



Revista Katálisis

ISSN: 1982-0259

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Serviço Social e Curso
de Graduação em Serviço Social da Universidade Federal
de Santa Catarina

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Revista Katálisis, vol. 26, no. 1, 2023, January-April, pp. 9-20

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Serviço Social e Curso de Graduação
em Serviço Social da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-0259.2023.e86375>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=179674360002>

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Critique of growth and degrowth ideology: from developed to underdeveloped countries

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Critique of growth and degrowth ideology: from developed to underdeveloped countries

Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the paradigmatic relationship between developed and underdeveloped nations within the notions of *growth/degrowth*. Economic Growth assimilated in the form of GDP expresses value bundle. Growth is demystified when the essence of value is grasped. Value ceases to be merely an abstract economic category and is apprehended as a social relation. Growth acquires a double reality under current social relations: Surplus value in a *particular* and a *general* form. To attain the dialectics of such relation and its supranational relationship, we endeavour a historical analysis giving an account of real relations to find the limits of our critique. Surplus labour historically has enabled societies to reach progress; only when societies produce beyond subsistence can they regard for different needs. On the other hand, the appropriation of surplus labour appears in history in many antagonist forms. In this perspective, the discussion about *growth/degrowth* attains major importance.

Keywords: (De)Growth; (Under)Development; Surplus-Labour; Exploitation; Marxism.

Crítica à ideologia de crescimento e decrescimento: dos países desenvolvidos aos subdesenvolvidos

Resumo: Neste artigo, discuto a relação paradigmática entre nações desenvolvidas e subdesenvolvidas dentro das noções de crescimento/decrescimento. Crescimento Econômico assimilado na forma de PIB expressa cesta de valores. O crescimento é desmistificado quando a essência do valor é apreendida. O valor deixa de ser apenas uma categoria econômica abstrata e é apreendido como uma relação social. O crescimento adquire uma dupla realidade nas relações sociais atuais: mais-valia em uma forma particular e uma forma geral. Para alcançar a dialética dessa relação e sua relação supranacional, empreendemos uma análise histórica dando conta das relações reais para encontrar os limites de nossa crítica. O trabalho excedente historicamente permitiu que as sociedades alcançassem o progresso; somente quando as sociedades produzem além da subsistência podem atender a diferentes necessidades. Por outro lado, a apropriação do trabalho excedente aparece na história de muitas formas antagônicas. Nessa perspectiva, a discussão sobre crescimento/decrescimento ganha grande importância.

Palavras-chave: (Des)Crescimento; (Em)desenvolvimento; Excedente-Trabalho; Exploração; Marxismo.

Crítica de la ideología del crecimiento y el decrecimiento: de los países desarrollados a los subdesarrollados

Resumen: En este artículo discuto la relación paradigmática entre naciones desarrolladas y subdesarrolladas dentro de las nociones de crecimiento/decrecimiento. El Crecimiento Económico asimilado en forma de PIB expresa el paquete de valor.



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El crecimiento se desmitifica cuando se capta la esencia del valor. El valor deja de ser una mera categoría económica abstracta y se aprehende como una relación social. El crecimiento adquiere una doble realidad en las relaciones sociales actuales: Plusvalía en forma particular y general. Para alcanzar la dialéctica de tal relación y su relación supranacional, emprendemos un análisis histórico que dé cuenta de las relaciones reales para encontrar los límites de nuestra crítica. La mano de obra excedente ha permitido históricamente a las sociedades alcanzar el progreso; sólo cuando las sociedades producen más allá de la subsistencia pueden considerar necesidades diferentes. Por otra parte, la apropiación del plustrabajo aparece en la historia de muchas formas antagónicas. En esta perspectiva, la discusión sobre crecimiento/decrecimiento adquiere mayor importancia.

Palabras clave: (Des)crecimiento; (En)desarrollo; Trabajo excedente; Explotación; Marxismo.

Received in 07.03.2022. Approved in 17.10.2022. Reviewed in 21.11.2022.

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the paradigmatic relationship between developed and underdeveloped nations within the notions of *growth/degrowth*. This means, when appropriation of estranged surplus-labour becomes the social nexus, then one cannot avoid a relationship of power-over, *i.e.* of domination. Such relationship must be accounted as historical; hence, one must understand its underlying foundation. Demystifying *growth* appears as a necessity in order to achieve such reasoning.

First, I challenge the mainstream notion of growth. Second, an investigation of growth as surplus-value is performed. In the third, fourth and fifth sections, I perform a historical investigation of social relations encompassing growth as surplus-value, namely its appropriation forms in different historical moments, such as the French Revolution, Bolshevik Revolution and Neoliberal raise.

Such historical undertaking grants the means for the last part, which is simultaneously an investigation and a conclusion – for it could not be different, since my investigative method is the immanent critique. The relations between nations appear as relations of power. The claim for degrowth without tackling the foundation of capitalist society appears hence as its opposite, *i.e.* not emancipatory actualization, but as the perpetuation of neo-colonial ties.

General and particular forms of Growth

Defining *Growth* appears to be a difficult task. The first thing it comes to mind when one speaks of Growth is *Economic-Growth*: or *growth* in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP can be defined, as IMF does, as the measurement of the monetary “value of final goods and services [...] produced in a country in a given period of time” (Callen, 2017). GDP then appears as a blunt measurement, since it measures *value* (exchange-value) only and all its underlying constitutive fractions appear as equivalents. Two important aspects are renounced: first, non-marketable wealth disappears; second, the quality (use-value), or rather specifics of what has been produced ceases to exist as exchange-value. Another problem of its definition, the notion of *value* and *price* becomes a unity, this makes it impossible to grasp the essence of *Growth*, for a price is merely the ideal form of value, which is actualized in the moment of alienation/appropriation and almost always fluctuates above or below the exchange-value. In order to grasp *growth*, I shall analyse its essence: *value*.

Growth as Surplus-Labour

Growth as value (exchange-value) appears only under certain conditions. Considered in its general form, *growth* appears as surplus-labour. For value is merely a particular form of surplus-labour. Labour is the form in which man produces life. Karl Marx clearly asserts: living man presupposes the production of living man, in other words: “[l]ife itself appears only as a *means* of life” (Marx, 1992a, p. 328). Labour is the actualization of man’s teleological setting, but also of labour itself as activity. For labour is the grasping of life in-and-for-itself. Human’s generality ceases to be mute; it gains social character (Lukács, 2010; Marx, 1983). The division of labour appears as a historical necessity for man to create (produce and reproduce) humanity (Marx, 2014).

Adam Smith (2012, p. 9) also argues that “the great improvements in the productive powers of labour” appears to be the effect “of the division of labour”. By Adam Smith’s time capitalism wasn’t fully developed, hence his difficulty to grasp labour beyond natural determinations (*i.e.* human nature); yet, his example of the production of a simple pin shows the vast division of labour comprised in its formation (Smith, 2012). The social character of Labour enables labour-productivity to rise, labour, never purely individual, becomes an ever more collective labour (Marx, 2014). Natural needs become social needs. For Marx surplus-labour appears as a means of meeting social needs, of creating possibilities beyond the natural ones. Such socialization shows the social character of labour, which enables to push the barriers of nature further; however, man is not only a social being but a natural one; he can never overcome nature, for he is immanently part of it (Lukács, 2010; Marx, 1906, 1992b).

The existence of societies presupposes the production of such societies. For ancient Greece, the production of philosophy presupposed the production of living philosophers. Since philosophy does not produce means of life, of producing and reproducing itself, ancient Greek philosophy presupposed the appropriation of surplus-labour for its existence. Labour is the only source of surplus-labour; in ancient Greece, slavery appears thus as a historical necessity. Aristotle recognizes it as such: “The parts of household management correspond to the persons who compose the household, and a complete household consists of slaves and freemen” (Aristotle, 1984, p. 4270).

With wage-labour, David Ricardo acknowledges salaries as means of the labour to reproduce itself as labour, however, he does not grasp as an internal determination, but rather an external. This means, for Ricardo, labour does not produce value of the means of labour, but rather, the “prices of food and necessities” determine the natural price of labour (Ricardo, 2001). Value in Ricardian terms is thence a natural determination, not a social relation. For Smith: “Labour is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities” (Smith, 2012, p. 34). Marx shows, the exchange-value of a commodity is determined by “the labour-time socially necessary”, which is “required to produce an article under the normal conditions of productions, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time” (Marx, 1906, p. 46). Due to his misinterpretation, Ricardo is unable to grasp the exchange-value within international trade, only use-value (Marx, 1983).

Wage labour appears as a particular form of distribution and appropriation (Marx, 1983). It is the basis of capital since capital is a relation of production and appropriation of surplus-labour (as an end-in-itself) as value, gratis-labour, the product of labour which exceeds the amount of *labour-time socially necessary* to reproduce labour (Marx, 2014). When labour needs 6 hours-day to reproduce itself as labour, if it works 12 hours-day, it produces double the amount needed for its reproduction, yet it receives only the socially necessary amount to reproduce it, its value. Insofar,

[h]alf the working day costs capital *nothing*; it thus obtains a value for which it has given no equivalent. And the multiplication of values can take place only if a value in excess of the equivalent has been obtained, hence *created*.” Insofar: “Surplus value in general is value in excess of the equivalent. (Marx, 1993, p. 324).

This means, the capitalist labour market denies the fundamentals of market-exchange-equivalency in order to produce and reproduce its existence as capital. Capitalist surplus-labour creates surplus-value – *growth* – and negates the imperatives of market-relations in order to do so.

Very briefly, I tried to attain the actualization of *growth* beyond its formal form GDP. *Growth* appears in general as a social necessity as means for meeting social demands. Yet, under the capitalist form of production, *growth* appears as an end-in-itself, as exploitation, the appropriation of estranged-labour, *gratis*-labour. In capitalism, *growth* appears in an *economic* form, while it actualizes political content of domination, capital rules labour as it controls its labour-power.

One can now throw light into the paradigmatic relation between developed and underdeveloped countries within the realm of the particular form of *growth*, surplus-labour under capitalist relations.

French Revolution and the Struggle for Surplus-labour

The analysis of examples of historical processes tries to understand the struggles for the appropriation of surplus values, attempting to throw light into a totality.

According to Eric J. Hobsbawm, the modern world appears as the product of two revolutions: British-Industrial-Revolution and French-Revolution. The former could not be fully felt until 1830s/40s (Hobsbawm, 1996b), while the latter shook the whole ancient regime. Its slogan of “liberty, equality and (it followed) the fraternity of all men” (Hobsbawm, 1996b, p. 21) is still called out today to defend the triumph

not of liberty and equality in general but of *middle class* or ‘*bourgeois*’ liberal society; not of ‘the modern economy’ or ‘modern state’, but of the economies and states in a particular geographical region of the world”; “[t]he great revolution of 1789-1848 was the triumph not of ‘industry’ as such, but of *capitalist* industry (Hobsbawm, 1996b, p. 1).

Uninterrupted wars in Europe follow the revolution. Surplus-labour produced by serfdom in Europe (corvee) appropriated by the ancient regime was not abolished, as a form of social exploitation, it simply changed form. According to Domenico Losurdo, Georg W. F. Hegel explains dialectically: French Revolution as a necessary and legitimate tyranny and the Thermidor tyranny of law.

And thus, in the French Revolution, it was a fearful force that sustained the state [and] the totality – in general. This force is not despotism but tyranny, pure frightening domination. Yet it is necessary and just, insofar as it constitutes and sustains the state as this actual individual (Hegel, 1983, p. 155).

For Losurdo: “The antagonists in this struggle became the embodiment of two different moments ‘of necessity’” (Losurdo, 2016, p. 260). Hegel (1983) emphasizes, the French Revolution achieved the abolition of privileged classes, however, not of inequality of classes. The French Revolution represented four major struggles: bourgeoisie, ancient-regime, labour, (anti-)colonial.

Multiple revolutions shook relations of exploitation from European societies. In 1776, the United States declared independence from England; in 1789, the French Revolution made the *ancien régime* crumble; in 1791, the Black-slave revolt, in Santo Domingo with its leader Toussaint L’Ouverture, was the first to abolish slavery, which was punished by the French (Napoleon reintroduced it); also in 1791 Olympe de Gouges elaborated her *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen*, in 1793 she was guillotined; in early 19th century, Spanish colonies in South-America declared independence; in 1822, Brazil proclaimed its formal independence from Portugal; in 1830s, different independence movements and insurrections took place in Europe; furthermore, the Revolution of 1848 made whole Europe trembled when proletarians overthrow monarchies with incredible speed: both the rise and the fall. The competition between imperialist nations was essential. France assisted the United States; England countries in South America; European struggles as struggles among capitalists, bourgeoisie and ancient regime. However, Asia and Africa remained immune to major revolutions (Hobsbawm, 1996b). Imperialist maxim became *divide-and-rule* or *divide-and-conquer*. Revolution showed that social order required public opinion control, *e.g.* newspaper control (Hobsbawm, 1996a).

Recently acquiring political power, the bourgeois responded politically-economically and philosophically. Politically-economically, Napoleon III represented the assimilation of different interests in France, where decadent aristocracy, bourgeois and *lumpen*-proletarians came to terms in the figure of Louis Bonaparte (Marx, 2011). The unification of Italy 1861 implied the expulsion of the Habsburg Empire; the unification of Germany 1871 posed multiple difficulties since it could represent different combinations and mixtures, thus war. However, in the following years, an economic boom made it possible for smoothing revolutionary tensions (Hobsbawm, 1996a). To bury any liberal intension the Prussian government called the most conservative figure for prime-minister: Otto von Bismarck (Engelberg, 1990). Britain continued, in a brutal manner, its imperialist ruling over India (Losurdo, 2012) and China (Losurdo, 2016). In the US, the new form of surplus-labour entered in direct conflict with the older, between 1861-65, in what has been the most lethal war in the US-history when Confederation and Union fought over slavery (Ireland-Kunze, 1989).

1917 October Revolution and the Struggle for Surplus-labour

For György Lukács, the legitimatization against emancipatory struggles appears as the *Destruction of Reason*, the negation of history by dissolving social-historical relations and categories and replacing them with

individuals detached-from-the-whole, coined by egoism in-and-for-itself. Max Stirner reduces the real social relations to the *Geist*, the spirit, the singular becomes totality, the thought acquires a double transcendental reality; it transcends leaving any trace of reality and comes back as the pure *Geist*: “*ich bin Geist, nur Geist*” (Stirner, 2012, p. 82). Friedrich W. J. Schelling sought restoration of the ancient regime (Lukács, 1973; Schelling, 1976). Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, Søren Kierkegaard’s major influence, denies the immanent ontological movement, which constitutes Hegel’s dialectic. For him *Being* and *Nothing* are both at ease. Thus, no movement can be apprehended. From the standpoint of the *Geist*, though, his claim has a fundament (Lukács, 1973), from an ontological perspective of the social-being, it does not. Kierkegaard tries to recover idealism by banishing from idealistic-dialectics any trace of non-idealism, namely history (Kierkegaard, 1987; Lukács, 1973). Arthur Schopenhauer represents the beginning of the bourgeois reaction to its crisis, the pessimism advocated by him characterizes the futility to act politically (Lukács, 1973; Schopenhauer, 1958). And for Friedrich Nietzsche’s egoism was the expression of the will to power from the *Übermensch* (Nietzsche, 2007, 2008).

The intellectual crisis of the late 19th and early 20th centuries represented the dismantling of the self-educated left, the *intelligentsia* “now tended to move sharply to the political right” (Hobsbawm, 1989, p. 262). The emphasis on egoism, disregard for social binding, total competition were now pushed towards a generalized mass-scale competition over labour. The Great World War marked a shift in imperialism. Total war became normality, or as Hobbes puts it: “so the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary” (Malmesbury, 1651, p. 77–78).

Onwards, the wars gained new dimensions. “Local, regional or global, the wars of the twentieth century were to be on an altogether vaster scale than anything previously experienced.” Hobsbawm continues, “[i]n short, 1914 opens the age of massacre” (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 23–24). It is startling and remarkable that, by 1914, Europe “had gained control of 84 percent of the globe” (Hoffman, 2015, p. 2). The racial questions, which were broadly regarded as scientifically true, were the bourgeois answer to emancipatory movements and commitments (Hobsbawm, 1989) and represented the social legitimization of worldwide capitalist ruling (Losurdo, 2010); social Darwinism being pushed forward at full pace (Hobsbawm, 1989). Capitalist imperialism was a business method that should not be put to a halt (Hobsbawm, 1989). Such ideology was so widespread that both rulers and intellectuals in Latin America “dreamed of biological transformation of their population which would make them amenable to progress” (Hobsbawm, 1989, p. 289, 1996a). In the United States of America, the abolishment of slavery formally liberate the black slaves, however, under the white supremacy ideology, the oppression merely changed form, segregation became the new form of racial ruling (Losurdo, 2016).

Revolution as a response to the increment of exploitation appears as a historical necessity. The 1917 October Revolution of the Bolsheviks renders for the first time the possibility of anti-colonial revolution worldwide. Struggles for liberation reverberated until the 1970s (Losurdo, 2016). China’s case was, as it still is, remarkable:

Far from being synonymous with ‘universal levelling’, the bourgeois revolution involved the accentuation of inequalities at many levels. Internationally, what has been called the ‘great divergence’ between the prosperous West and the rest of the planet derived from it. In 1820 China, for centuries or millennia eminently placed in the development of human civilization, still boasted a GDP amounting to 32.4% of the world GDP, while ‘Chinese life expectancy (and thus nutrition) was at roughly English levels (and so above Continental ones) even in the late 1700s. At the time of its foundation, the People’s Republic of China was the poorest country in the world or among the poorest. The history of India is not very different. (Losurdo, 2016, p. 57).

However, Western Nations were not ready to give away their colonies. Instead, as shown by L. Moniz A. Bandeira, France and England, still during the war, divided the Ottoman Empire and rearranged it in the secret Sykes-Picot-Agreement (Bandeira, 2016). Moreover, Western Nations attacked *en bloc* the Soviet Union trying to revert the Bolshevik-Revolution¹:

The Allies saw no reason to be more generous to the centre of world subversion. Various counter-revolutionary (‘White’) armies and regimes rose against the Soviets, financed by the Allies, who sent British, French, American, Japanese, Polish, Serb, Greek and Rumanian troops on the Russian soil. (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 63).

For, when comparing the French Revolution and the October Bolshevik Revolution of 1917,

the October revolution had far more profound and global repercussions than its ancestor. For, if the ideas of the French revolution have, as is now evident, outlasted Bolshevism, the practical consequences of 1917 were far greater and more lasting than those of 1789. The October revolution produced by far the most formidable organized revolutionary movement in modern history. (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 55).

Neoliberal raise and the struggle for Surplus-labour

The (partial) fall of liberalism gave way to new forms of social discipline, namely capitalist control over surplus-labour. The insipient answer that would only gain a greater actualization in the third quarter of the 20th century was Keynesianism (Hicks, 1974). The imminent answer for the second quarter appeared in the form of fascism, specifically Adolf Hitler's.

While in the United States, white supremacy appeared as legitimization for Native Americans' genocide and black segregation (*cf.* Josiah Strong's *Our Country*), in Europe, Ludwig Gumpowicz advocated in his *Der Rassenkampf* against non-Aryan races (Losurdo, 2010, p. 255). In Asia 1937, Dalai Lama acknowledges that his claim for a Great Tibet (regions of China) wasn't based on any historical groundings, but rather a racial one (Losurdo, 2012). Even Mohandas K. Gandhi claimed that colonizing Indian people was wrong because Indians are Aryans and, hence, they were part of the pure race (Losurdo, 2012). Germany's plans, led by Hitler, were, hence, an expression of such context. Social discipline and expansion of colonialism by the enslavement of Slavs (Mazower, 2008) for slavery was "a condition of every higher culture" (Nietzsche, 2002, p. 129), the annihilation of Communism and Jews appeared as fundamental tasks (Hitler, 1927).

The economic policies of expansionism adopted in the 1930s were not simply consciously implemented in a Keynesian sense (Hicks, 1974). After the Second World War (or rather, the second part of the Great World War), the economic reconstruction of Europe and Japan appeared as a political necessity in order to save western capitalism and its global ruling, because the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) came politically out of the war in a very strong position – though economically and socially destroyed after suffering over 27 million human deaths. With voluptuous investments (*cf.* Marshall Plan); capital base being severely destroyed by war; a significant decrease of labour-time socially necessary for reproducing labour; and US-American capital export; all these enabled the emergence of the so-called capitalist *golden age* (Castro, 1979). This is essential to understand *growth* from a Western historical perspective. During the wars, the United States opened economic and technological gaps between themselves and their peers. However, throughout the Golden Age, Japan and Europe "were fast catching up and continued to do so in the 1970s and 1980s" (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 258) due to the increase in productivity, accumulation of surplus-labour. It represented significant progress in the developed capitalist countries; in the third-world, it characterised a drastic increase in the population, insofar it produced real wealth (Hobsbawm, 1995). If the wealth created was the product of human-labour, the natural drive was fossil fuel as its energy source (Hobsbawm, 1995). Thus, occidental wealth was measured by the number of cars while third world wealth by the number of trucks (Hobsbawm, 1995). Tourism, a luxury in former times, had become an expected standard of comfort (Hobsbawm, 1995).

To contain the "danger" of revolution and counterbalance the loss of political control, which Europe had over the world, the so-called Western-Democracies polarized the dichotomy between the first world (developed) and third world (underdeveloped-nations). Truman Doctrine attempted to secure it (Hobsbawm, 1995). The West became the haven of the labour-movement, and the Welfare State its shield against the red danger. The former political annexation gave place to the economic one. The form for the capitalist centre to command surplus-labour changed from colonial rule to neo-colonialism (Losurdo, 2017). Italy; Greece; Portugal; Chile; Argentina; Panama; Brazil; Iran; Korea; China; Vietnam; Syria; Laos; Guatemala; Indonesia; Lebanon; Cuba; Georgia; Domenic Republic; Bolivia; Afghanistan; Nicaragua; etc. were all subjugated to Western's will.

Like the Soviet Revolution and other socialist revolutions yet to come, also the Chinese Socialist revolution was never accepted, it has suffered attacks from its inception, which persist until today (Losurdo, 2016). The atrocities against Vietnam were committed by the West again because it had chosen the "wrong side", thus, it had to be destroyed, (Hobsbawm, 1995). Wars, sanctions, embargo, regime change, dictatorship,

all account for measures to sustain power-over, for guaranteeing the capitalist appropriation of surplus-value: the so-called capitalist *growth*. Regime change and *coup d'état* became regular diplomatic missions, they have even been perfected into a method (Gene Sharp, 2010), which enabled for instance the so-called colour revolutions (Bandeira, 2014).

With the collapse of Bretton Woods, the US-economy moved away from Eurodollars to Petrodollars. Thenceforward, massive debts have been possible, since the dollar has artificially become a new Exchange-Standard, because, after the Yon Kippur war, the deal previously established with Saudi Arabia granted US-dollar exchange-clearing monopole of oil (Bandeira, 2016). Since modern capitalism could not work without oil, every nation needed dollars to buy it, an artificial seemingly eternal source of financial resources was created to benefit the US and their capitalist class.

The 20th century can be understood as a “secular struggle by the forces of the old order against social revolution” (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 3), communism, and anti-colonialism. The fall of the Union of Soviets Socialist Republics shifted this further, the fight against anti-colonialism and (western-)labour was intensified. In this scenario, neoliberalism emerged in the fourth quarter by moving away from previous dominant capitalist social arrangements, focusing on individual atomism, which appears as an immanent capitalist enterprise. The intellectual, ideological base created by idealism and irrationalism (see above) gave way to a subtler form of irrationalism coined in neoliberalism. All human instances become market moments, which by the means of economic institutions set the grounding to determine what truth is and can be (Machado, 2010). Capitalist government policies start abandoning social locus and adhere to market form only. A complete reversal in liberal ideology takes place; ironically, or cynically, neoliberal strategy destroys liberal *raison d'être* and reverses it, calling itself (the modern form of) liberalism (Foucault, 2004).

In this context, when Saddam Hussein tried to move away from the dollar to euro, the United States invaded and destroyed it, securing a monopoly over Iraq's oil reserves, thus, further securing their currency and not for the sake of the oil itself. Vladimir Putin's Russia created a new SWIFT, *i.e.* a system for Exchange-Clearing, eliminating the dollar from transactions within the Eurasian Economic Union (Bandeira, 2016). In 2012, China developed a payment system called CIPS (China International Payment System), which started operating in 2015 (Bandeira, 2016). Since then, Russia and China have been attacked with more economic sanctions; military threats; media war; always on the account of diverged allegations – as we have recently seen also in countries such as Venezuela (Cohen & Blumenthal, 2019). 2014 Ukraine's fascist *coup d'état* supported by the United States and the European Union put immediate pressure on Russia (Bandeira, 2016). Conversely, North Korea became a scapegoat to legitimize the relocation of the US-military from Middle-East to the Coast of China: “The United States has a first-strike capability against China today and should be able to maintain it for a decade or more” (Keir A. Lieber & Daryl G. Press, 2006).

With the 2008 crisis, economic and social wealth was widely destroyed (Losurdo, 2016), according to GAO (United States Government Accountability Office) maybe over 10 trillion dollars; yet, the financial system received, alone in the US, over 16 trillion dollars as buyout, according to Forbes (GAO, 2013; Mike Collins, 2015; Tracey Greenstein, 2011). The crisis represented a pronounced transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. Social surplus-labour was privately re-appropriated by the financial sector, the government was its mediator. Meanwhile, the United States try to impose to the NATO-members (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) that each contributes with the 2014 agreed 2% of GDP, *i.e.* an increase in war spending while the social, economic and political crises are plunging (‘International: Erreicht Deutschland das Zwei-Prozent-Ziel der Nato? ZEIT ONLINE’, 2017; ‘Military spending by NATO members: Does America contribute more than its fair share?’, 2017).

The consequences of monopoly-capitalism were already grasped in 1917 when Lenin wrote *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Lenine, 1996). Lenin shows corollaries of capitalist relations, which are being rediscovered almost one hundred years later². The concentration of production and competition leads to monopoly. Huge players concentrate and control capital, hence social wealth (*cf.* The Network of Global Corporate Control (Vitali, Glattfelder, & Battiston, 2011)). OXFAM has been urging against inequality (*cf.* OXFAM publications (Lawson et al., 2019; Pimentel, Aymar, & Lawson, 2018)) and even Credit Suisse acknowledges: “Accordingly, the top wealth holders benefited in particular, and, across all regions, wealth inequality rose from 2007 to 2016. In every region of the world except for China, median wealth declined” (Anthony Shorrocks, Jim Davies, & Rodrigo Lluberas, 2017, p. 4). Yet, the number of millionaires and

billionaires is increasing. Concentration continues to urge. It, then, becomes impossible to separate national from an international question, when regarding the political economy. Nonetheless, discussing inequality and GDP, as moral or immoral acts, hides the essential: the underlying exploitation, namely appropriation of surplus-labour.

Already in 1992, “[t]he historical memory [of 1914] was no longer alive” (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 3). Neoliberalism sanctioned the *perpetual present* (Debord, 1997; Hermeto, 2020). “The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century” (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 3). Insofar, Fukuyama’s *End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama, 1992) expresses the appearance but not the essence of our time.

Conclusion: From abstract to real Growth/Degrowth relations among and within Developed/ Underdeveloped Countries

Growth in general appears as a specific form of social-relation based on surplus-labour; its appropriation appears as a constant and concrete struggle, which defines its very particular forms. While in capitalist societies *growth* appears as an end-in-itself, *growth* as a mere economic measure hides its true praxis, surplus-labour. Furthermore, it hides not only that surplus-labour is a social relation of economic determinants, production and reproduction; also, the form, in which social relation is employed, appropriated, *i.e.* social relations in a political sense. How to account for capitalist exclusion as unjust as Mauro Bonaiuti does (Bonaiuti, 2003, p. 47)? Speaking of social justice, without questioning the very foundations of what is being contested, becomes vulgar moralism. Capitalism is in fact just. The political foundation of capitalism is egoism, appropriation of estranged surplus-labour, its formal basis: competition. These are not only economic fostered; but also political, legal/judicial, social institutions legitimize such framing. Winning competition is as just as losing it.

Growth cannot be criticized as a mere economic category; its specificity, namely social character, must be grasped by a correct critique. Accepting egoistic freedom is denying real social relations; the reality of freedom becomes consume only (max. of utility), in other words, a “relation” of one with and towards himself. Instead of questioning the concrete political form of surplus-labour, which determines the whole production, not only of products but also of life, of society; production becomes ideally a moment of consumption, one’s egoistic will. Critique of production becomes a critique of consumption (cf. Lorek & Fuchs, 2013); critique of social relations becomes critique of individual consumption (WSC/sSC [weak sustainable consumption/strong sustainable consumption]). A contradiction. The foundation of such liberty means doing whatever one pleases insofar it does not harm the other. Whatever one pleases is egoism *per se*; not harming the other, means this liberty relates to itself. The foundation of such liberty is not the relation between human-beings; the relation appears not as the actualization of human-beings, but on the contrary, as a barrier, the relation appears thus as the denial of the self (Marx, 1992c). Insofar, egoistic relations can neither account for future generations (question posed by Georgescu-Roegen (1994)), nor for present relations in terms of recognition. *E.g.*, the surplus of food production is a worldwide reality since the 1970s (Wee, 1987); yet, today, 25,000 people die daily from starvation and approximately 800 million suffer bad nourishment (Ulrike Mast-Kirschning, 2011; UN - United Nations, 2018).

Can “economic degrowth in the North provides a path for approximating the goal of a globally equitable SSE [steady-state economy], by allowing some more economic growth in the South” (Kerschner, 2010, p. 549)? Under real capitalist relations, this formal arrangement seems, in practice, to be impossible. What does it mean that *rich North* aims for *degrowth*? For less appropriation of surplus-labour, corporations would have to compensate *degrowth* elsewhere to be on pair with profit margins of their corresponded production sectors. For the profit considers capital as a whole, it has two components: constant- and variable-capital. The quantity of constant-capital, objectified-labour, is relatively smaller in underdeveloped countries; the labour-time socially necessary to reproduce variable-capital, meaning the needs of the working class, is absolute smaller in underdeveloped countries. This relation makes it possible for what is known as neo-colonialism, meaning not (directly) political, but economic domination.

The recognition of *degrowth* in developed nations cannot appear as recognition of underdeveloped nations as sovereign nations. Instead, it establishes the necessity to push neo-colonialism further. After China

broke free from colonialism, Western Democracies never ceased to attack it. It is impossible to grasp the failure of the Great Leap Forward without acknowledging the sanctions perpetrated against China (Losurdo, 2016). Walt W. Rostow – Kennedy administration – observed that such sanctions had set back China by decades at least. Finally, Edward Lutwak acknowledges, “a ban on Chinese imports is the nuclear weapon that America keeps pointed at China” (Losurdo, 2016, p. 288).

China’s economic opening could only free over 600 million people from necessity-of-want, because market-economy is subordinated to People’s will by the socialist State. Yet, the struggle of the appropriation of surplus-labour did not end in China, both internally or externally. Internally, however, the Communist Party counterbalances the market, political power dominating economic power. So in China there is capital but no capitalism. Externally, China is attacked with economic sanctions and it is tolerated based on the appropriation of surplus-labour in low-aggregated-value goods and a dependency by western consumption from Chinese production. As it begins to move away from this neo-colonial relationship China becomes a higher target of foreign government sanctions, economic restrictions, media attacks, military drills, intellectual condemnations etc.³ “Representatives of the Truman administration were explicit at times: China must be ‘plagued’ with ‘a general standard of life around and below the subsistence level’, ‘economic backwardness’, and a ‘cultural lag’” (Losurdo, 2016, p. 288).

Insofar, *degrowth* as recognition for underdeveloped-nations appears as a contradiction. Social determination of surplus-labour appears as impossible – when thought in the spheres of economic capitalist-production, its governance and policies of legitimization of appropriation of estranged surplus-labour.

Another problem appears when regarding *degrowth* as subsistence (Lorek & Fuchs, 2013). Devolution appears as a romanticization of freedom in social relations, when in reality the increase of labour-time socially necessary for the reproduction of labour appears as the decrease of social relations (division of labour) and the increase in direct dependence of nature/necessity; it also appears as the accentuation of exploitation of nature, instead of its recognition and path to sustainability, due to productivity decrease. Insofar, it appears not as a political determination of how to produce life (ethically speaking, good life), but rather its negation, its dehumanization. Irrationalism, which accounts for social disintegration, appears in capitalism as its opposite. The question of *Growth/Degrowth* should be made from a different perspective. How-to social-politically determine *growth*? To enable social needs, but simultaneously to be sustainable, it presupposes not producing surplus as an end-in-itself, but as a means of life, for example, non-programmed-obsolescence. Abolishing capitalist-egoistic-relations – namely abolishing the private property of the means of production – appears as a pre-condition for enabling different/new-(*growth*)-relations.

The need for different analysis and discourse in relation to sustainability cannot focus on the level of appearance anymore – such as the contemporary *growth* and *degrowth* dialectics. It has, rather, to go deeper and grasp the social relations of production – the processual ontology of the social-being (Hermeto, 2020). In recent years, we have been seeing the emergence of a so-called *Ecosocialism* (Löwy, 2015; Saito, 2017; Wallis, 2018), where the critique of the political economy becomes an immanent call for sustainability. Lukács’ *Ontology* (hardly known) had already revealed this character (Lukács, 1984, 1986), *i.e.* the immanent relation between humanity and nature on the one hand and that the overcoming of human estrangement (*Entfremdung*) requires a relation of reciprocity with nature, *i.e.* not merely one unidimensional relation of exploitation of nature. Kohei Saito pledges in relation to Marx’ critique: “I maintain that *it is not possible to comprehend the full scope of his critique of political economy if one ignores its ecological dimension.*” (Saito, 2017, p. 14). Thus, both the struggle of classes (*Klassenkampf*) and the struggle over the environmental must be encapsulated with the paramount category of totality. Or, as John Bellamy Foster emphasizes, while the social critique on *growth* is blind to historical determinations, Marxist critique on capitalism must always take into consideration the metabolic relation between society and nature (Foster, 2022).

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Notes

- ¹ It is worth mentioning how remarkable it is that until today the western invasion to destroy the then-recently-formed Soviet Union is not regarded as a foreign aggression but rather as Russian Civil War.
- ² The hegemonic apparatus of the capitalist elite, with its intellectual class, has been discussing the problems of the so-called economic inequality since it could bring much instability to capitalism and the ruling elite. Thus, its enlightened portion is trying to reorganize some distributive layers in order to save the capitalist base of and for exploitation. An example, Thomas Piketty's research represents one of its exponents, using anti-capitalist terms in the titles of his books without screeching the surface of capitalist relations of power – for instance, *Capital in the 21st Century*, or also, *Capital and Ideology* –, or better put, he does not

even seem to understand what *Capital* as a social relation of power means. Thus, either he is willingly co-opting any anti-capitalist struggle or is indeed ignorant and thus represents simply a useful tool for the powerful, as he redirects revolutionary force and energy towards the always recurring elite's reforms and regulations paradigm, in other words, *everything must change so that nothing changes*. E.g. (Piketty, 2015).

- ³ See: (Bandeira, 2016; Losurdo, 2016, 2017) Furthermore, the case with Huawei has also been emblematic, as soon as it became the biggest cellphone producer in the world and leading researcher and developer of 5G and 6G networks, under Donald Trump US sanctioned Huawei, which bipartisanly is still perpetrated by Joe Biden's administration, and, as predicted, United States' vassals accepted and followed their illegal and criminal acts and doings. ('Trump executive order enables ban on Huawei telecom gear', 2019).

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Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Funding Agency

Not applicable.

Authors' contributions

Not applicable.

Ethics Committee approval and consent for participation

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Consent of the authors.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.