

Green Political Economy: beyond orthodox undifferentiated economic growth as a permanent feature of the economy

Paper presented at the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI) Annual conference, 'Political Economy in an Age of Great Uncertainty'

4th-6th July 2016

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Abstract

This paper outlines the main features of green political economy and the principal ways in which it differs from mainstream or orthodox neoclassical economics. Neoclassical economics is critiqued on the grounds of either hiding or denying its normative and ideological commitments as well as committed to the idea of orthodox economic growth as a permanent feature of the economy. Green political economy is presented as an alternative or heterodox form of economic thinking but one which explicitly expresses its normative/ideological value bases (hence it represents a return to 'political economy', the origins of modern economics). Green political economy also challenges the commitment to undifferentiated economic growth as a permanent objective of the human economy. In its place, green political economy promotes ideas of 'economic security' as a better objective for a sustainable, post-growth economy. The latter includes the transition to a low-carbon energy economy, and is also one which maximises quality of life (as oppose to formal employment, income and wealth), and actively seeks to lower socio-economic inequality. Green political economy views orthodox economic growth as having passed the threshold in most 'advanced' capitalist societies beyond which it has undermined quality of life and at best manages rather than reduces socially and ecologically damaging socio-economic inequalities.

Keywords: green political economy, economic growth, post-growth economics, neo-classical economics, economic inequality, economic security.

Introduction: Origins and Overview of Green Political Economy

A potted historical evolution of green economic thinking would include Aristotle's distinction between '*oikonomia*' or management of the household and '*chremastistics*' or money-making; the French Physiocrats in the 18th century in relation to their analysis of the importance of the land and agriculture to the economy; Thomas Malthus as an early proponent of 'limits

to growth’; Karl Marx in relation to his foundational critique of capitalism and class exploitation and for his analysis of the inner workings of capital accumulation; John Stuart Mill’s defence of the ‘stationary state’ economy in the mid 19th century (a forerunner of Herman Daly’s later work in the 1970s on ‘steady-state economics’); 20th century thinkers such as E.F. Schumacher, for his ‘small is beautiful’ concept, ‘Buddhist economics’ and the injunction for ‘an economics as if people mattered’ (Schumacher, 1973); Ivan Illich for his trenchant critique of dehumanising institutions and defence of the convivial economy (Illich, 1973); Herman Daly, the founder of modern ‘ecological economics’ (Daly, 1973) and Dennis and Donella Meadows and the Club of Rome for their ground-breaking ‘Limits to Growth’ reports from the 1970s, and on (Meadows et al, 1972; Meadows et al, 2004).

And yet despite this lineage, green political economy, as a ‘heterodox’ school of economic thinking, is marginal and lacks influence and status in comparison to dominant neoclassical economics. By neoclassical economics I mean a form of asserted value-neutral, objective knowledge of the human economy, which assumes a view of the human being as ‘homo economicus’ (rational, selfish and possessive), and a view of the human economy as ecologically disembedded i.e. ecologically ignorant. It is marked by an ideological preference for the free market and capitalism (Barry, 2012: 121-2), even though it rarely uses the term ‘capitalism’, nor countenances alternative non-capitalist forms of economics or ways of organising the human economy. For Stanford:

Neoclassical economics is dedicated to the study of capitalism; in fact, other kinds of economies (that existed in the past, or that may exist in the future) are not even contemplated. Yet the term ‘capitalism’ does not appear in neoclassical economics textbooks. *Instead, economists refer simply to ‘the economy’—as if there is only one kind of economy, and hence no need to name or define it.* This is wrong. . . . ‘the economy’ is simply where people work to produce the things we need and want. There are different ways to organize that work. Capitalism is just one of them. (Stanford, 2008: 33; emphasis added)

As Molly Cato notes ‘Green economics is not, as yet, an academic discipline with a major place in the universities’ (Cato, 2008: 5), and there are very few self-declared ‘green economists’ or ‘green political economists’ within the academy or elsewhere. While environmental economics does discuss ecological ‘externalities’ and resource problems, it does so from within the dominant neo-classical, capitalist/market model, and does not question economic growth nor offer a deeper or integrated view of the economy as both ecologically embedded (and therefore limited) as well as politically, culturally and socially embedded (and therefore the economy and the market are political creations not ‘naturally given’). Ecological economics does move us further towards a scientifically /metabolic and energy/resource understanding of the human economy. However, while it does not rule out explicitly normative ethical and political concerns, these prescriptive elements are not a systematic feature of its approach. Green

political economy on the other hand is explicitly political, critical and prescriptive and for whom the economy and how we think about it is a site of contestation and an exercise in power. This power is one the one hand is the power and struggle of ideas and related to that, how those ideas that win or are dominant create the economy they prescribe. In other words, dominant framings or conceptualisations of the economy, such as neo-classical/capitalist economics, do not 'objectively' or 'neutrally' simply *describe* an economy that 'just is', but rather actively *prescribe* and bring into being an economic system aligned with its normative and ideological assumptions.

It is as pioneers of an 'old/new' approach to understanding the economy and its relationship to the non-human world, politics, ethics and human well-being, and its challenge to a dominant neo-classical economic theory and capitalist economic practice, that we can explain the striking lack of visibility of this green economic approach. Add to that the fact that those holding this perspective are also by default 'dissidents' in relation to the ruling economic orthodoxy, who also seek to reveal the political, philosophical and cultural roots and assumptions underpinning dominant views of 'economics' and the 'economy' and one can easily understand why these dissident pioneers are invisible.

An extremely important feature of green political economy and its spelling out of an economics of sustainability is its scientific basis: its integration of the insights of the natural sciences, especially ecology, thermodynamics and systems thinking. This concern has been there from the origins of modern green political economy in the work of Georgescu-Roegen and Daly, to contemporary scholars such as Molly Cato and Tim Jackson (Barry, 2012). For example, suggesting we should analyse and appraise our energy options not just from a financial/profit/monetary perspective, but also in terms of energy returned on energy invested (EROEI) (Murphy, 2013) i.e. how much energy (not the monetary cost/value of energy) we expend on extracting an energy resource. In this case, fracking, extracting shale gas, from a green political economic perspective, should be assessed not simply from a cost or 'energy security' perspective but from an energy/thermodynamic perspective. Does it make sense to expend more energy (which could be used for other purposes) to extract shale gas? Yet, despite this accumulating evidence, the neo-classical economic paradigm and its commitment to unsustainable economic growth still reigns dominant both in terms of how we understand the economy and 'economics' and in public policy.

The Battle of Ideas over the Economy

The intellectual debate between green political economy and neo-classical economics is one that lies partly within the framework of the academic production of knowledge, but is also a debate that goes far beyond the academy. This is also an ideological battle, only part of which occurs within the academy. Neo-classical economics supports a particular view of the

economy and society, one which, with a few exceptions, is supportive of a capitalist organisation of the economy, private ownership of the means of production, and production for profit; justifies an unequal distribution of income and wealth; promotes free trade, deregulation, and economic globalisation; and above all is committed to promoting orthodox economic growth. By orthodox 'economic growth' is meant 'undifferentiated, monetary/GDP measurements of economic growth as a permanent feature of the economy' (Barry, 2012). *In short, neo-classical economics supports the prevailing capitalist status quo and therefore underpins actually existing unsustainability.*

This is of course an old Marxist insight – namely that conceptions about and debates regarding the economy and economics are, in part, about power relations within society, seeking ideological and intellectual hegemony. This ideological hegemony translates not simply into political power in determining state policies for example, but is equally a form of cultural hegemony informing how we 'commonsensically' think about, assess and evaluate the economy and economic issues. Perhaps the most vivid expression of an ideological position that has achieved this preeminent position is that it neither presents itself as an ideological position nor is perceived as such by others. Rather it is viewed as 'economic commonsense' or 'normal'. Once a particular way of conceptualising and thinking about the economy is widely shared and commonsensical, alternative modes of thinking about the economy are by default deemed 'nonsensical', and indeed this has and continues to be the most common reaction to non-neo-classical economic perspectives – green or others.

In this way how we think about 'the economy', or the 'economic imaginary' have, to state the obvious somewhat, ideological, cultural and normative dimensions. But also material ones too, as refracted through and underpinning ideological-normative claims and ideas. An example here is the carbon energy (especially oil) underpinning the 'imaginary' of endless economic growth. As Bridge puts it, "the social significance of an 'economic imaginary' like continuous growth (a particularly pervasive imaginary rooted in the experience of energy abundance and falling energy costs associated with transition from coal to oil in the United States in the early 20th century)" cannot be understood without knowledge of the oil energy assumed to underpin and inform the economic imaginary of endless GDP growth, capital accumulation and consumerism (Bridge, 2010: 5). Mitchell develops this insight further stating that, "The conception of the economy depended upon abundant and low- cost energy supplies, making post-war Keynesian economics a form of 'petroknowledge'" (Mitchell, 2009: 417). Hence constitutive of capitalism and economic growth are not just accumulation, production for profit etc. but also consumerism and carbon energy.

A sign therefore of the ideological success of neo-classical economics is that it has, by and large, managed to perform the sleight of hand of replacing 'capitalism' with 'the economy', such that whenever we 'commonsensically'

talk about ‘the economy’ we are in fact, usually, talking about a particular mode of economic organisation, namely capitalism. A category mistake has been made: the confusion and conflation of ‘capitalism’ with the ‘economy’. Think of when an ‘economist’ is called to comment in the media: it is without exception a neo-classical economist who will (generally speaking) talk about (and defend) capitalism. Rarely do we hear non neo-classical economists in our media, or if we do these are not accorded the label of ‘economists’ but ‘political commentators’, nicely eliding the fact that those called ‘economic experts’ are also political commentators.

Part of the ideological project of green political economy, I would suggest, lies in its aim to at one and the same time *repoliticise and democratise thinking about economics* and democratise the economy through, for example, strategies of localisation or the promotion of social enterprises. This is the real meaning of Cato’s view of green political economy growing ‘from the bottom up and from those building a sustainable economy in practice’ (2008: 5). This democratic impulse does not mean that a green political economy perspective does not recognise that complex aspects of the economy require expertise and forms of knowledge only a few will possess. But this is compatible with requiring democratic oversight and transparency in respect of these complex aspects of managing the economy. On the other hand, if we look at the ways in which the very complexity of certain types of economic activity, primarily but not limited to the financial sector, is partly to blame for creating the current economic crisis, then simplifying the economy and making it more transparent does make a lot of sense. So apart from the standard response of calling for more regulation in response to the current economic crisis, a green economic perspective makes the case for also de-complexifying the economy (and in the process making it less unsustainable and more resilient). This imperative to de-complexify is a democratic impulse in which, *inter alia*, relocalisation, enhancing community self-reliance, reducing the distance between production and consumption, and reducing the material throughput of the economy are needed to create a ‘human-scale’ economy capable of being democratically controlled and regulated, embedded in, rather than disembedded from community. Here democratisation necessarily leads to less unsustainability.

The Critique of Economic Growth

Another aspect of the ideological battle of ideas about the economy from a green perspective is the claim that economic growth is an ideological belief that has to be imposed upon a society and is not something that people ‘naturally’ gravitate towards. It is only by understanding economic growth as the ideology of the ruling classes that we can explain the paradox at the heart of the green critique of growth. Namely, why and how could economic growth be supported by the majority of people (not just the elites), given the abundant ethical, political and psychological arguments against it, and the wealth of empirical evidence demonstrating that (after a threshold) orthodox, undifferentiated economic growth does not improve peoples’ lives and goes

against their interests in flourishing? How in short, can such a belief system continue past the point where it no longer contributes to real freedom, genuine prosperity or human well-being and flourishing? How can such 'cancerous growth' continue to be not only supported but actively desired? How, reminding ourselves of the insights of the early Frankfurt school and Marcuse, in the midst of material abundance and plenty (in so-called 'developed' capitalist societies) can people be induced to believe that their lives are governed by its opposite, namely generalised scarcity, and thus be disciplined into wage labour and into producing and consuming more and more?

Another founder of green economics, James Robertson, notes why the 'new economics' is so threatening: it challenges 'powerful established interests, and call[s] into question existing institutional structures, existing organisational values, and existing expansionist tendencies in government, business and the careerist professions, and conventional economic orthodoxy' (Robertson, 1997: 13). Yet Robertson's analysis is somewhat abstract. So to fill this gap as I see it in the generally well-developed (if not generally accepted) green critique of orthodox economic growth, I wish here to touch upon four sources of evidence for the ideological and class character of economic growth – drawn from historical analysis, development studies, deliberative democracy and.... orthodox economics.

Firstly, some historical evidence. It is clear that Marx's view of capitalism emerging 'dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (Marx, 1967: 760) is, despite the overdramatic expression, basically true. There was massive popular and sustained resistance by peasants, craft guilds, and others, resulting in uprisings, revolutions, sabotage and other acts of resistance and opposition to the imposition from above of the discipline of wage-labour, enforced movement from the land to the city, the use of machine technology, enclosure of the commons, the factory system etc. As Polanyi details, the emergence of capitalism resulted in the spontaneous 'double movement' of social forces rising to resist and protect society and social relations from the unfettered free market (Polanyi, 1947). A large part of this was forcibly compelling people to produce more goods, more wealth, despite norms of pre-industrial, peasant culture being oriented towards producing enough rather than accumulating a large surplus. The habit of accumulation or producing more and more, rather than enough, had to be imposed from above by those who benefitted most from it, the emerging capitalist class. A good example of this class-bias of economic growth is the way in which technological improvements have been since the emergence of capitalism (and continue to be today) used not to result in *more people working less, but less people working more*. Simply put, it is in the interests of the owners of capital to institute and maintain an economic system geared towards generating a *surplus*, whereas it had been in the interest of peasants to produce a *sufficient* amount.

Secondly, we have the evidence from development studies about the ways in which economic growth had to be forced upon and how it was and is

resisted by people in non-western so-called 'underdeveloped' societies. It is interesting and telling that early green critiques such as Illich (1973), Latouche (1993), Shiva (1988) and Escobar (1995), drew much of their insights about the problems of global capitalism from their studies and experiences of the 'developing world'. On the one hand, there is the arrogance of using western experiences of development to categorise all other societies as 'developing', 'underdeveloped' or 'undeveloped' i.e. using western metrics to judge and rank all societies. On the other, there is the documented resistance of non-western societies and people (mostly non-elites and peasants) to capitalism, the imperative of economic growth, factory-time and its work discipline and production for accumulation and consumerism for leisure. And there are clearly similarities between the forms of resistance to economic growth in the 'majority world', and the resistance historically to capitalism in Europe.

Thirdly, there is some evidence of the disjuncture between elites and citizens when it comes to certain risky technological policies in relation to promoting economic growth. That is, results from deliberative citizens' experiments seem to indicate that the public is more risk adverse and more inclined to support precautionary approaches than political and economic elites (Dryzek et al, 2009). As they note, 'If precautionary worldviews are as pervasive in reflective publics as we suggest, then the generally Promethean positions of governing elites cannot be legitimated by deliberative means – at least when it comes to issues of technological risk' (Dryzek et al, 2009: 34). This is suggestive of the view that the more open and deliberative the political process the less likely we are to see policies for technologically risky economic growth policies. This suggests that alternatives to economic growth such as 'economic security' (discussed below) may enjoy more democratic support. Finally, from conventional economic theory we have what is known as the 'backward bending labour supply curve'. This is the rather simple hypothesis that beyond a threshold, further increases in wages will not lead people to work more. In other words, once workers have attained enough or sufficient wages, they prefer other things than working for a wage and consuming (Barry, 2012).

What is an Economy for? From Economic Growth to Economic Security

A long-standing green commitment is to re-orientate the economy towards enhancing and being judged by its capacity to promote 'quality of life', 'well-being' and 'happiness' rather than orthodox economic growth. As the new economics foundation puts it,

the purpose of economy should be to enhance the well-being of the citizens of the country, in a way that is socially just, and environmentally sustainable. That is, the level of economic growth achieved in an economy is not a sufficient measure of that economy's success or failure to deliver prosperity to society. This is because

economic growth does not, in itself, tell us anything about our quality of life. (new economics foundation, 2008: 1-2)

The economy and economic growth are, after all, means not ends in themselves. We live in societies with economies, not economies with societies, a view which profoundly challenges neo-classical economics and the neoliberal worldview. I outline here how ‘economic security’ could be a replacement for economic growth, and present a green economic case for a new type of economy, in which redistribution and reducing socio-economic inequality are central (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). A model of green political economy cast in terms of ‘economic security’ has the advantage of presenting a positive and attractive discourse for addressing the problems of ‘actually existing unsustainability’ (Barry, 2012). Using the language and analysis of economic security, introduces ways of arguing and presenting the case for a less growth-orientated economy and high consumption society, which at the same time aims to raise quality of life while lowering inequality. At the same time it is important (not least strategically) that a green critique of ‘growth’ should be viewed as a critique of orthodox and *undifferentiated growth* as measured by conventional economics. That is, least a critique of economic growth be viewed as critique of any and all types of growth, it is important to stress that greens reserve their critique for what Daly calls ‘uneconomic growth’ – the expansion of forms of activities which (after a threshold) undermine or compromise human flourishing. Thus it is perfectly consistent for greens to support growth in, for example, education, public health, public transport or subsidised organic farming, but criticise the growth of consumerism, the quantity of arms and weapons an economy produces and trades, and the size of domestic/household credit card debt.

There are many potential contenders for what replaces economic growth that have been canvassed over the last 150 years – from John Stuart Mill’s ‘stationary state’ (Mill, 1848), to more recent work on ‘quality of life’, ‘well-being’ and ‘prosperity’ (Jackson, 2009) for example. All share a number of components and have a large degree of overlap – the one I wish to explore here is the notion of ‘economic security’ (Barry, 2009). I take this term from a 2004 report by the International Labor Organization entitled *Economic Security for a Better World*, which found that ‘economic security’ coupled with democratic representation and equality were the main determinants of well-being, tolerance and social stability (International Labor Organization, 2004c). The report defines economic security as “composed of *basic social security*, defined by access to basic needs, infrastructure pertaining to health, education, dwelling, information, and social protection, as well as *work-related security*. (International Labor Organization, 2004a: 1). The report found that:

People in countries that provide citizens with a high level of economic security have a higher level of happiness on average, as measured by surveys of national levels of life-satisfaction and happiness...*The most important determinant of national happiness is not income level – there*

is a positive association, but rising income seems to have little effect as wealthy countries grow more wealthier. Rather the key factor is the extent of income security, measured in terms of income protection and a low degree of income inequality. (International Labor Organization, 2004b: 1; emphasis added).

Such findings, also echoed in the work of others such as Wilkinson and Pickett, (2009) and Standing (2002), give some empirical support to long-standing arguments stressing the need for policies to lower socio-economic inequality as necessary to enhance individual and collective socio-economic security and increase well-being.

It is also relevant to note other observed links between in/security, economic growth and well-being. One of the principal psychological determinants of excessive consumption has been found to be feelings of personal insecurity, status competition and vulnerability – whether about one’s body shape, sensitivity to peer judgements, or externally generated and reinforced views of self-other relations that undermine personal or other forms of security and self-esteem (Chaplin and John, 2007; de Graff et al, 2005). For example, psychologist Tim Kasser points out that individuals in America when faced with short-term insecurity or pain (psychological or physical) increasingly turn to money and possessions as a way of coping with distress, rather than seeking comfort and support in social interaction and community or family relationships, since these have been eroded, in part, due to the pressures of economic globalisation and the imperative of orthodox economic growth (Kasser, 2008). Yet it is precisely those non-monetary, non-possessive relationships that have a greater positive impact on our overall levels of happiness and well-being.

However, this does not necessarily mean (as critics are wont to point out) that a focus on economic security as a main objective of macro-economic policy means an end to entrepreneurialism or innovation. A fair question to ask, and one any alternative to our current economic growth focused model needs to take seriously, is how to ensure that stagnation and regress will not be the outcome of a post-growth economy. However, we have reasons for thinking that development ‘comes from innovation, from consuming different things, rather than more of the same things’ (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 221). And once one begins to free up key economic goals – such as ‘innovation’ from its technological-economic straightjacket, ‘growth’ from its reduction to material wealth or capital accumulation, ‘work’ from being identified solely with formally paid ‘employment’ and so on – there is reason to suppose that *more, not less, innovation and creativity* and innovation beyond technological or institutional spheres will be the result of living in such a society, rather than stagnation or regress. In fact, such forms of innovation and creativity are *necessary features and therefore ‘required’* for low carbon, high well-being lives and communities, and not some ‘added extra’ (Cato and Hillier, 2010).

This problem of economic insecurity (experienced at an individual or collective level) can also be applied at the level of the existing economic system itself. An economic system that has only two options – continual growth or collapse – cannot be stable or secure. On the one hand, this economic system is unsustainable i.e. it is simply *biophysically impossible* to achieve continual economic growth. Much hope is (mis)placed on the idea of ‘decoupling’ orthodox economic growth from energy, resource and pollution impacts, often associated with ‘ecological modernisation’ and the ‘environmental Kuznets curve’ hypothesis. Both suggest that orthodox economic growth is compatible with reducing environmental impact. Rather like the ancient myth of Achilles lance which could heal the wounds it inflicted, the argument (based in neoclassical economics) is that growth which causes environment degradation can, after a point, reverse this and deliver environmental improvements. Yet as a recent study has concluded, ‘the statistical analysis on which the environmental Kuznets curve is based is not robust. There is little evidence for a common inverted U-shaped pathway that countries follow as their income rises’ (Stern, 2014: 14).

Thus, we have little empirical evidence that this is either possible on the scale required, or that such ‘decoupling’ within advanced industrial economies (Barry, 2003). For Jackson this decoupling is a ‘myth’ and ‘assumptions that capitalism’s propensity for efficiency will allow us to stabilise the climate and protect against resource scarcity are nothing short of delusional’ (Jackson, 2009: 7). This is the case even if growth is associated with more egalitarian and redistributive policies, that is within alternative views that less inequality does not undermine orthodox economic growth (Kirby and Murphy, 2010; Putterman, Roemer, and Silivestre, 1998). So while clearly better from the point of view of equality and providing economic security, ‘egalitarian growth’ is, qua continuous economic growth, also biophysically impossible and therefore unsustainable.

On the other hand, capitalist stagnation brings with it its own dangers i.e. no-growth is *not socially desirable* or politically acceptable (Jackson, 2009). Economic stagnation – as with the global economic crisis experienced since 2008 – is associated with high levels of unemployment, social dislocation, disinvestment and a lowering of well-being. This macro-level or system level critique of the capitalist economy represents an updated version of Marx’s analysis of the endemic ‘crisis-ridden’ character of capitalism. Hence, more radical conceptions of green political economy often accept significant elements of the Marxist analysis of capitalism, though without necessarily going along with its proposed solutions for or alternatives to capitalism, since most (though not all) streams of Marxism are committed to economic growth. It is the ‘myth’ of exponential and permanent economic growth itself that is the problem and needs to be abandoned. *Rather than focusing our energies on increasing the ecological and energy efficiency of capitalist production and orthodox economic growth, what we need to be doing is exploring ways of increasing the ecological and energy efficiency of human flourishing.*

Economic Security, Equality and Well-Being

One of the most significant impacts of a shift away from economic growth as a central goal would be the undermining of the justification of socio-economic inequalities. The latter are usually justified or tolerated on the grounds that inequalities are necessary ‘incentives’ to motivate people (via the promise of differential, unequal rewards) towards entrepreneurial activity, ‘hard work’ etc. and thus stimulate economic growth. As early proponents of the ‘steady-state economy’ pointed out, the shift from a society geared towards economic growth to a society where material growth is not a priority may lead to more extensive redistributive measures. This is a point made many years ago by forerunners of green economic thinking such as Herman Daly (Daly, 1973). That is, there are significant redistributive implications of moving beyond a growth paradigm. According to the orthodox growth view, growth is needed to eliminate poverty (by making the ‘economic pie’ bigger, not slicing it differently), and through the process of ‘trickle down’. If, however, the option of baking a bigger pie is neither (ecologically) possible nor (socially) desirable, then poverty elimination can be solved only by more direct redistributive measures. And in so doing the link between poverty and inequality is explicitly revealed. That is, inequality causes poverty, not vice versa. As the authors of the International Labor Organization report note, ‘Inequality is part of insecurity, particularly when that inequality is substantial. And the unequal distribution of insecurities is part of socio-economic inequality’ (International Labor Organization, 2004c: 3). So if one argues for a post-growth economy, then it does mean that the traditional political strategy for simply managing inequalities is no longer an option.

There are other problems with inequality in relation to human well-being that I wish to highlight here. **The first** is that the more unequal a society the greater there is status competition and a diminution in overall well-being. As Wilkinson and Pickett note ‘The problems in rich countries are not caused by society not being rich enough (or even by being too rich) *but by the scale of material differences between people within each society being too big*. What matters is where we stand in relation to others in our own society’ (2009: 25; emphasis added). As Jackson contends, this ‘Unproductive status competition increases material throughput and creates distress’ (Jackson, 2009: 154) as a result of competition between individuals for social status. And in modern consumer-capitalist societies the main way in which social comparison is performed is through material goods and the ‘mandatory’ practices of consumerism and consumption.

The second is that, as Wilkinson and Pickett’s research demonstrates, highly unequal societies almost always come out worse on a range of policy issues ranging from obesity, childhood mortality, drug use, literacy, social mobility, trust, teenage pregnancy and incidence of mental illness. As they put it, ‘Economic growth, for so long the great engine of progress, has, in the rich countries, largely finished its work. Not only have measures of wellbeing and happiness ceased to rise with economic growth but, as

affluent societies have grown richer, there have been long-term rises in rates of anxiety, depression and numerous other social problems. *The populations of rich countries have got to the end of a long historical journey* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 5-6; emphasis added). Thus, this suggests that economic growth is not to be somehow rejected 'in principle' as being 'intrinsically' bad or wrong, but is to be seen in terms of a society's evolution over time, and as a policy that needs to be periodically reviewed, rather than a 'locked-in' or permanent feature of a society. And one threshold (apart from obvious ecological ones) that can be identified to signal the point beyond which economic growth needs to be reconsidered, is when greater and greater levels of inequality are required for economic growth, which reduces the range of components central for human flourishing. Other thresholds could be more directly related to human flourishing such as mental health, social trust or measurements of community and solidarity.

The third striking implication of inequality is its negative effect on social trust and social solidarity and sense of community (Lane, 2000). This has significant implications for democracy, based on the principles of both equality between citizens and fellow feeling as members of the same community. It is of particular concern for a green republican notion of politics. In short, large degrees of inequality undermine a sense of a community of equals. This can lead to the danger of hierarchical and paternalistic relations between supposedly equal citizens. This carries with it the possibility of relations of domination, including those based on internalised senses of inequality and inferiority. As Wilkinson and Pickett note, 'The problem is that second-class goods make us look like second-class people' (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 222). Such forms of social stratification (around race, class, ethnicity, sexuality or gender) are not compatible with the equality required for democratic politics, and living in a democratic society of equals.

A fourth and related problem with inequality is one particular to democratic politics, namely how inequality undermines and compromises democracy. Simply put, a substantial degree of equality is a precondition for democracy. As Stout observes, 'Wherever economic power is both concentrated in the hands of a few and easily convertible into unconstrained political power, it makes no sense to speak of political life as democratic. The power of the rich is unconstrained because too few people are bothering to constrain it. *Power is always accumulating in novel ways, posing new threats to liberty and justice*' (Stout, 2007: 6; emphasis added). In that context, as work stretching from Goodin and Dryzek in the early 1980s (Goodin and Dryzek, 1980), to more recent work of Solt (Solt, 2008), we find that less well-off citizens, those most disadvantaged and marginalised in society due to inequality, give up on discussing political matters and effectively withdraw from politics. This of course leaves politics and the shaping of what politics means (like neo-classical economics in relation to economics) in fewer and fewer hands.

Conclusion

Green political economy can be thought of as motivated by creating an economy as if we mean to stay around to enjoy it, not as a process of liquidating the planet, exploiting people, unequally distributing the fruits of that economic growth, and calling it 'progress'. In terms of the critique of economic growth, green political economy questions *undifferentiated, orthodox GDP measurements of growth, where growth is viewed as permanent feature of an economic or a permanent economic objective*. Economic growth beyond a threshold becomes an ideology which serves the interests of elite, and its ideological promotion (by neo-classical economics) is intrinsically connected to the contemporary practices of global capitalism. And 'threshold' can be roughly understood in terms of the need for an explicitly political and democratic process whereby the points beyond which economic growth increases rather than decreases inequalities, continues rather than reverses our unsustainable development pattern, and leads to a decline rather than increase in human well-being represents the thresholds beyond which economic growth has become 'uneconomic growth'. Green political economy thus indicates the need for a paradigm shift in how we understand the economy and the organisation of the economy away from orthodox, undifferentiated economic growth as a permanent feature of the economy towards seeing it as a contingent and historically specific feature, a step towards a green, sustainable economy organised around the objective of increasing the ecological efficiency of human well-being.

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