

ECOFEMINIST UNDERSTANDINGS OF CARE AND DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS: TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF WORK FOR THE DEGROWTH MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The starting point of this paper is a recognition of the need for transitions to sustainability. This exploratory paper is a stepping stone for development of a theoretical framework for ways of imagining and acting upon ecofeminist degrowth futures based on design for sustainability transitions (DFST). The aim of the framework is to conceptualise the role paid and un(der)paid work in and for such transitions. In this paper, we bring together previous research of design for sustainability DFST, degrowth, and ecofeminist understandings of care as gendered work. With references to the multi-level perspective of system innovations, DFST investigates the niche socio-cultural practices and technologies to develop and analyse design scenarios for alternative futures using participatory approaches. Degrowth as a civic movement that challenges the continuous economic growth as a policy making goal,

converges with DFST in its holistic understanding of a need for systemic change. Recent discussions in degrowth have called for taking into consideration questions of care, power, gender, class, ethnicity and inter-species interactions, which are at times overlooked in analyses. In order to do so, we draw upon ecofeminist philosophy, which highlights how the (mis)treatment of women is attached to the (mis)treatment of non-human/more-than-human nature.

INTRODUCTION

The biophysical and socio-technical trends indicate that we as humanity are approaching towards tipping points that impose increasing risks over sustainment of conditions that support human life and other species on Earth (Dearing et al., 2014; Steffen et al., 2015). There has been an increasing acknowledgement for structural, and in some cases radical, changes in systems that support human society (Loorbach, 2010). These structural changes are often referred to as sustainability transitions.

Transitions to sustainability has recently been framed as design challenges with creative, technical and political dimensions rather than being problems that can be addressed solely through development and

deployment of technology (Gaziulusoy & Ryan, 2017). Design for sustainability transitions (DFST) is now recognised as the emergent edge of design for sustainability field (Ceschin & Gaziulusoy, 2016) although the origins go as far back as late 1990s. As an emerging area, there is not yet a unified theoretical foundation, but a variety of approaches are used, such as insights from sustainability science, system innovations and transitions theories, social practice theory, futures studies, complex systems theories, product-service systems, social innovation, value-based design, and user innovation. The common position adopted in these contributions is an emphasis on normativity; that to achieve sustainability the society should not rely on projections of the present, and that there is a need to create visions for alternative futures to shift the projected trajectory of the (unsustainable) present towards those that are aiming at the visions.

We relate degrowth to the need for design for sustainability transitions. Degrowth engages various actors, such as citizens, activists, academics, and decision-makers (Demaria et al., 2013). It challenges the expectation of continuous exponential economic growth that results in treating non-human nature as a resource. According to Latouche (2009), many may agree with this but few consider it possible to detach from the vicious cycle of economic growth. Instead, growth as a paradigm needs to be sustained, because it is the unquestioned basis for social security, labour markets, policy-making, citizenship, and corporate activities. Thus, degrowth debates do not only concern decreasing material throughput but a need for holistic paradigm change (Paulson, 2017).

This paper rests upon the notion that degrowth should be organised around the notion of care (Dengler & Strunk, 2018). In addition to humans, we want to acknowledge the non-human (more-than-human) agency. Thus, we draw from ecofeminist writings that address environmental justice and feminist traditions together (Warren, 2000).

The focus of the paper is gendered work. Previous feminist research has established that women do a great deal of un(der)paid work (Mellor, 2006). When working for DFST and degrowth, there is a danger of repeating this assumption and continuing to exploit this tendency. As a contrast, overcoming this exploitative arrangement is a goal in many ecofeminist imaginaries.

This exploratory paper is a stepping stone for developing a theoretical framework for ways of imagining and acting upon ecofeminist futures based on DFST. The framework relates to the conference theme “Who cares?” since it is to be used for analysing the degrowth movement in the global North as part of an ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the Finnish degrowth movement conducted by the first author.

LITERATURE

DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

The origins of DFST goes as far back to late 1990s when the research into development of sustainable

technologies influenced thinking of ecodesign scholars (Brezet, 1997). Late 2000s and early 2010s have seen a significant influence of system innovations and transitions theories (Loorbach 2010) in design for sustainability work. These theories provided some foundations on how socio-technical transformations happen and how they can be steered so that design researchers could start to establish links between design theory and practice and sustainability transitions. The first PhDs integrating theories of system innovations and transitions with design (Gaziulusoy, 2010; Joore, 2010; Ceschin, 2012) generated a set of frameworks with similarities as well as differences. Later, Irwin (2015) published an article presenting a transition design framework for design education, research and practice, which coined the term transition design and popularised it within the broader audience. The other key works in the development of this emerging field include an exploratory study on the roles of design in transition processes (Gaziulusoy & Ryan, 2017), explicit use of particular design approaches in transition projects (e.g. Mok & Hyysalo, 2018), and investigations of evidences of user involvement in the design and diffusion of new technologies in transition projects (e.g. Hyysalo et al., 2017).

All of this work put an emphasis on linking design action in the short-term with visions of desirable and sustainable futures in the long term, therefore demonstrating a preference for normative outcomes. Although there is an emphasis on normativity of outcomes of DFST, there are also differences in the characteristics of the normative outcomes argued for. For example, according to Gaziulusoy (2010) sustainability is not an absolute property; it can only be established relative to the nominal lifespan of the system to be sustained (ex post facto). Therefore, sustainability cannot be measured but sustainable systems can be envisioned and enacted upon across relevant system levels and timeframes. Joore (2010) does not take up a mission for developing an elaborate frame for sustainability. Instead, he adopts a definition from an earlier work by Tukker and Tischner (2006); that is causing minimum negative environmental impact while maximizing social well-being and maximizing economic added value. Ceschin (2012), provides a discussion touching on overarching themes in sustainability discourse such as growth, equity and limits. He argues that sustainability can only be achieved by drastically reducing consumption of environmental resources, at least by 90%, compared to the average consumption by mature industrialised contexts, and by equally distributing them. Kossoff (2011) argues that sustainability requires not only ecological, social, economic, but also cultural, political, existential problems to be addressed so that everyday life becomes sustainable again across its all domains. He is against quantitative framings of sustainability and advocates qualitative understandings that incorporate non-utilitarian, in addition to utilitarian, human activities. The position adopted in this and later related works can be summarised as sustainability being a

place-based property of globally networked communities, informed by evolving visions which propose whole lifestyles and diffuses in everyday practices.

The foundational theories that underlie early contributions in DFST cover adaptive systems theories, sustainability science, system innovations and transitions theories, social practice theory and environmental ethics. These are essential theories for informing futures of design practice that can play a role in sustainability transitions. Nevertheless, this emerging field can also learn from other theories that are currently informing design and penetrating its zone of comfort. For example, design in general should shake the dominance of human-centredness as it is a necessary foundation but too anthropocentric to lead design practice into the future on its own. DFST should develop ways to give voice to voiceless both in its epistemology and methodology as the essential aim should cover creating just and sustainable futures. For this purpose, design and DFST specifically can learn from feminist theory, animal studies, post-humanist ethnography, political ecology and literature on decolonising methodology. Some of these have been integrated into design through contributions of pioneering work (Avila, 2017; Jönsson & Lenskjöld, 2014; Schalk et al., 2017; Tlostanova, 2017) There is urgency to further explore implications of these literatures in design and derive insights and lessons for development of transition design theory and practice.

FRAMING DEGROWTH AROUND CARE

We understand degrowth as one discussion related to the need for sustainability transitions. There are excellent overviews of degrowth thinking (e.g. D'Alisa et al., 2015; Demaria et al., 2013; Latouche, 2009). These discuss main ideas, the diversity and depth of the discussions, and the criticism from various positions. For instance, the idea is not to merely cause economy to degrow, but to allow a paradigm change that enables enhanced well-being while respecting the planetary boundaries. According to Paulson (2017, p.426), “debates about what degrowth is, is not, or ought to be, entail extraordinary theoretical and normative complexity”.

Recent discussions in degrowth have called for more critical understandings of how degrowth could be achieved. This includes considering more profoundly the questions of power, gender, class, ethnicity, inter-species interactions and different geographical locations. Consequently, some suggest that degrowth should be organised around care (Dengler & Strunk, 2018; D'Alisa et al., 2015, p.4). Unless gendered care work is acknowledged, there is a danger of duplicating the tendency that women do unrecognised and undervalued care work that sustain human societies.

Dengler and Strunk use the example of work-sharing, in which the lowered need for waged work is divided among employed and unemployed. However, they argue that some sectors, like care-intensive social work, would not be included, since that labour is

needed. Part of the reduction would take place if the efficiency gains obtained by working methods and technology are not transformed into more consumption. However, they argue that “gender equality cannot be achieved as long as we only tackle employment in the monetized economy” (Dengler & Strunk, 2018, p. 177).

CARE IN ECOFEMINISM

In addition to un(der)valued care work across temporalities, we want to acknowledge the non-human (more-than-human) agency. Thus, we draw from ecofeminist philosophy, since ecofeminism brings together environmental justice and feminist traditions (Warren, 2000). This combination produces an overarching claim that as long as women are used as a capitalist resource, the same goes for non-human nature, and vice versa:

“Ecofeminist political economy provides an analysis of the current destructive relationship between humanity and non-human nature through an understanding of women's position at the boundaries of economic systems. From this perspective [...] women's work and lives, like the natural world, are externalised and exploited by the valued economy.” (Mellor, 2006, p. 139)

This quote swiftly captures the ecofeminist political economy that resonates with degrowth thinking. The most apparent difference is that ecofeminist thinking starts from the standpoint of the oppressed, i.e. women and non-human nature.

Mentioning women as a group and focusing on women's issues results in an ontological challenge for ecofeminism. However, as Salleh (2017) argues, this is not an insuperable issue for ecofeminist analysis: women and men are equal but culturally certain qualities, practices and understandings are attached to gendered categories. Thus, focusing on women, it is possible to make visible gendered practices that maintain exploitation and subordination.

Care is an important element of ecofeminist thinking. It is precisely the un(der)paid and un(der)valued care work that maintains human societies, whether it is women or non-human nature. Moreover, as the quote above from Mellor (2006) shows, valued economy, nowadays mostly capitalism, exploits this organisation. According to Domborski et al. (2018), the first step in imagining ecofeminist futures is to make “visible who is doing the care work necessary in transforming our political economies and ecologies”.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - TENTATIVE IDEAS

The development of the theoretical framework relates to the conference themes as follows. We understand care as a lens that helps us relate to humans and non-humans in a non-utilitarian manner. In relation to “How to care?” and bringing this idea back to DFST

we ask: What would it mean to have the lens of care across the spectrum of domains/levels?

One assertion is prioritising “care” in vision development. How is it different to envision alternative futures with care lens? This may assist with giving voice to voiceless; enable non-humans to be considered as equals; and moving from techno-centric visions towards care-centric visions, which might bring forth the importance of degrowth as a call to care for the limits of the Earth. Also, moving from techno-centric visions may help with moving away from ambitions of invading other planets as a “cure” for not living sustainably on this one.

In addition to a fundamental paradigm change, degrowth is about developing sustainable livelihoods for people in the face of changes in the global South and North (Barca, 2017). This links to Kosoff’s (2011) argument that sustainability transitions need to be handled in domains of everyday life, the smallest unit of being home. This relates to theme “Care (in)action?”, since every domain is supported by un(der)valued care work. Hopefully, doing DFST with an ecofeminist focus on the domains, it would be possible to address gender and other inequalities, specifically when using care-centric visioning. In addition, the ecofeminist thinking, to be used in the forthcoming framework, addresses the theme “The who in care?” when it focuses on empathy with humans and more-than-humans.

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