A Critical Analysis of Degrowth Debates Through the Lens of Gross National Happiness (GNH): Refraining from the Conventional View of Plurality*

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Abstract

This study problematises degrowth's goal of abandoning economic growth as a policy objective on the grounds that its advocates base their arguments on a binary growth/no-growth dichotomy and unwittingly activate the same economistic frame as the growth paradigm. To explore a remedy against this pitfall arising from the conventional view of plurality that segregates study materials into distinctive categories and prioritises one of them, Bhutan's policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is taken up. The policy does not lapse into the growth/degrowth trap, refrains from rejecting economic growth of all kinds, and instead ascertains its potentially diverse connotations. GNH accordingly weighs growth-related indicators on equal terms with various others concerning social, cultural, spiritual and emotional contentment. The holistic approach of GNH helps rectify the prevailing hegemony of economic growth and thus provides a more effective pathway for attaining a postgrowth order.

Keywords: degrowth, Gross National Happiness (GNH), postplural view, marginalising the economy, postgrowth order

Introduction

There is a growing realisation that the relentless pursuit of economic growth, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP), is ecologically and socially unsustainable and infringes on human wellbeing. Accordingly, attention has been paid to

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the term 'degrowth'. Proponents of degrowth argue for the 'abolishment of economic growth as a social objective' (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 3) on the grounds that the narrow framing founded on GDP is far from an accurate indicator of prosperity. They therefore call for an 'equitable downscaling of production and consumption' (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 512).

This study, while sharing these concerns, problematises degrowth advocates' goal of removing economic growth as a social objective, referencing Bhutan's policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). GNH is a 'multidimensional development approach that seeks to achieve a harmonious balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional and cultural needs of our society' or to balance non-economic concerns with economic growth (GNH Commission, n.d.). Under GNH, economic growth is not ruled out, given that what matters is not whether the economy grows in monetary terms, but whether growth is subservient to greater happiness. It is agnostic about the pursuit of economic growth, in line with what J.C.J.M. Van den Bergh (2011) terms 'agrowth', heeding the numerous, concrete manifestations of economic growth.

As with degrowth, GNH rejects a growth-for-growth's sake approach. However, it has been largely overlooked by degrowth advocates, who thereby miss the opportunity to gain valuable insights (Verma, 2017, p. 485). Even where taken up, its agrowth stance is not given due regard, with Bhutan erroneously placed within the category of 'societies living without growth', to borrow a phrase used in a review article co-authored by six advocates (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 302).

This study attributes the disregard of GNH by degrowth proponents to the conventional view of plurality (Strathern, 2004, p. xvi) underlying degrowth debates. The orthodox view is founded on a hierarchical 'whole-part' distinction and segregates the 'entire' debate on a postgrowth order into the degrowth 'part' and the growth-seeking 'part'. Accordingly, degrowth treats growth-oriented measures and degrowth

initiatives as separate endeavours and lapses into '"no alternatives" fatalism', rejecting growth of all kinds (Stirling, 2016a). Degrowth advocates thus give little regard to GNH on the grounds that it does not abandon the pursuit of economic growth.

How does the binary logic upheld in degrowth debates hamper a foundational shift to a postgrowth era? What insights can we gain from the agrowth approach of GNH, in view of the problematique in degrowth debates? 'GNH may have grown in the context of Bhutanese culture' but 'the universals that are important to all people in the world should be underlined and made more prominent' given that there are similarities among various peoples of the world, including the Bhutanese who have embraced democracy, markets and technology (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 60). What are those 'universals', then, which can be elucidated by weighing up the divergent stances of GNH and degrowth debates?

With these questions in mind, this study starts with an overview of degrowth debates, followed by an analysis of the conventional view of plurality underlying them. GNH is then taken up to examine how it embodies a postplural worldview that avoids dividing the 'entire' debate on a postgrowth order between the degrowth and growth 'parts', and instead explores compatibility between them to depart from a '"no alternatives" fatalism'. GNH refrains from rejecting economic growth of all kinds and ascertains its potentially diverse connotations: there exist myriad ways of ordering social life beyond the growth/no-growth binary. This study concludes by dissecting the 'universals' that are potentially conducive to our endeavours to establish a postgrowth order.

An overview of degrowth debates

Degrowth's approach to advancing its 'paradigmatic proposition'

Proponents of degrowth claim to put forth a 'paradigmatic proposition': 'human progress without growth' can possibly be

made through a ‘project with the ambition of getting closer to ecological sustainability and socio-environmental justice worldwide’ (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 511). Degrowth is ‘ambitious’ in that ‘[o]ur society’s fate is tied up with an organization that is based upon endless accumulation’ (Latouche, 2009, p. 16).

Accordingly, degrowth encompasses more than the critique of economic growth, as it pursues a radical, multifaceted transformation of the ongoing growth-oriented social order. For this purpose, degrowth debates draw on such intellectual traditions as environmentalism, anthropological and structural critiques of economism, postdevelopment critiques of the ideological construction of development, and political ecology against technofascism (Muracca, 2013). Degrowth is based on ecological economics, historical analyses of the growth paradigm, anthropological research on steady-state societies, and studies of appropriate technologies as well as of alternative political institutions and practices (Kallis et al., 2018).

In practical terms, degrowth advocates envision the promotion of ‘green, caring and communal’ economies, in which people’s lives are organised differently than today, with greater emphasis on ‘sharing’, ‘simplicity’, ‘conviviality’, ‘care’ and the ‘commons’ (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 3). Degrowth seeks to liberate people from growth imperatives, thus creating greater space for them to democratically pursue ‘what they define as the good life’ (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 5). This also implies that a ‘cultural revolution’ is to be ushered in, redefining what constitutes the ‘good life’ (Akbulut et al., 2019, p. 3). As a result, in lieu of the existing expansionist order, localisation is advanced to reduce material throughput; to increase the circularity of resource extraction, production and consumption; to boost sharing of space, resources, work and expertise; to decommodify labour, land and money; and to enhance human wellbeing through closer ties among residents (Kallis, 2018, pp. 119−122).

This is meant 'not as a blueprint but as a canvas that nourishes new imaginaries', implying that degrowth should be 'open, malleable and plural—a project to be worked out democratically, not one that is predefined in detail in advance' (Kallis, 2018, pp. 124−125). 'Green, caring and communal' economies take the form of a range of practices, including eco-communities, farmers' cooperatives and markets, back-to-the-landers, associations of child and health care, urban gardening, community currencies and work sharing (D'Alisa et al., 2015).

While degrowth advocates consider it insufficient to call for the abolishment of growth as a social objective, this is 'the degrowth thesis at its simplest' (Kallis, 2018, p. 112). According to them, moreover, the pursuit of economic growth is neither desirable nor mandatory for market mechanisms to function. This is dwelt on in the co-authored article referred to above, which reviews literature falsifying growth imperatives (Kallis et al., 2018, pp. 298−300): nongrowing economies may increase unemployment, which can nevertheless be curtailed by decreasing average working hours, or by creating employment in labour-intensive sectors; market economies function with zero net investments, or with increased investments in socially and ecologically sound sectors as well as disinvestments in others; even when governmental revenue declines as a result of degrowth, an equal distribution of income and wealth can be attained through progressive taxation and social spending, as well as by eliminating 'dirty' subsidies; and growth imperatives can be contained through economic legislation imposing carbon caps and taxes, while promoting collective firm ownership or not-for-profit corporations.

Degrowth debates' relevance/irrelevance to the Global South

A systemic change required for degrowth can be advanced by forging 'a coalition of the global social and environmental justice movements' (Kallis, 2017, p. 29). First, although degrowth initiatives originated in the North, they can also serve to liberate the South from 'the exploitation of its natural and human resources at low cost by the North'; it should accord

the Southern countries and peoples greater space to 'find their own trajectories to what they define as the good life' (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 5). Second, the potential relevance of degrowth to the Global South is also demonstrated by a growing volume of studies on similar movements and practices initiated in the Global South (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019, p. 248).

At the same time, as one study on environmental justice movements in the Global South illustrated, issues are framed differently from degrowth in the following aspect: the size of GDP is not of paramount importance for Southern groups that struggle to protect their own localities from the onslaught of global capitalism while confronting elite appropriation and control (Rodoríguez-Labajos et al., 2019, pp. 177−179). It is therefore advisable that degrowth advocates the avoidance of imposing a 'global' agenda in a neo-colonial manner in view of 'the lived realities of the subaltern groups in the Global South': they can instead pursue 'a gradual, bottom-up process rather than a radical, top-down rupture' (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019, p. 249).

Degrowth advocates are not necessarily unaware of these issues. For example, Susan Paulson (2017, p. 436) proposes to 'shift ambition away from determining which of these is the right answer ... toward building potential for synergy among many kinds of answers and solutions playing out differently across spaces, scales and social groups'. Similarly, Joan Martínez-Alier (2012, p. 66) admits that '[t]he Southern potential alliance with the small degrowth movement in Europe cannot mandate an agreement to stop economic growth everywhere'.

Moreover, the Declaration adopted at a seminal conference held in Paris in 2008 did include the following exceptional clause: 'In countries where severe poverty remains, right-sizing implies increasing consumption by those in poverty as quickly as possible, in a sustainable way, to a level adequate for a decent life, following locally determined poverty-reduction

paths' (Research and Degrowth, 2010, pp. 523−524). The conference is widely seen to have 'marked the birth of an international research community of researcher-activists' (Kallis, 2018, p. 6).

However, it is not desirable to limit this clause to 'countries where severe poverty remains'. This is because, as noted by Kate Raworth who put forth the notion of 'doughnut economics' as a roadmap for a sustainable transition, every nation is required to stay within the ecological ceiling (the outer ring of a doughnut) while securing minimum standards of living (the inner ring): 'We simply cannot be certain of how GDP will respond and evolve as we make this unprecedented transition into the Doughnut's safe and just space' (Raworth, 2017, p. 267).

A sustainable transition necessitates an expansion of investments in distributive and regenerative enterprises[1], as well as a contraction of environmentally and socially harmful industries, such as oil and gas, mining, industrial livestock production, demolition and landfill, and speculative finance (Raworth, 2017, p. 267). In countries where such polluting industries prevail, economic growth becomes 'uneconomic', in the words of Herman E. Daly (2014), because it increases environmental and social costs faster than its production benefits. In other 'developing' countries, economic growth can be 'economic', that is, the marginal benefits of growth can be greater than its marginal costs (Daly, 2014, p. 89). There are opportunities, in the latter category of 'developing' countries, to channel GDP growth into promoting distributive and regenerative undertakings, while avoiding developing harmful industries (Raworth, 2017, p. 254).

[1] Distributive enterprises are businesses that contribute to 'transforming the underlying dynamics of wealth' and 'reducing both poverty and inequality' (Raworth, 2017, p. 178). Regenerative enterprises catalyse the metamorphosis from the throwaway economy to a circular economy in which 'the leftovers from one production process ... become the source materials for the next' (Raworth, 2017, p. 221).

Against this background, it is crucial to assign the duty of limiting growth primarily to 'rich' countries immersing in mass production and consumption, which are required to make available ecological space for 'developing' countries to converge on a common, optimal level of material throughput (Daly, 2014, p. 75). Many 'developing' countries are at what Walt W. Rostow termed the take-off stage, whereby economic growth serves to expand the range of socio-economic choices available to individuals and groups (Raworth, 2017, p. 254).

Degrowth's pitfall of dichotomising growth and degrowth

Theoretical framework: The conventional view of plurality

Nevertheless, should we follow degrowth debates and 'mandate an agreement to stop economic growth everywhere', except for 'countries where severe poverty remains'? To address this question, it is useful to seek to liberate ourselves from the shackles of the conventional view of plurality, which Marilyn Strathern problematises in favour of an alternative postplural perception of the world (2004, p. xvi).

Under the sway of the conventional notion of plurality, scholars tend to complacently accept the binary 'whole-part' distinction. They are consequently prone to hold a simplistic view that the relation between a 'part' and the 'whole' is irreducibly hierarchical, or that the 'whole' is composed of distinctive 'parts' that require separate treatment. However, '[t]he more closely you look, the more detailed things are bound to become' (Strathern, 2004, p. xiii). This is because a close inspection of the particular 'whole-part' distinction opens up possibilities for a wider range of categorisation (Strathern, 2004, p. xv).

In studying Strathern's contribution, for example, M. Holbraad and M.A. Pedersen (2017, p. 131) use an example of classifying a dog as a quadruped (a distinct 'part' or category of the 'entire' life form). This analytic category helps reduce the complexity of data on various life forms to enable a comparative analysis of quadrupeds and bipeds. However, it simultaneously albeit

unwittingly incurs information loss in that a dog and a human being can also be grouped into a single category such as that of mammals or vertebrates.

'The perception of increasable complication—that there are always potentially "more" things to take into account' is therefore called for (Satrathern, 2004, p. xiv). To put it inversely, we should not be complacent with a particular 'whole-part' divide that regards the 'entire' debate as consisting merely of distinctive 'parts'. Categorisation purports to order the complexity surrounding the materials under study, but insidiously ends up as a conduit to further amplify the complexity.

In dealing with this conundrum, it is imperative to draw on the postplural view of the world, under which the very 'whole-part' or 'complexity-simplicity' distinction loses its sense (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 124–125). To refrain from the hierarchical 'whole-part' distinction, partial connections are ascertained, for instance, between a dog as a quadruped and a human being as a biped, given that the two are both mammals and vertebrates. 'Comparability is not intrinsic to anything' (Strathern, 2004, p. 53), but there is fertile ground for forging a 'working compatibility' between different analytic categories (Strathern, 2004, p. 35).

Moreover, under the postplural view, analytic categories are not rigidly separated with recourse to a particular type of categorisation, nor are they compared with each other to make abstract, generalised arguments. On the contrary, 'comparison does no longer occur with reference to a high level of abstraction and generalization' but is accompanied by efforts to unearth differentiations within each category to explore compatibility between different categories (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 138). In this way, what Strathern terms 'the perception of increasable complication' is attained while embracing the postplural view.

As a logical consequence, categorical distinctions between the objects under study are no longer accepted a priori, and the categorisation used to separate them dissipate into 'self-comparisons' within each object under investigation (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 133). This leads us to 'the postplural injunction', that is, that any given category entails 'the latent potential to be "scaled" into what it is not (yet)' (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 154). Instead of complacently accepting given analytical categories, efforts are made to identify 'something more' and to go 'beyond the original answer to the question' (Strathern, 2004, p. xxii).

The conventional view of plurality underlying degrowth debates

The postplural worldview, put forth by Strathern, which points to the potential of identifying compatibility between analytical categories, helps dissect the pitfalls of degrowth debates. Degrowth advocates devised the new analytic category of 'degrowth', assuming that by making a clear-cut binary distinction between the degrowth and growth 'parts', they amplify information about the 'entire' debate on a postgrowth order. The notion of degrowth supposedly helps 'open up a space for the inventiveness and creativity of the imagination' that has been blocked by the prevailing idiom of economism (Latouche, 2009, p. 9).

At the same time, in line with the conventional view of plurality, degrowth advocates regard growth-seeking and degrowth measures as distinctively separate endeavours, with recourse to a unidimensional scale to assess whether the abolition of economic growth as a social objective is attained. As long as they overemphasise the two categories' comparability, they incur information loss and overlook the potential of exploring compatibility between the two.

While degrowth rightfully calls into question our expansionist society, it should not downplay growth-seeking measures altogether, because to attain a fully-fledged postgrowth order,

the co-optimisation of economic development, environmental quality and employment concerns needs to be prioritised (Ashford & Hall, 2019, p. 459). Economic development represents the entire gamut of change required to widen the distribution of basic life-sustaining goods and services, to raise standards of living and to expand the range of socioeconomic choices available to individuals and nations (Todaro & Smith, 2015, p. 24). Economic development is distinguishable from economic growth, although the former does not preclude the latter, given that there is 'good GDP' and 'bad GDP' (Ashford & Hall, 2019, p. 164).

Therefore, it is imperative to avoid placing unnecessary constraints on economic growth, and we need not contract every material throughput and output as long as stringent measures are in place to curtail undesirable externalities that flow from growth (Van den Bergh, 2011, p. 890). Indeed, 'positive progress towards more just and sustainable societies will necessarily entail exponential rates of growth in particular practices, technologies and sectors' including 'peaceful dispute resolution; open source seeds; ecological farming; collective land tenure; co-operative enterprises; renewable energy; community utilities; grassroots innovations… and so on' (Stirling, 2016b).

This is supposedly in line with the assertion made by proponents of degrowth that it is not a retrograde step back to premodern styles or standards of living. As stated by a noted advocate, Serge Latouche, it is aimed at 'doing more, and doing better, with less' than the business-as-usual, with recourse to 'better technologies and better management', such as those relating to renewable energy sources, material efficiency improvements and low-carbon devices (Latouche, 2009, pp. 55−56). If so, degrowth advocates may agree with Van den Bergh (2011, p. 885) who puts forth the notion of 'agrowth' on the grounds that 'being against GDP or against unconditional GDP growth is not the same as being against growth'.

'Marginalising the economy' beyond the growth/no-growth binary

From the postplural viewpoint which ascertains the potential of identifying compatibility between different categories, therefore, it is imperative to ensure that 'comparison does no longer occur with reference to such a high level of abstraction and generalisation' as degrowth debates. The polarised 'growth/degrowth trap' should be superseded on the understanding that 'growth can be a far more nuanced and subtle process, than this dismal zero sum calculus suggests' (Stirling, 2016c)[2].

'So, by simply inverting the terms of its target, a narrow "degrowth" critique risks counterproductively reinforcing the prevailing hegemony of monetary value in current real world-politics' (Stirling, 2016c). Degrowth is not framed differently from the growth paradigm, in that both draw on the crude binary logic of growth/no-growth to prescribe policies either to increase, decrease or stabilise the size of the economy (Andy Stirling's commentary, cited in Kallis, 2017, pp. 167−169).

The problematique surrounding the polarised 'growth/degrowth trap' can be further elucidated by drawing on Steffen Roth's article on anti-capitalism (2015). Anti-capitalism 'creates its own problems' and insidiously facilitates the continuation of capitalism (Roth, 2015, p. 111). This is because it distinguishes capitalism from non-capitalism, clarifies the distinct nature of the former and elucidates issues thus far unnoticed or neglected by capitalists, who learn how

[2] This drawback manifests itself in the review article referred to above, which intends to reinvigorate 'studies of economic stability in the absence of growth and of societies that have managed well without growth' (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 292). In the article, Bhutan is erroneously included among those societies that have sustained themselves without growth (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 302). By implicitly interpreting GNH as rejecting economic growth, the authors of the article grasp it 'only superficially and as a kind of exotic curiosity', to borrow a phrase from Ross McDonald (2009, p. 614).

best to reorient and prolong the status quo. It is therefore advisable that proponents of anti-capitalism refrain from activating the same economistic frame as capitalism, the object of criticism. Unless they shed themselves of their economy-bias, 'the sharpest problem focus cannot help but sharpen the problem' (Roth, 2015, p. 107).

Similarly, degrowth debates are beset with the economy-bias in that they remain trapped in the same binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth' as the growth paradigm (Roth, 2017, p. 1034). A more effective solution lies in 'marginalizing the economy' or avoiding reinforcing its prevailing hegemony (Roth, 2017, p. 1043). However, degrowth advocates are immersed in the binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth' and instead help growth advocates sharpen their counterarguments, even if unintentionally.

To rectify this pitfall, it is useful to pay attention to the separation of the economy as a distinct sphere of social life, which became entrenched in the 1950s to give rise to the growth paradigm (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 294). The separation of the economic sphere can be done away with while illuminating the existence of various other non-economic domains such as 'political system', 'science', 'art', 'religion', 'legal system', 'sport', 'health', 'education' and 'social media' (Roth, 2017, p. 1040). When all these domains are accounted for in tandem with the economic sphere, it is plausible to relegate 'economy' to being merely one of them, and to conceive myriad ways of ordering social life (Roth, 2015, p. 118).

In this way, issues regarding economic growth can be grasped in 'contextual, relational and ever-changing' terms: its unfolding is seen to hinge on how economic growth intersects with the non-economic domains (Stirling, 2016c). This is in line with the postplural worldview that repudiates the conventional notion of plurality founded on the orthodoxy of complacently accepting rigid analytical categories: scholars are liable to draw on the latter to make abstract, generalised comparisons

without exploring compatibility between ostensibly divergent analytical categories.

Degrowth proponents should move away from the restrictive, binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth' founded on the conventional notion of plurality. Instead, they can ascertain myriad connotations of economic growth beyond monetary value and heed the potential of linking growth to social values, such as equality, longevity, health, justice, care, liberty, fulfilment, education and sustainability (Stirling, 2016b). Such a 'many-growth analysis means reshaping and balancing activities measured in conventional economic terms, with radically more prominent and dynamic diversities of cultures, institutions, practices' and so on (Stirling, 2016c).

Gross National Happiness (GNH) and its postplural stance

In facilitating degrowth to move away from the conventional view of plurality, it is imperative that its advocates 'shift ambition ... toward building potential for synergy among many kinds of answers and solutions playing out differently across spaces, scales and social groups', as noted earlier. In this regard, Bhutan's GNH can serve as an illuminating model in both conceptual and practical terms.

This is against the background that the role of religion in development has gained significance since the start of the 21st century, as a key to ascertaining alternative and multiple views of 'progress' (Bompani, 2019). GNH has won acclaim among development scholars as an alternative development approach founded on Buddhist principles of holistic wellbeing and harmony with the natural environment (Willis, 2021, pp. 170−171). As pointed out by degrowth proponents, there is a growing realisation that the growth-oriented world order has proven ecologically and socially unsustainable, thus calling for a fundamental redefinition of what constitutes 'progress' or 'development'.

GNH denotes 'the distinctive Bhutanese perception of the fundamental purpose of development', founded on the country's rich tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, and is not 'an intellectual construct detached from practical experience' (Priesner, 1999, p. 27). 'For most Bhutanese, Buddhism permeates all facets of their lives' and 'informs their worldview, lifestyle, social behaviour, economic practices and political thinking' (Karma Phuntsho, 2013, p. 42). For the public, the promotion of Buddhist values of happiness in the country's development plans is nothing novel or revolutionary, although it was visionary for the Fourth King (rein: 1972–2006) to have initiated the process of translating the country's rich tradition of Mahayana Buddhism into a formal national policy (Karma Phuntsho, 2013, p. 596).

GNH began to be applied to Bhutan's development plans in the 1970s, as the Fourth King started stressing on the need to prioritise happiness in defiance of the propensity of development elsewhere to revolve around the maximisation of GDP, in his public speeches and statements (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, pp. 32−35)[3]. In this sense, GNH predates degrowth by a few decades, and thus provides 'a wealth of experience to learn from' in order that the latter can evolve into a more concrete approach defying the business as usual (Verma, 2017, p. 485). Degrowth is still a hypothesis that requires empirical studies, as admitted by a noted proponent (Kallis, 2018, p. 155).

[3] It was in a policy document entitled *Bhutan 2020* (Planning Commission, 1999) that, for the first time, the government explicitly articulated GNH as its long-term vision. GNH had not been mentioned in the country's earlier development plans, but had been de facto put into practice by 'people who had intuitively internalised it' (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, p. 34). Accordingly, various policy measures, which would later be incorporated into the systems of GNH measurement, were adopted in various plans, including the fifth (1981–1986), the sixth (1987–1992) and the seventh (1992–1997) five-year plans (Masaki et al., 2021).

Moreover, in conceptual terms, GNH gives insight to degrowth advocates as it is agonistic about economic growth: those involved in GNH implicitly avoid the conventional view of plurality that leads degrowth advocates to reject growth a priori. This stance is attested to by its composite index, encompassing both indicators of wellbeing stemming from economic growth and those relating to non-economic spheres. In line with the Buddhist worldview, as described below, GNH adopts a postplural stance of abstaining from rejecting economic growth of all kinds. This is to instead ascertain its myriad connotations depending on how it intersects with non-economic domains. GNH thus avoids making an abstract, generalised comparison and is resultantly more capable of 'marginalising the economy' or rectifying its prevailing hegemony: it criticises the narrow framing founded on GDP while refraining from the economistic frame of 'more-versus-less growth'.

GNH's 'holistic' approach founded on Buddhism

GNH seeks to strike a harmonious balance between economic and non-economic wellbeing of the society through 'sustainable and equitable socio-economic development', 'environmental conservation', 'cultural preservation and promotion' and 'good governance'. These four pillars are further subdivided into the nine domains that compose the GNH index, namely, 'living standards', 'education', 'health', 'cultural diversity and resilience', 'community vitality', 'time use', 'psychological wellbeing', 'ecological diversity and resilience' and 'good governance'.

In this way, GNH embodies a holistic (recognising all aspects of people's needs, be these spiritual or material, physical or social) and balanced approach (emphasising balanced progress towards the attainment of GNH) (Karma Ura et al., 2012, p. 7). The GNH's stance of conceptualising development as interdependent economic, ecological, social, cultural and good governance concerns is rooted in Mahayana Buddhism, which advocates interdependence as opposed to the dominant either–

or worldview (Schroeder & Schroeder, 2014). Any perceived either–or dichotomy infringes on the ultimate nature of the universe (Givel, 2015, pp. 20–21).

Although GNH is akin to degrowth positions in rejecting a growth-for-growth's sake approach, it differs from the latter in not ruling out the pursuit of economic growth. This is attested to by the fact that the nine domains include 'living standards' in income, land and quality of housing: the domain concerns the economic wellbeing required for the Bhutanese people to fulfil their basic needs for a comfortable lifestyle (Karma Ura et al., 2012, p. 168). Therefore, according to the first policy document entitled *Bhutan 2020,* which explicitly articulated GNH as the government's long-term vision, 'the concept of Gross National Happiness does not reject economic growth' but regards it as 'a precondition for ... increasing standards of living and enlarging the opportunities and choices of our people' (Planning Commission, 1999, p. 11). *Bhutan 2020* continues to serve as a benchmark for the government's development policies.

According to the Bhutanese government's report, prepared for the 2021 High-Level Political Forum of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 'sustainable economic growth' is called for, to address the country's 'persistent challenges' concerning 'vulnerabilities associated with the economy' (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021, p. 73). The country's economic vulnerabilities are related to its reliance on capital-intensive investment in hydropower generation for state coffers. The sector is not highly correlated with employment generation, thereby necessitating the promotion of non-hydropower sectors such as agricultural processing, cottage and small industries, and green tourism.

There is ample room within Bhutan to expand the economic choices available to the disadvantaged segments as a means to curtail regional and social disparities. As noted in the SDGs report, income poverty rates in the country's 20 districts range from more than 30 percent to less than 1 percent, while

unemployment is high among youths, especially women (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021, p. 39, p. 80). The government commits itself to 'sustainable and equitable socio-economic development', one of GNH's four pillars, and economic growth can therefore serve as a reasonable approximation of 'living standards'. This denotes that GDP per capita possibly correlates with people's access to the subsistence essentials such as food, clothing, housing and health care.

Simultaneously, for the marginal benefits of economic growth to outweigh its marginal costs in Bhutan, the government prioritises 'environmental conservation', another pillar of GNH. Environmental sustainability is positioned as a defining point of economic growth, given that the latter is measured by GDP or the total value of all goods and services traded in the country, and thus increases material throughput and waste[4].

At a more fundamental level, the promotion of 'sustainable growth' has been the mainstay of the country's development, that is, 'economic growth is seen, not as an end in itself, but as 'an important means for achieving higher ends', as stated in *Bhutan 2020* (Planning Commission, 1999, p. 11). The stance is derived from Buddhist economics, which positions the economy as part of a broader ethical order, unlike mainstream economics, which privileges it as a separate, important domain of social life (Long, 2019, pp. 64–69). Buddhist economics moves beyond the popular view that 'getting more is always good' and measures economic performance more holistically while taking into consideration 'the protection of the

[4] To avoid environmental degradation, the government has formulated the National Sustainable Consumption and Production Strategy and Action Plan (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021, p. 90). It is also committed to remaining carbon neutral by endeavouring to decouple growth from greenhouse gas emissions. 'Bhutan's carbon sink ... will be surpassed in the 2035–2040 period' unless efforts are made to decouple growth from greenhouse gas emissions (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021, pp. 94–95).

environment, the state of the human spirit, and the quality of life of all people' (Brown, 2017, p. 6). GNH conceptualises development as interdependent economic, ecological, social, cultural and good governance concerns, as noted above.

These attributes enable GNH to embody a parallelism with the above-stated dictum of Roth, that is, the importance of 'marginalising the economy' or rectifying the prevailing hegemony of economic growth. In order to refrain from activating the same economy-bias as the growth paradigm, GNH places a stronger focus on non-economic domains but does not reject growth across the board, thus departing from the binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth'. The attainment of 'right livelihood', wherein economic activities 'satisfy the test of ecology, future generations, and society' is what matters in Buddhist economics (Zslonai, 2011, cited in Ng, 2020, pp. 61–62), as opposed to the monetary scale. This does not imply that the pursuit of material prosperity is prohibited, but points to the need to use resources including monetary wealth mindfully, to let go of human ego and self-centred attachment to material comfort (Brown, 2017, pp. 22–23).

GNH measurement conducive to 'marginalising the economy'

To verify the overarching status and progress of GNH outcomes and to provide decision-makers with information on how best to advance future policies and projects, GNH surveys are conducted regularly using the GNH index. The quantitative scores of the nine domains are summed into an overall value of national GNH[5], which is also disaggregated for geographical and demographical comparisons. The scores are also used to ascertain changes over time, and to assess the relative

[5] GNH exemplifies a 'nondollar index' that aggregates a holistic range of variables into an overall measure of people's wellbeing, as opposed to a 'dashboard' that provides a variety of indicators of wellbeing (Brown, 2017, pp. 110−112).

significance of the nine domains for the Bhutanese people to live happily.

In measuring people's wellbeing in this way, the nine domains are given equivalent weight in view of the equal importance of each domain for happiness (Karma Ura, 2017, p. 128). The performance of economic growth is primarily assessed under 'living standards' (closely linked to GDP per capita), while this and other domains are weighed on equal terms, thereby positioning economic growth as one among a range of variables conducive to human wellbeing.

As a result, 'the required combination of variables [for each person to achieve happiness] may vary depending on personal circumstances at a given point in time' (Karma Ura, 2017, p. 132). As noted in the report on the 2015 GNH survey, 'people themselves find fulfilment in a multiplicity of ways': 'GNH in Bhutan is relatively well balanced across domains' in that each of the nine domains contributes almost equally to overall happiness (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, p. 60).

This attribute of GNH resonates with the above-mentioned importance of heeding the possibility of myriad ways of ordering social life while taking into consideration a range of domains, both economic and non-economic. Unlike degrowth debates immersed in the binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth', GNH avoids lapsing into the conventional view of plurality that rigidly distinguishes degrowth from growth, and instead ascertains potentially diverse connotations of economic growth: its unfolding is seen to hinge on how it intersects with other non-economic affairs and is thus grasped in 'contextual, relational and ever-changing' terms.

At the same time, in reality, '[b]alancing between GNH and GDP poses an ever-greater challenge to governance' (Karma Ura, 2017, p. 117). GDP measures the volume of economic

exchanges, irrespective of their social or environmental implications: it increases even when economic growth adds to income disparity or environmental degradation, and ignores exchanges that do not involve monetary transactions[6]. Moreover, a globalised world dominated by GDP poses challenges to the promotion of GNH: given the worldwide phenomena of deepening international trade and investment ties, 'Bhutan has not been immune to capitalism, resulting in increased materialism and the emergences of a status-conscious consumer class with disposable income' (Verma, 2017, p. 486).

It is noted in *Bhutan 2020* that GNH does focus on 'ensuring that nonmaterial aspects are not overwhelmed by the negative forces of modernization' (Planning Commission, 1999, p. 12). According to a report entitled *Happiness: Towards a New Paradigm of Development*, '[t]he process of our transformation from the current to the new paradigm must harmonise and reconcile seemingly contradictory choices such as short-term and long-term goals, individual and collective goals, and growth and sustainable goals': 'The journey … has to begin with the recognition of the complexity and interrelatedness of our reality' (New Development Paradigm Steering Committee and Secretariat, 2013, p. 7).

[6] In this respect, GDP is in a stark contrast to GNH that promotes 'community vitality' as one of its nine domains. 'Community vitality' is concerned with social support and community relations entailing non-monetary transactions of goods and services. Its inclusion in GNH tallies with the following view held among scholars concerned with postgrowth transitions: material security hardly constitutes the sole goal of human beings who also value the quality of their relationships with each other and take pride in what they contribute to their own communities (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, pp. 21–22). It is plausible to draw on this consideration to operationalise a 'community economy' that capitalises on a broader range of transactions than those based merely on individuals' calculations of gains and outcomes (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, p. xix). The author provides a case study of the operationalisation of a 'community economy' in a village in Bhutan in another article (Masaki, 2021b).

GNH's agrowth approach to economic growth

This brings us back to the need to see the dynamics of economic growth as being 'contextual, relational and ever-changing' to clarify what constitutes 'good GDP' or 'bad GDP'. According to a report detailing the recommendations contained in the *New Paradigm of Development* report, '[t]here is no point in being against economic growth as such because economic growth can in principle manifest in so many different ways', and at the same time 'we should try to minimize any collateral problems that may entail' (Hirata, 2017, pp. 381−382). This is in line with the agrowth stance that is agnostic about 'more-versus-less economic growth'.

From the perspective of GNH, care should be taken not to be judgmental about a growth path or a non-growth scenario when examining its implications for employment (Hirata, 2017, pp. 382−384). While GNH prioritises addressing involuntary unemployment, it is not vital 'to react to a productivity increase and to the resultant fall in demand for labor with an increase in production [or with resource to economic growth] in order to keep people in jobs' (Hirata, 2017, p. 382). This is because increased labour productivity results in reduction in working time, which can otherwise be tapped for work sharing to contain the rise in unemployment. Moreover, it is plausible to advance deliberate reductions in productivity, which can be promoted by replacing socially and environmentally destructive industries with more sustainable and labour-intensive industries. This is a practice pursued in several parts of the world, with recourse to a shift from fossil fuel power generation to community-based renewable energy sources.

Similarly, the GNH perspective accords importance to reducing income inequality, but leaves whether the issue can be better addressed in the presence or absence of economic growth as an open question (Hirata, 2017, pp. 384–385). Although the worldwide trend is that within-country income disparity widens in times of economic growth, the latter can also serve to narrow the former when it is promoted in ways to equitably

expand socio-economic choices available to the populace. In this respect, the following precept warrants attention, which Ernest F. Schumacher put forth in his classic *Small is Beautiful*, originally published in 1973: it is imperative to depart from the unfounded and yet popular idea that 'the modern sector can be expanded to absorb virtually the entire population' (Schumacher, 2010, p. 178). To avoid inflicting internal imbalances on the economy, modern industrial development needs to proceed in tandem with the promotion of 'production by the masses' in Schumacher's words (2010, p. 79). The latter can be attained with the development of vibrant local communities, which serves to create 'a dynamic situation capable of generating growth' albeit with less total output (Schumacher, 2010, p. 184).

The effect of economic growth on environmental conservation is not black or white (Hirata, 2017, pp. 387–388). It may create the material affluence required to maintain adequate ecosystem services such as fresh water, air purification and pest control, but can also create polluting industries and contribute to carbon emissions owing to the increased consumption of energy and resources. Simultaneously, nations worldwide, including 'developing' ones, cannot afford to seek to 'grow now and clean up later', but are instead required to channel economic growth into promoting distributive and regenerative economies (Raworth, 2017, p. 254). This is because the world economy is pushing against the ecological ceiling. It is vital for every nation to constrain undesirable externalities that flow from growth, even when this means slowing it down, and to explore possibilities of resource-saving technological progress or substitution of material goods by services.

GNH's 'ethical' approach to 'marginalising the economy'

GNH can 'marginalise the economy' or rectify the prevailing hegemony of economic growth, not only because it allows myriad ways of ordering social life, as noted above, but also because it embeds wellbeing within Buddhist ethics. GNH weighs various indicators of economic and non-economic

wellbeing in light of ethics (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 55). 'When you see a society that is happy but it is tending towards unethical actions or an individual finding happiness but in a very unethical manner, there ought to be some sort of an adjustment downward in the hedonic value of that happiness' (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 56).

GNH's ethical approach to 'marginalising the economy' is based on the following Buddhist values of happiness (Karma Ura, 2017, p. 125). First, happiness is attained when a person abandons the false belief in the possibility of a clear and separated self, and instead arrives at a relational view whereby the self/other boundaries are diluted. Second, happiness arises from inner contentment and compassion for others, rather than self-centred attachment to material comfort and fleeting pleasures. These have much to offer at a time when material prosperity has become the bedrock of public policy, under the sway of a 'debilitating and short-sighted vision of individualism' that conceives the self in terms of appetites and wants (Halkias, 2012, p. 16).

In other words, GNH represents the secularisation of Buddhist teachings on 'meaningful happiness and deeper values in life' (Verma, 2019, pp. 24–25). In this respect, GNH is founded on two imperatives that human wellbeing hinges on: relationships and the environment (Jigmi Y. Thinley, 2012, pp. 12–13). Human beings derive happiness not only from individual gains and outcomes but also from the quality of relationships with each other as well as those with the environment. GNH thus seeks to attain ends that are collective (viewing happiness as an all-encompassing collective phenomenon), sustainable (pursuing wellbeing for both current and future generations), and equitable (ensuring everyone a reasonable level of wellbeing) in nature (Karma Ura et al., 2012, p. 7).

Given that GNH thus enables 'a deeper assessment of development that directly gives much greater space to happiness defined in a broader way' (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 55),

its argument that relates wellbeing to individuals' sense of ethics is more capable of 'marginalising the economy' than degrowth. This is because Buddhist values of happiness help people to internalise frugality 'without falling into a severe form of ascetics': frugality is underlined by people's greater sense of interdependence with human and non-human others (Ng, 2020, p. 134).

This comparative advantage of GNH can be illuminated by contrasting its stance with the 'ethical' approach put forth by degrowth advocates (Koch et al., 2017). They similarly warn against material comfort and fleeting pleasures arising from a convenient but unsustainable lifestyle. The disadvantage is that degrowth fails to consider the significance of people's inward disposition to abstain from an overly materialistic lifestyle. Limitations are imposed on such material comfort as meat consumption, air travel and the use of electronic gadgets (Koch et al., 2017, p. 76) but 'it seems rather too optimistic for us to hope for an overall increase in subjective wellbeing, at least in the short-term' (Koch et al., 2017, p. 80).

In this way, degrowth hands down the moral imperative with mere reference to objective, science-based knowledge pointing to the need to constrain the spread of self-centred, materialistic values. The ethical approach of degrowth is therefore not effective in shedding the economy-bias that is built on individuals' liability to prioritise the goal of increased income and consumerism. People's logical understanding of the importance of pursuing a more sustainable mode of happiness is not a sufficient condition to motivate them to change their lifestyles[7].

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[7] This tallies with the theory of ethics 'based on the action of the will' which Nishida Kitaro propounded based on his Zen practices, to problematise the 'rational or intellectual theory' in *An Inquiry into the Good*, originally published in 1911 (Nishida, 1990, p. 111). While the 'rational or intellectual theory' can depict the universality of certain moral laws (such as 'love thy neighbour'), one's logical understanding of those laws does not necessarily motivate one to obey them, as 'the will arises from feelings or impulses, not from mere abstract logic'

GNH, on the contrary, refrains from privileging objective knowledge based on scientific studies as follows. Progress occurs through 'an inward journey towards realization of the true nature of mind' (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 58). As noted above, happiness arises when individuals abandon self-centred attachment to myopic comfort and pleasure in favour of inner contentment and compassion for others. 'Objective knowledge and belief in scientific proof are not the main routes towards knowledge of the true nature of mind' (Karma Ura, 2010, pp. 58−59).

This does not mean that GNH is not aligned with an objective, standardised system of measurement: on the contrary, the promotion of GNH requires a 'navigation tool' that guides society to the desired destination (Karma Ura, 2010, pp. 54−55). This stance has been given a concrete expression in the above-mentioned index used to quantitatively measure GNH. GNH resultantly encompasses both objectively verifiable indicators and individuals' subjective consciousness, in contrast to degrowth that prioritises the former with scant regard for the latter.

This approach helps conceptualise a more effective postgrowth transition because GNH, contrary to degrowth, refrains from the subjective/objective dichotomy, another manifestation of the conventional view of plurality that divides study materials into distinctive categories and prioritises one of them. The

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(Nishida, 1990, p. 113). According to Nishida, one can arrive at a situation in which 'knowledge [about ultimate reality] is ... accompanied by the performance of the will [to translate it into conduct]' (Nishida, 1990, pp. 90–91). Nishida's theory of ethics is founded on his notion of pure experience, in which we 'rid ourselves of the [subjective] self and merge with the object of thought' (Nishida, 1990, p. 13). This assertion accords with Zen practices aimed at reaching the transcendental unity that surpasses the subject/object dichotomy and thus brings about a revelation of the essence of reality from within oneself (Schinzinger, 1958, p. 15).

subjective/objective dichotomy underlies the growth paradigm that erroneously treats GDP as a proxy of human wellbeing. The growth paradigm resultantly downplays subjective experiences in favour of objective GDP data. GNH supersedes the subjective/objective dichotomy and is not confined to being 'an arithmetical exercise, derived from indicators': it is also about 'developing a vision that is in concert with all the deeply thinking members of society' (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 54).

Conclusion

As described in this study, a postgrowth transition should be pursued with recourse to the postplural perspective, under which analytic categories are not rigidly separated: efforts should instead be made to explore compatibility between ostensibly divergent categories to avoid making abstract, generalised arguments. This allows us to arrive at a more nuanced and subtle understanding than the binary calculus of degrowth suggests, that is, the polarised growth/degrowth trap. Otherwise, our endeavours to move towards a postgrowth order may merely end up flipping the growth paradigm on its head: so long as the same parameter of 'more-versus-less economic growth' remains, as with the growth paradigm, degrowth advocates continue to reinforce the way of viewing economy in terms of economic growth[8].

The postplural worldview is embedded in Bhutan's policy of GNH, which offers an illuminating alternative to degrowth in both conceptual and practical terms. GNH is well designed to 'marginalise the economy' or rectify the prevailing hegemony of economic growth through its holistic, balanced approach that ascertains myriad ways of attaining happiness. Accordingly, the GNH index accords equal weight to all the nine domains,

[8] A related strand of postdevelopment studies, lambasting development as top-down, ethnocentric, homogenising endeavours, is not 'radical' enough to abandon a similar binary logic entailed in its rival developmentalism (Masaki, 2021a). As noted above, degrowth debates draw on postdevelopment studies, as well as on environmentalism and anthropological and structural critiques of economism.

including that of 'living standards' which is closely related to 'more-versus-less economic growth'. Moreover, GNH effectively 'marginalises the economy' by encompassing the pursuit of subjective introspection, thereby constraining the economy-bias founded on the subjective/objective dichotomy.

As noted in the document detailing the *New Paradigm of Development* report, referenced above, 'there can be no doubt that societies are worse off when they are forced to have economic growth than when they are free to choose whether economic growth should be part of their conception of truly good development' (Hirata, 2017, p. 392). This does not mean that 'societies should be forced to have degrowth'. On the contrary, a postgrowth transition should be 'a project to be worked out democratically, not one that is predefined in detail in advance', to repeat the quote of a degrowth advocate taken up earlier.

It is therefore crucial to revert to and bring to the fore the principle of valuing 'locally determined paths', which was contained in the declaration adopted at the 2008 conference (but not as an exceptional clause, as originally implied). For this purpose, the conventional view of plurality, segregating the 'entire' debate on a postgrowth order into the degrowth and growth 'parts', should be done away with to avert a '"no alternatives" fatalism' that rejects growth of all kinds. It is instead crucial to uphold the freedom of different nations 'to choose whether and how economic growth should be part of truly good development'.

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