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Editorial: Post-Growth Organizations

Problematizing Growth

> *"Wherever I go, I ask questions about economics – and get answers about climate."*
> (Paul Mason, 2015, p. 245).

Global warming, pollutions of air and the seas, the depletion of non-renewable resources and the loss of biodiversity are just some of the most pressing issues of our time. The current attention for the natural environment as well as the reflection of the consequences of economic activities - that is our ways of producing, consuming and working - for our planet dates back to a change in attention and attitudes in the 1960's in various parts of the world. Early inspiration stems from Rachel Carson's book *The Silent Spring*, leading to a ban of the insecticide DDT in the United States, Kenneth E. Boulding's contribution about the *Spaceship Earth*, and the work of the *Club of Rome* in the 1970s. In the magnitudes of Thatcherism and Reaganism, the triumph of neoliberalism, and the manifestation of globalization both scholars and activists kept the discussion about the relationship of humanity to the planet alive. Broadly speaking, these critical voices overtly questioned an economically driven and anthropocentric understanding of nature, which is expected to be merely a bundle of resources, instrumentally understood in margins of input variables.

The numerous questions about the past and future relationship of humanity and the natural environment that arose from the historical course of attention received answers from both the political and academic sphere. Firstly, there are political answers, in which a political orientation serves as background foil for an ethically justified 'action orientation' connected to environmental policy. In addition to that but sometimes also connected to the domain of politics, scholars critically thought, discussed and wrote about ecological issues and their infliction by growth oriented economic policy. As ethical and political movement environmentalism became a global, yet, diverse trend driven by two different strands of thinking. From a *radical environmentalism* perspective, the political objectives are oriented towards nature and all species within a complex and fragile ecosystem. Early on, this perspective was extended to include a social dimension. Arguing from neo-marxist, material-

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mrev, 29 (3) 2018, 193 – 205 DOI: 10.5771/0935-9915-2018-3-193

feminist, and anarchist positions, the societal idea of social ecology was developed to overcome anthropocentric ideals, patriarchy, and so called enlightened rationality that bear down and oppress nature, classes, as well as gender (Bookchin, 1971; Bookchin, 1980). In this sense, radical environmentalism is oriented toward the intrinsic value of nature in line with human needs and social justice. Adopting a more moderate point of view, *reform environmentalism* became the dominant and highly institutionalized shaping of environmentalism nowadays. Inspired by the Brundtland Commission appointed by the United Nations at the beginning of the 1980s, political parties have been established to modernize the society in an ecological and sustainable manner. The objective was and still is to reconcile environmental and economic issues (e.g. Rockström, 2015). From the political agenda of reform environmentalism, respect for nature can be combined with economic efficiency as well as economic growth.

Secondly, academic answers to questions on the relationship of humankind and nature were developed from a similar background as mentioned above. Various scholars contributed to establish an academically inspired reflection about the role of both the economy and mainstream economics, especially regarding their continuous reference to a logic of steady growth. Already at the beginning of the debate, scholars did not remain in the ivory tower. In fact, academic answers to questions of environmental issues can be seen as an interplay between pure scientific motivations and ethico-political aims as the following approaches demonstrate.

One of the first contributions was the report '*The Limits to Growth*' by Meadows, Meadows, Randers and Behrens (1972) which was supported by the Club of Rome. Meadows et al. and later Rockström et al. (2009a; 2009b), and Rockström and Klum (2012) focus on a material and physical sphere of globalized human action. Relating to the existence of a finite planet, the growing extraction of natural resources, the pollution and overuse of common goods (like air), and a growing world population, the authors develop a complex calculation and several scenarios for a downfall of population, a decrease in quality of life and 'economic output', and a shortening of the lifespan. Most of these future pictures estimate a substantial decline of economic output or even population.

The approach of *degrowth* and the associated *degrowth movement* are rooted in the 1970s (see for example the work of Georgescu-Roegen, 1977) and connect to culturalist, democratic, ecologic, bio-economic and positive-spiritual intellectual traditions (Schneider, Kallis & Martínez Allier, 2010). The degrowth debate adheres to concreteness, refers to nature and human wellbeing, and upholds a fundamental positive connotation. Generally, degrowth exposes the negative effects of economic growth for nature and society and claims a reduction of economic performance to adapt to biophysical limits (Kallis, 2013; Latouche, 2009; Schneider et al., 2010). Proponents of the concept question the primacy of economic growth and challenge notions of more – instead of better – consumption, private – instead of public –

investment, the artificial – instead of a natural – objects of investment, and the externalization of costs (Martínez Alier, Pascaul, Vivien & Zaccai, 2010). Degrowth as scientific field and political movement promotes social choice, decentralization of political institutions, democratization and repoliticization of economy, and the discourse of environmentalism. The intent is not to create another kind of forced mechanism but rather an alternative draft to capitalism, socialism, social-liberalism and neoliberal sustainability (Fourier, 2008; Latouche, 2003; Martínez Alier et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2010; D'Alisa, Demaria & Kallis, 2015).

Promoting the approach of a *steady-state economy* several scholars engage in the measurement of a (potential or disputable) correlation between economic growth and labour, (in)solvency, (pressure on) state finances, and unemployment against the backdrop of an upward moving trade cycle which ends in itself (Blauwhof, 2012; Daly, 1972; Daly, 1973; Lawn, 2011; Smith, 2010). In a steady-state economy, focus is laid on a novel, hybrid form of production between capitalism and socialism (Czech & Daly, 2004; Daly, 2010). In such a "mixed economy" (Nitsch, 2006, p. 156) capitalist and non-capitalist models of economic behaviour coexist in the way that work force is united classlessly and freely. Profits are possible and disconnected from growth as well as the accumulation of capital (Blauwhof, 2012; Lawn, 2011; Smith, 2010). From a steady-state perspective, there is a need of a strategic orientation toward "workers, as the creators of the products and profits of cooperations […] in a unique position to gain control over the qualitative decisions about what, how and for what purpose goods and services are produced" (Blauwhof, 2012, p. 261) to overcome the problematic failure of revolution as well as state reform.

The *diverse economies* approach (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2006b, 2008) gives voice to marginalized, hidden and alternative economic activities. Defining itself as 'ontological project' its aim is to challenge the dominant framing of economic practices and discourses in terms of markets, wage labour, and capitalist enterprise. Consequently, this approach identifies mainstream economics as growth oriented, whereas alternative economies are labelled as 'vitality oriented'. Thus, the diverse economies approach "proliferates difference in the economic landscape and at the same time calls into question the hegemonic capitalocentric dynamics - mechanistic logics of reproduction, growth, accumulation, commodification, concentration, and centralization - on which capitalism's naturalness (and naturalized dominance) are grounded" (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, p. 16).

In recent years the approach of the *circular economy* received considerable attention. Authors emphasize the circularity of resource extraction, production, consumption, and recycling. They promote the idea of an economic system where materials and goods are designed to feed back into the system, e.g. through composting, or are recovered and restored, e.g. through reuse, repair and finally recycling (Bloomsma & Brennan, 2017; Murray, Skene & Haynes, 2017; Stahel, 2016; Tukker, 2015). On the one hand, a circular economy seems to clearly reject the unquestioned

paradigm of economic growth. On the other hand, it connects to the idea of reform environmentalism that is to reconcile economic growth and environmental protection through a decoupling of economic growth and environmental degradation.

Finally, Fred Hirsch (1977) offers a distinct perspective focusing on the consumption of goods that represents and is closely related to a position within a social structure. In this sense, the work of Hirsch and his concept of *positional goods* shows some similarities to Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 2017 [1899]) but develops it towards a general reflection upon the relationship of growth and consumption. The consumption of positional goods, i.e. goods that are only available to a few, implicates expectations of maintaining or acquiring higher social status. However, a growth-oriented sequential innovation and production of novel goods makes such goods step-by-step available to large segments of society. In turn, these goods lose their function to indicate a superior social position. Therefore, due to prices, distribution and life-cycles of positional goods and the gradual availability of such goods to many, individuals can never reach a higher position in society. Hence, the limits of growth from this perspective are social ones deriving from growing imbalances due to never reached expectations and widening differences between the upper ten and the lower ninety percent. To put it in other words: "the growth process itself engenders ever-growing wants that lead it over onward" (Easterlin, 1974, p. 121).

For this Special Issue, we decided to connect to the broad notion of post-growth relating to all of the above concepts. First and foremost this is motivated by our attempt to set a wider frame under which heterogeneous approaches and empirical insights can be presented. Thus, we do not want to limit the contribution of this Special Issue to one of the particular directions of the critical debate on growth and its consequences. We also understand the term 'post-growth organizations' as an umbrella term, capable of integrating diverse critical and/or reflexive positions on growth both articulated by organizational scholars as well as set in practice by activists, or the management and other members of organizations. From a practice-based perspective the problematization of growth can be politically motivated and formulated in a more or less radical tone, but it can also be a result of lifelong experiences of organizational actors, who decided not to follow the growth path. Said this, the notion of post-growth organizations tries to capture both the fissures of the growth narrative in the existing capitalism as well as the utopian energies of alternative forms of work and organization actively promoting a turn away from the growth path.

Post-Growth in Organization and Management Studies

Our focus on organizations follows the assumptions that organizations are key actors in highly developed societies (e.g. Perrow, 1991; Simon, 1991; Türk, 1999). Simon states that a visitor from Mars, observing the Earth from space and equipped

with telescope to reveal social structures will detect organizations - and not markets or transactions - as "the dominant feature of the landscape" (Simon 1991, p. 27). Similarly, Aldrich and Marsden (1988, p. 381) state that "Organizations … are the fundamental building blocks of modern society". Throughout their lives people are members of various organizations and their life course is affected by organizations. As Giddens (1991) reminds us, within modern societies meaning is negotiated in organizations. Therefore, organizations play also a major role for how individuals perceive their environment (e.g. Zolfaghari, Möllering, Clark & Dietz, 2016). From this perspective, broad cultural values, like nationality or religion, gain their relevance for individual's cultural identity in the specific contexts of for instance families or organization. Taking this stance, the idea of growth and its proliferation in economies and societies is essentially realized in and through organizations. In turn, however, we believe that organizations also hold progressive capacity for developing practical alternatives to challenge the growth ideology. Therefore the specific aim of this Special Issue is to substantiate the debate on post-growth and its sister-concepts from an organizational perspective. How do organizations respond to the limits of economic growth? How can organizations, from a post-growth perspective, promote their social worth as opposed to their monetary worth? How can organizations implement the elements of a post-growth economy, find a balance between sufficiency and dependency on consumption and push forward institutional innovations for the society, the environment and regional economy (Paech, 2016)?

However, the topic of organizing for the post-growth economy has only begun to gain momentum within Organization and Management Studies (Cheney et al., 2014; Liesen et al., 2015; Johnsen et al., 2017; Banerjee, Jermie, Peredo, Perey & Reichel, 2018). As Egri and Pinfield state in their historical review of the relationship of organization theory and environmental issues, "conceptualizations of organizational environments fail to explicitly include considerations of the natural environment" (1996, p. 222). Even more from the perspective of organization theory "environmental degradation becomes relevant only when the performance of a focal organization and the welfare of organizational participants are affected by such concerns" (p. 223). Though, there are exceptions. For example, the editors of the recent Special Issue of ephemera "Organizing for the post-growth Economy" connect to the concept of *sustainability* (Johnsen et al., 2017). In so doing they show that the post-growth related discourse of sustainable business claims that business organizations should stop seeing sustainability as another option to create economic growth but begin using sustainability as fundamental guideline for their reorientation towards a future that has the capacity to safe our planet (Johnsen et al., 2017). However, there are also voices that challenge the possibility of a sustainable turn due to the insurmountable clash between the capitalist economy and the idea of environment sustainability (Boehm et al., 2016). Furthermore, the concept of *social enterprise* offers a promising approach to understand post-growth organizing. In fact, there are overlaps between the post-growth discussion and the broad social enter-

prise discourse (Posse, 2015), the latter addressing for example solidarity economy, social and environmental entrepreneurship, benefit organizations, and common good organizations (Felber, 2015; Johanisova et al., 2003; Marquis et al., 2011; Sahakian & Dunand, 2015). Social enterprises are assumed to have the capacity to redefine growth by turning our attention away from output acceleration towards what Mintzberg (2015) refers to as a qualitative understanding of growth. This notion of growth is essentially related to the creation of human, natural and social wealth (Raworth, 2017). Finally, the realm of *alternative organizations* does as well provide fertile ground for studying post-growth organizing, particularly when for example co-operatives, credit unions, fair trade organizations, social movements, and hybrid organizations define their existence and development as being independent from the need to constantly growth (Böhm et al., 2015; Boyd et al., 2009; D'Alisa et al., 2015). Featuring individual autonomy and respect, an orientation towards solidarity and cooperation, and the responsibility for the future (Parker et al., 2014) – elements that resonate with the post-growth discourse - alternative organizations could be productive for the development of an economy and society that turns away from the narrow focus on economic growth.

Apart from these attempts, Organization and Management scholars tend to continue showing little effort to answer the question of how the ideas of post-growth implicate a new thinking of the organization. The broad post-growth discourse recognizes that the necessary transformation of the economy and, hence, the society could only be realized through a transition of organizations towards an orientation which seeks to foster wealth in social and environmental terms. However, Organization and Management Studies have only devoted little ambition to address the manifold organizational issues that this discourse implicates (Johnsen et al., 2017). Therefore, we know little about the organizational ramifications of claims such as a paradigmatic reordering of values (Fournier, 2008) and the implementation of moral economies featuring producers' "socially and ecologically embedded and politically engaged market activity" (Roman-Alcalá, 2017, p. 119). We also only begin to understand the consequences for organizations, when post-growth is not only related to the economic sector but to the society as a whole and to earth's life support system (Rockström, 2015).

Enriching the post-growth debate in Organization and Management Studies, the authors of this Special Issue seek to explore alternatives for organizations, which connect in various ways to the idea of post-growth. Their articles show for example the various practices that organizations use to realize post-growth, organizations' attempts to redefine value creation as being unrelated to economic growth, business owners' counter narratives to economic growth, and the broad impact of post-growth initiatives. What the authors of this Special Issue also emphasize is the ongoing and sometimes painful struggle inherent in establishing a post-growth reality within a hegemonic regime of neo-liberal capitalism, a regime where the dominat-

ing institutional environment continues to take output acceleration to be the Holy Grail for its economic and societal advancement.

Overview of the Articles in this Special Issue

The articles of this Special Issue appear in this and the following issue of the journal. The following five articles will be published in issue no. 3/2018:

Thomas Cyron and *Jan Cornelius Zoellick* start in problematizing current theory on growth in the existing literature. They do so by applying Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), to "unpack" unquestioned conditions. By using the method of problematization, the article questions common assumptions in business growth literature and its generalizability to different settings, that of post-growth, and assess the soundness of existing ideas on business development. In this perspective growth is challenged from the perspective of businesses. Conceptionally driven by Penrose (1959), the article expects growth as well as post-growth to be "an existing economic *context* embedding the individual firm". From a common perspective, the authors then discuss firm size, dispositive path dependencies, and strategies of growing in order to arrive at a revision of what is commonly understood as growth. Overall, the contribution of Thomas Cyron and Jan Cornelius Zoellick is twofold. First, they present an in-depth review of existing business growth literature. Second, they suggest a sound programme for research on the development of organizations and businesses in a post-growth context.

Jana Gebauer presents a study that focuses on small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) within a post-growth discursive field. It becomes obvious, that SMEs "can promote sufficiency-oriented solidary, and democratic business practices and reach out to different milieus". So, SMEs often 'resist' the far-reaching view of the growth-imperative. In her contribution, Jana Gebauer presents a meta-interpretation of four existing empirical studies on growth-independent entrepreneurship. With a sample of 33 SMEs, Jana Gebauer sensitizes for existing approaches in the field of research and shows that expertise is already existing regarding post-growth practices. She presents decisions-making processes in SMEs, goals and criteria for limited growth, decisions of growth independence, and finally processes of transition. Summarizing, SMEs appear to provide potential with a look on a transformation towards a post-growth society.

Eeva Houtbeckers' article emphasizes the struggle of social entrepreneurs in their every day practices to oppose the imperatives of economic growth. She introduces the term "post-growth organizing" to grasp people's rising awareness of existing social and ecological problems that stem from the fixation on economic growth and to attend to their efforts to address these problems. Drawing upon the framework of the diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2011; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) her article uses a broader understanding of economic activities, which covers mainstream, alternative and anti-practices with regard to labour, enterprise, transactions, property,

and finance. Studying two cases of how social entrepreneurs navigate the diverse economy, she demonstrates the ways the entrepreneurs are enmeshed in various forms of economic activities, many of them connected to alternative and anti-ideas of for example enterprise, labour, and transaction, yet, some of them following the hegemonic logic of economic growth. Overall, Eeva Houtbeckers' analysis suggests that framing social entrepreneurship as a showcase for post-growth organizing could be misleading. The reality of social entrepreneurs' practices is complex and multi-facetted and so are their ways to address the imperative of economic growth.

Benedikt Schmid develops a praxeologically informed, diverse economies perspective on post-growth organizations. He draws upon the concept of the diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) and the practice theory literature (e.g. Hillebrandt, 2014; Nicolini, 2013) to investigate the practices of alternative economies in the area of Stuttgart, Germany. Grounded in the praxeological perspective post-growth organizations constitute practice formations that address social and environmental concerns and that simultaneously engage in post-growth politics, hence, the practices of changing practices. However, the findings of this study remind the readers that changing practices is a long-term and challenging task since it involves changing practices that are embedded in socio-cultural and institutional environments. The author emphasizes the organizations' struggle during their everyday enactment of the idea of post-growth economies. On the one hand they are determined to challenge growth-based economic, political and cultural constellations. On the other hand, however, they have to adapt to institutional arrangements and thereby to comply with financial and legal requirements in order to ensure the survival of the organization. Benedikt Schmid concludes that post-growth organizations expand spaces of alternative economies through enacting the diverse ideas of post-growth and simultaneously coming to terms with existing institutional arrangements.

Jasmin Wiefek and *Kathrin Heinitz* investigate how common good-oriented companies' characteristics and practices could support the socio-economic development towards post-growth. Even though profits are of reduced relevance within the economy of the common goods, we know little about how common good-oriented companies position themselves towards economic growth. The authors use Latouche's (2009) "virtuous circle of eight R's" (p. 33) in order to analyze how the companies in their study incorporate the strategies for a transformation towards a post-growth society, such as reevaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, reuse, and recycle. The companies in this study, albeit to various degrees, embrace values such as fairness, cooperation, diversity, independence, democracy, transparency, and ecological sustainability. Thereby, they serve as examples for companies that contribute to a development towards an economy and society beyond the narrow focus on economic growth. However, the authors also show that the companies do not always abandon the idea of economic growth. For some, economic growth is still important as such growth is seen as beneficial for promot-

ing the ideas of a common goods economy. Growth in this sense could for example be necessary to push less sustainable companies out of the market, as the authors explain. Overall, Jasmin Wiefek and Kathrin Heinitz are convinced that common good-oriented companies have the potential to support a societal transition towards post-growth.

The following three articles will be published in issue no. 4/2018:

Ricardo Rodrigues de Souza and *Rene Eugenio Seifert* conducted an explorative qualitative research of six mature small firms from the food and drink sectors in Brazil. Their study follows the general, but often neglected or missed out observation that many firms start small and remain small (Aldrich, 1999; Storey, 1994). Based on interviews with business owners they identify nine different motives for not to expand their business and not to follow a growth path. Among them are rather common motives like maintain control over the business or risk avoidance but also alternative understandings of success, which is linked to ideas of craftmanship or being happy and satisfied at work and doing what one likes. Thus, the paper reminds us of the manifold and rather mundane reasons for doing a business. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of business owners success is not necessarily connected to growth. Given its explorative character, the paper is also an invitation to dwell deeper into the diversity of economic activities beyond the surface of capitalism and its growth narrative.

The contribution of *Venere Stefania Sanna* addresses the broad field of Community-based initiatives (CBIs), which are overtly portrayed as a driver of societal transformation towards a more sustainable economy (Girardet, 2006; Seyfang, 2009). However, most of the literature of CBIs and their impact for the local economy is based on case studies or rather anecdotal evidence. Based on research of a wide range of CBIs in six European countries, the article takes a different path and develops a set of indicators to grasp both the economic and financial impact of CBIs, that is their financial sustainability as well as their impact on the local economy. In doing so, the study introduces and applies several indicators, among them indicators for revenue concentration, income and job creation. The results point both to the financial fragility of most CBIs as well as to the significant impact they have for the local community related to income and job creation.

The contribution of *Christoph Rauner-Lange* discusses the impact of an organization's culture based on ideas of resonance and reciprocity on mitigating psycho-social disorders of employees. The author links the increasing pressure to work under flexible conditions to the dynamics of endless capitalist growth. On the backdrop of Siegrist's concept of gratification crisis *Christoph Rauner-Lange* argues that flexibility can lead to a chronic distress experience and is contrary to human needs. The presented case study of an alternative bank points to mechanisms, which maintain procedures of resonance and reciprocity as determining principles of organizational

structure and culture. These principles serve to soften the effects of capitalist growth by relativizing the impacts of markets and competition on employees.

Given the enthusiasm of the authors, the range of topics they address, and the conceptual and empirical insights they develop, we are convinced that this Special Issue contributes to the debate of the importance of organizations and organizing in the context of post-growth (Johnson et al. 2017). Nevertheless, there remains a lot of work to be done to address the numerous aspects related to organizations and the critique of growth. Further steps need to be taken to learn from practices in every part of the world. Moreover, scholars may take different theoretical lenses to uncover hidden phenomena of post-growth organizations and/or to make recommendations of political and social relevance. Exemplary, debates about power in and of organizations (Hardy & Clegg, 1996; Clegg, Courpasson & Philipps, 2006; Fleming & Spicer, 2014), feminism and gender (Acker 1990; Harding, Ford & Fotaki, 2012) or postcolonialism (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001; Boussebaa, Morgan & Sturdy, 2012; Frenckel & Shenhav, 2006), which have a long tradition in Organization Studies, should be linked to the context of post-growth and post-growth organizations. It is only recently, that colleagues call for contributions addressing the aforementioned fields in Organizations Studies (Corvellac et al., 2017; Banerjee et al., 2018).

Ending the editorial for the Special Issue, we would like to express our deep gratitude to the reviewers. They are in alphabetical order: Armin Beverungen, Steffen Böhm, Ulf Bohmann, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Andreas Exner, Gabriele Fassauer, Mona Florian, Florian Lottermoser, Daniel Nyberg, Dirk Posse, André Reichel, Steffen Roth, Bernd Sommer, Gerrit von Jorck, and Wolfgang Weber. We very much appreciate their efforts to evaluate the texts and their invaluable contribution to amend the articles.

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