



Transformation is not a metaphor

Jevgeniy Bluwstein

Department of Geosciences, University of Fribourg, Switzerland, CH-1700 Fribourg, Switzerland

In this intervention I highlight an element that has been overlooked in this important debate about “progressive environmental futures” (Robbins, 2019, p. 1) – the dismantling of fossil capitalism. More still, I argue that some perspectives in this forum may even distract our attention from a more direct engagement with this – in my view – most urgent question of our time. Ultimately, I suggest that by not engaging this question head on, debates about “transformation” risk rendering it a metaphor.

Here, I am inspired by the influential critique of decolonial scholarship by Tuck and Yang (2012), who insist that “decolonization is not a metaphor.” Tuck and Yang (2012) maintain that while the decolonization of academic and educational institutions through the recognition and integration of alternative knowledges is important, this is not the central objective of decolonization. Writing from a settler-colonial context, the authors suggest that “[u]ntil stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 19). In a settler-colonial context, decolonization thus must go beyond the usual critique of epistemology and beyond calls for decolonizing knowledge and methodologies. Above all, land has to be given back and colonial property relations dismantled.

Although Tuck and Yang’s intervention is specific to a settler-colonial context, and thus should not be generalized, it resonates with broader critiques raised against recent trends in decolonial and ontopolitical scholarship. For instance, Chandler and Reid (2020, p. 494) are frustrated with the exuberant attention to the “coloniality of knowledge” at the expense of paying due attention to “the coloniality of real inequalities and injustices in the world.” Relatedly, the late David Graeber sees a lack of engagement with material questions of slavery, class, patriarchy, war, police, poverty, hunger and inequality in scholarship that privileges multiple ontologies of being and epistemologies of knowing (Graeber, 2015).

Drawing on these perspectives about the limits of critique, here, I draw a parallel between decolonization that requires land repatriation and not just the decolonization of knowledge production, and a vision of transformation that requires the rapid, ruptural dismantling of fossil capitalism and not just the transformation of our understanding of socio-ecological limits. In this vein, a vision of transformation that is not a metaphor needs to go beyond questions and critiques of limits, technology, labor and growth (however illuminating they may be), and to

engage more directly with political strategy, organization and praxis in the here and now. After all, what matters is “which strategies can actually work to address the environmental and social crises the world faces” (Bliss, 2021, p. 1).

But isn’t addressing environmental and social crises exactly what the debate in this forum is ultimately about? Yes and no. Yes, because a post-capitalist future is central to both, a degrowth and a socialist modernist vision, although in different ways. No, because this forum has not touched upon questions of political strategy, organization, and praxis for short-term dismantling of fossil capitalism, even though both camps agree that capitalism is the single biggest obstacle towards progressive environmental futures. Hoping that a future world of degrowth or socialist modernism will get us beyond fossil capitalism by, say 2050, is akin to placing our hopes in not-yet-available negative-emission technologies. Put differently, if net-zero emissions discourses risk leading to mitigation deterrence and becoming a spatiotemporal fix for fossil capitalism (Carton, 2019), can some visions of degrowth or socialist modernism similarly risk leading to *transformation deterrence*? If these visions do not build on political strategizing for actively dismantling fossil capitalism, I do not see why fossil capitalism cannot continue to fix its crises, to overcome its internal contradictions, and even to appropriate some degrowth or socialist demands.

In this sense, “imagining progressive environmental futures,” the initial framing of this Virtual Forum (Robbins, 2019, p. 1), must begin with imagining a rapid, ruptural dismantling of fossil capitalism, as we debate the role of limits, growth, labor, and technology in a post-capitalist future. Importantly, critical engagement with growth, labor, and technology must be rooted in a materialist analysis if transformation is not to end up a metaphor. Arguably, economic growth and a capitalist mode of production do not simply go away in a hypothetical future where knowledge and science are decolonized, and where marginalized perspectives on socio-ecological crises are recognized.

From this vantage point, I find the critique of degrowth scholarship through feminist and decolonial perspectives offered by Mehta and Harcourt (2021) somewhat misdirected, for it steers attention away from a direct engagement with fossil capitalism towards a critique of epistemology. Hickel’s more materialist take on decolonization seems more appropriate. His insistence on a decolonial transformation is based on the realization that “solidarity with the South requires degrowth in

E-mail address: jevgeniy.bluwstein@unifr.ch.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102450>

Received 17 June 2021; Accepted 20 June 2021

Available online 1 July 2021

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the North" (Hickel, 2021, p. 2). Simply put, production and consumption must go down in the North, regardless of how we conceptualize and make sense of these material phenomena. I would have liked to know how this goal could be pursued strategically and practically, in the short term. Here, Huber's (2021) emphasis on production over consumption is analytically convincing, but it raises the problem of fossil socialism. Against the background of a looming climate crisis, it may matter little if production is transformed into socialist hands, given that working people and labor unions with a stake in fossil capitalism have been a major obstacle towards radical socio-ecological transformation so far. This suggests that transformation that is not a metaphor must dismantle both capitalism and fossil fuel infrastructure. This also suggests that essentializing labor may be a good political strategy in some times, but not necessarily in the context of a climate emergency. Moreover, Paulson's response to Huber highlights an important point: We need a vision for a radical politics where our political economy is not based on "colonial, racialized, and gendered relations of production" (Paulson, 2021, p. 1). That said, Paulson's alternative vision through "a different politics of knowledge and strategies of worldmaking" (Paulson, 2021, p. 2) risks reducing urgently needed socio-ecological transformation to a metaphor, similar to the intervention by Mehta and Harcourt (2021).

If socio-ecological transformation is not a metaphor, Kallis's (2021) insistence on collective self-limitation seems necessary, and Huber's (2021) insistence on limits on profits seems fundamental. Highlighting how a culture of self-limitation could be promoted has been a strength of degrowth scholarship, but how we can impose limits on capital and eventually suspend the logic of capital remains a lacuna. While I do not claim to have the answers, here I propose a set of strategic and tactical questions about how limits on fossil capital could be imposed: Who should stop the extraction of minerals and fossil fuels? Who should blockade and eventually shut down fossil infrastructures, from coal mines to pipelines to highways to power plants? Could technology be harnessed here for "digital resistance" (to highlight one concrete way that the intervention by Howson, Crandall, and Balaguer (2021) may fit here)? What, if any, role can divestment and expropriation play? How can potentially "stranded assets" actually remain in the ground? What should be done about state and corporate repression and counterinsurgency? What could be done about a resurgent far right that seizes the climate crisis for political gains? What about capital's notorious capacities to overcome its internal contradictions? How do we deal with multiple scales through which fossil capital operates? How can the state be harnessed to prevent an economic recession? How can popular support be nurtured across scales and classes when laws are broken and fossil fuel infrastructures actively dismantled? What laws are in the way and what laws should be defended? Which means and ends are ethically and morally just and acceptable? How can we defend democratic values and practices in what presumably requires the state of exception? What alliances need to be built (as hinted by Paulson) and what social antagonisms amplified? What new institutions need to be created? What can we learn from current frontline struggles against fossil capital, such as NoDAPL, Ende Gelände, or the various ZADs (zone à défendre) across France (also hinted by Paulson)? What can we learn from the successes and losses, dilemmas and challenges, of popular climate movements? The different contributions to this forum thus far have ignored these questions and debates on (the limits to) resistance to fossil capital.

Andreas Malm is well known for having pushed these debates in some of his recent works. The provocatively titled book *How to Blow up a Pipeline* (Malm, 2021) is a case in point. In another book, Malm and the Zetkin Collective examine the forces on the far right that may either defend fossil capital or help bring about climate apartheid in the future (Malm and The Zetkin Collective, 2021). To be sure, Malm's account of fossil capital has little to say about contemporary decolonization debates, and he questions - at times unfairly - important tenets of, and insights from, political ecology (Malm, 2018). Yet he raises important strategic and tactical questions. Although Malm does not expect critical theorists (like the ones participating in this forum) to get their hands

dirty through direct action against fossil fuel infrastructure, he demands that academic theory for the climate crisis "clear up space for action and resistance" (Malm, 2018, p. 18). Some theories, Malm insists, "can make the situation clearer while others might muddy it" (Malm, 2018, p. 16).

While Malm can be read as someone with strong sympathies for socialist modernism, his work resonates with Andrea Brock's and Alexander Dunlap's degrowth-oriented, anti-modernist scholarship that draws explicitly on insights from decolonization and environmental justice. Brock and Dunlap highlight autonomous, anarchist, and insurrectional practices employed against fossil capitalism, and they show what counterinsurgency strategies by fossil capital and the state look like (Brock, 2020; Brock & Dunlap, 2018; Dunlap, 2021). In short, writing against the grain of some degrowth scholarship, their degrowth vision for transformation foregrounds "a political ecology of resistance that invigorates political praxis to subvert the ongoing socio-ecological catastrophes" (Dunlap, 2020, p. 1).

Regardless of what role one sees for the state, labor, or technology in a progressive environmental future (I am sitting on the fence on many of these issues myself), the issues raised by scholars such as Malm, Brock, and Dunlap (and in fact, many others) speak directly to this Virtual Forum and deserve more attention. To be sure, political ecological, feminist, and decolonial scholarship represented in this forum has much to offer for a critical engagement with some of the blind spots in Malm's work (Hansen, 2021) and with insurrectionist and anarchist approaches. But it strikes me as odd that automated dairy cows have received so much attention throughout this forum, while the difficult strategic, organizational, and practical questions as to how we should dismantle fossil capitalism have received so little. What, we must ask, can degrowth and socialist modernism contribute to a political ecology of resistance against fossil capitalism and climate breakdown?

Declaration of competing interest

I have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work in this viewpoint.

Acknowledgements

I thank Caroline Nagel and Tor Arve Benjaminsen for the opportunity to intervene in this debate and for the very helpful editorial support. This commentary benefitted from exchanges with Connor Cavanagh, Salvatore Paolo De Rosa, Wim Carton, and Jens Friis Lund.

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