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Urban planning and degrowth: a missing dialogue

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at discussing the reciprocity of developing a dialogue between urban planning and degrowth by arguing for two interactive processes: 'spatialising degrowth' and 'degrowing planning'. Degrowth literature has not yet fully recognised the potentiality of urban/urban regional spatial development and planning in facilitating and driving the degrowth transformation for local and regional sustainability and justice. The possibility of urban planning to facilitate a downscaling of the economy, save the environment and secure distributive justice is predicated on the causal relationships between space and societal conditions. Therefore, planning has the potentiality of providing spatial instruments in a degrowth transformation. On the other hand, the mainstream growth-oriented planning paradigm is facing internal and external imperatives for transformation. Degrowth values and principles provide inspiration for urban planning to rethink its role and function in urban and societal development, specifically on three fronts: ideology, substantive values and utopianism. The paper further discusses the dilemmas and advantages of planners, being situated in the complex political and institutional landscape, in taking proactive transformative practices.

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1. Introduction

Failures of reconciling economic growth with ecological and social sustainability have given rise to debates on alternative post-growth approaches to human prosperity (Jackson 2009; Latouche 2009; Victor 2018). Central to these is a call for transformation to degrowth societal paradigm that is socially just and environmentally sustainable. Acknowledging the necessity and urgency of transforming to a degrowth society, this paper aims at engaging in a dialogue between urban planning and degrowth. The paper contends that urban planning, in so far as its focus is on spatial development, has a potential in being a vanguard of social change, while the degrowth values and principles can trigger a reflection on the development of the planning discipline. By doing so, the paper explores the reciprocity between urban planning and degrowth.

Degrowth is a social movement, a political debate and an academic research field. A widely accepted understanding of a degrowth society is 'an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term' (Schneider, Kallis, and Martinez-Alier 2010, 209). Central to the degrowth thinking is living within ecological limits by reducing production and consumption levels, and meanwhile striving for well-being for all and enhancing justice and democracy (Demaria et al. 2013; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017; Kallis and March 2018). To achieve these goals requires transformative societal changes beyond the current capitalist society and the mainstream green growth

ideal (Foster 2011; Asara et al. 2015). Sharing these major values, a number of multi-disciplinary visions and policy proposals have emerged, though not all consistent with each other, nevertheless aiming at contributing to the achievement of a degrowth society. This paper argues that among all these contributions, degrowth debates have so far not taken seriously the vital role of the spatial aspect in social transformation and its associated planning discipline. Specifically, degrowth has failed to engage in transformation from an urban/urban regional lens rather than limiting the scope to local initiatives on the community or neighbourhood level. The failure to recognise the causal powers of urban/urban regional spatial patterns and planning can weaken the transformative strength of degrowth-inspired social actions and even lead to contradictions between policy proposals and degrowth values. This paper, therefore, aims to foreground the importance of spatial development on the urban/urban regional scale and associated planning (particularly relevant to strategic planning, master planning, land use planning, transport planning, housing planning) in the degrowth transformation.

Meanwhile, the mainstream urban planning, in the sense of being formal, institutionalised and state-led, has been criticised for lacking capability and transformative edge in coping with the current social and ecological problems (Albrechts 2015). Although numerous transformative planning practices striving for rights, justice and sustainability operate under various conditions (mostly taking place at the neighbourhood level) (e.g. Sandercock 1998; Beard 2003; Irazábal and Foley 2010), it is fair to say that the mainstream urban planning paradigm follows a political ideal of neoliberalism, growth and competitiveness and functions as more of a hindrance than blessing to radical societal transformation. The paper contends that, for planning to be a progressive driving force of societal transformation, the mainstream planning should be transformed and degrowth theory can provide directional reflections.

Through a fruitful exchange between urban planning and degrowth, the paper aims at strengthening the coherence and the efficacies of strategies, policies and actions geared to degrowth, and repositioning urban/urban regional spatial development and planning as a transformative societal force. The paper will pursue this aim by developing two separated, yet interrelated lines of argument: 'spatialising degrowth', attempting to develop a systematic involvement of the spatial dimension in the degrowth debates and explicate planning's potentials as a supportive institution for the transformation; and 'degrowing planning', where the inspirations of degrowth for renewing the urban planning profession are explored.

Before constructing the arguments, it is important to elucidate how planning is framed. Planning could be understood as including two dimensions: the spatial, substantive dimension, and the political, process dimension. The spatial dimension concerns the proposal of substantive land use strategies, grounded in techno-rational logics and professional expertise, while the political dimension highlights planning as a political activity, never occurring in a vacuum but situated in complex, dynamic institutional, governance and power structures. Both dimensions can affect the transformative impacts of planning practices. Notwithstanding the fact that planners' professional values are never fully manifested in planning strategies, which are co-produced through governance processes, it is possible and necessary to take an 'inside' perspective of planners in the discussion on formulating substantive values and spatial strategies. Indeed, if planning is going to be the vanguard of social change, it has to be transformed from inside in the first place. Recognising the transformative potential of planning as a political activity, the paper, however, addresses the substantive dimension of planning to which less attention has been paid in much of the planning literature in the past decades.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 underscores the lacks, deficiencies and challenges of both the mainstream degrowth theory and the mainstream urban planning paradigm in addressing future development, laying the foundation for the argument for a reciprocal engagement between the two domains. From this, an exploration of the potential role urban planning can play in facilitating degrowth transformation follows (section 3). Section 4 discusses how degrowth values can enlighten the development of urban planning to reinforce planning's transformative role in

society. Both Section 3 and 4 focus on the spatial, substantive dimension of planning from the inside perspective of planning profession. Section 5 positions planning within the wider political and institutional landscape and briefly discusses the constraints, dilemmas and potentials of planners in taking transformative activities. The last section (6) concludes the paper.

2. The need for a dialogue between degrowth and urban planning

2.1. Urban space- and planning-blindness in degrowth debates

Since the first international degrowth conference in Paris in 2008, degrowth has evolved from an activist movement into a multi-disciplinary academic field, drawing on studies from anthropology, sociology, psychology, political economy, philosophy to political ecology. Notably, except a few recent attempts from geographers and planners at embracing a spatial perspective in the degrowth debates (Demaria, Kallis, and Bakker 2019; Schmid 2019), the spatial dimension and the disciplinary contribution of urban planning are largely neglected in existing degrowth narratives (Weiss and Cattaneo 2017). Furthermore, degrowth scholars do not yet recognise the space and planning as a potential topic to address even in future degrowth studies (Cosme, Santos, and O'Neill 2017; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017). Below, I argue that neglecting the urban spatial development and planning is one of the deficiencies of the degrowth theory, at best weakening the consistency and strength of the theory and at worst hampering the degrowth transformation.

Some degrowth propositions tend to confuse the bleak status quo with possible futures, denying the possibilities of progressive transformation 'within' the urban. With a recognition of cities as contributors to global economic, social and environmental crises, degrowth proponents have developed an anti-urban sentiment in the mainstream degrowth literature. Instead of exploring transformation potentials *within* the urban, degrowth advocates seek solutions in suburbs (Alexander and Gleeson 2018) or outside main urban societies (Delambre 2010; Trainer 2019). Cities are considered destined to be environmentally and socially negative. The denial of an evolving urban development, from a source of crisis to a driver of positive societal transformation, is rather problematic. It falls into a trap of idealism, neglecting the material reality that more than half of global population already live in urban areas and this figure is even higher in the wealthy, Western part. Since any transformative act requires matter and energy, the large-scale transformative actions entailed by this neglect can generate more negative environmental consequences, a phenomena framed as 'transformation paradox' that contradicts the degrowth goal of minimising matter-energy in human society (Heikkurinen 2019). Moving present urban populations to rural areas or new suburban communities would, e.g. require enormous encroachments on natural areas and farmland to provide housing and other buildings for the new non-urban populations.

With scepticism towards the urban, degrowth proponents tend to advocate for small-scale, bottom-up initiatives, such as urban gardening (Anguelovski 2014), squatting (Cattaneo and Gavalda 2010; Olsen, Orefice, and Pietrangeli 2018), and co-housing (Lietaert 2010; Nelson 2018). Despite being inspirational and heuristic for degrowth-oriented transformation, such studies often lack a reflection on the question of scale. As the larger scale is contingent on the small scale but has emergent causal powers, consequences of the small-scale neighbourhood initiatives on the urban/urban regional scale have to be seriously analysed and assessed. For example, although urban gardening practices demonstrate several benefits including food security, enhancement of neighbourhood environmental quality and greater sense of community, its scaling up can lead to low-density urban development that encroaches on surrounding natural areas and farmland and increases travel demand for other activities than food provision. In addition, the effects of local initiatives are conditioned by the spatial characteristics of the larger geographical scale, such as location, availability of transport infrastructure and relation with other urban functions. Therefore, the often-claimed benefits of the lower-scale initiatives can be partly attributed to the geographical

situatedness of the local activities. As recognised by Kallis et al. (2015), a relational perspective on spatial scale is obliterated in the existing degrowth theory and analysis of degrowth practices.

Without taking the spatial into account, proposals of degrowth strategies and alleged 'transformative' actions can come along with unintended negative social and environmental consequences. An example is the eco-village vision, endorsed by mainstream degrowth advocates as an ideal degrowth human settlement (Fotopoulos 2007; Latouche 2009; Trainer 2012). This idea is supported as it appears to align with degrowth advocacy for localism, self-sufficiency and autonomy. However, when scrutinising the spatial pattern generated by the eco-village vision, namely the small-scale, decentralised, self-contained human settlements grounded within the bioregion, serious doubts can be raised about the potential negative environmental impacts from transport, housing and land use (Xue 2014a). Furthermore, some of the eco-villages have primarily targeted middle- to upper middle-class white households and created green enclaves (Chitewere 2010), which can hardly be in line with degrowth values.

Degrowth advocates' negative attitudes to the urban also apply to urban planning which is often regarded as a barrier to degrowth practices (Vansintjan 2018). The planning-scepticism originates from the notion of autonomy and direct democracy, hailed by degrowth proponents as one of the ways to oppose market-based property speculation and the complicity of the state. Treating urban space as a common is seen as the third way beyond the market and state to a degrowth future. Urban planning, insofar as a major governmental institution organising and managing spatial development, is criticised for its role in prioritising market needs and facilitating capital accumulation. Moreover, rules and regulations imposed by planners on how to use spaces are seen as hindrances to degrowth-oriented spatial innovations (Vansintjan 2018). Searching solutions by bypassing planning renounces the transformation possibilities *within* the planning profession.

The predisposition to deny transformation within the existing urban spaces and planning reflects another broader problem in the degrowth debates that tend to draw on a strong dichotomy, e.g. between globalisation and localisation, political centralisation and autonomy, representative democracy and direct/participatory democracy. One pole is drawn to resist the opposite pole, for instance, a strong localism against the forces of globalisation. Regarding urban planning, Xue (2014a) refutes this dichotomy by addressing the environmental and social risks arriving from localising and decentralising land use-related decisions and argues for dispensing with the dichotomies. In support of the same view but from a different angle, this paper will argue for the potentials of transforming planning and urban spatial development from 'within' rather than turning away from it.

Compared to the degrowth proponents' disinterest in or even aversion to the urban and planning, a few urban and planning scholars have begun to undertake some attempts at exploring the potentiality of urban planning in building a degrowth future. Wächter (2013) addresses theoretically three potential areas for spatial planning to contribute to degrowth: as a support for renewable energy production, facilitating a more resource-saving lifestyle and creating social capital through more community-based facilities. Illustrated by an empirical case study of a Finnish city, Lehtinen (2018) addresses that degrowth planning should prioritise upgrading of daily living conditions by qualitative maintenance and renewal, instead of volume production for economic growth and raising consumption. Transport planning scholars (Von Schonfeld, Ferreira, and Pinho 2018) question the contemporary transport planning that is excessively dominated by norms of efficiency, time-saving and competitiveness leading to social acceleration and economic growth. The authors raise the question of what role planning should play in order to counteract this trend. March (2018) makes a few suggestions on how degrowth can selectively embrace the urban techno-imaginaries such as the Smart City.

Urban scholars have also tried to engage in the dialogue by critically debating some of the degrowth propositions. Xue (2014a) challenged the idea of spatial decentralisation which can lead to various social and environmental consequences contradicting the multi-goals of a degrowth society. She promoted the compact city coupled with strategies on limiting housing consumption and mobility as environmentally sustainable urban structure. Opposing any universal human

settlement model, Kraushaar (2018) claimed that any spatial solution has to consider differentiated geography. In addition, a critique is developed by Xue (2014a) against the degrowth call for decentralisation of planning power and space-related decision-making to lower scales. Instead, she makes a plea for multi-scalar strategies in the planning context to pursue degrowth. This opinion is shared by Exner (2018), who contextualises the argument in the urban development of Vienna.

The review above suggests that the degrowth approach to the urban and planning is subject to deficiencies and the studies on the interaction between degrowth, urban spatial development and planning are still sporadic. Based on the above critical scrutiny, this paper will, in Section (3), argue that the urban, being the locus of environmental and social problems, can also be the places where many solutions to these challenges develop.

2.2. The need for a new planning paradigm beyond growth

Since the neoliberal turn in the late 1970s, globally, mainstream planning has become increasingly growth-oriented and dependent. The rolling out of neoliberalism into the urban planning domain, although showing important geo-historical differences, shares certain common values, including entrepreneurialism, individualism and freedom of choice (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Sager 2011). Neoliberal planning is, therefore, oriented towards competitiveness and growth. In addition, planning has become more and more dependent on private sectors to deliver benefits for the wider community (Rydin 2013). Consequently, the role of planning has been profoundly affected by its dependence on profit-seeking developers. This neoliberalised, growth-oriented and -dependent planning paradigm has been subject to widespread critiques by urban and planning scholars, however, from different angles and with different levels of depth.

One body of literature focuses on the social failures of the neoliberal, growth planning orthodoxy to deliver social goods in a just, democratic and inclusive manner. These criticisms have covered various domains of urban development, such as housing projects (Andersson and Turner 2014; Vale and Freemark 2019), urban green initiatives (Anguelovski et al. 2018), waterfront redevelopment (Boland, Bronte, and Muir 2017), public spaces (Newman and Kenworthy 1999) and the more recent austerity policies (Peck 2012; Davies and Blanco 2017). More of the critiques point to the resultant segregation, exclusion, gentrification, marginalisation, and lack of democracy of the neoliberal approach to urban development.

The environmental failures of the neoliberalised, growth planning paradigm have also been deeply questioned by planning scholars. The rising concern on sustainable development since the late 1980s was translated into an eco-modernist notion of urban development that believes in decoupling urban growth in population, economy, building, infrastructure and mobility from environmental impacts (Spaargaren and Mol 1992; Xue 2015). However, the environmental concern has not challenged the prioritisation of economic growth as the supreme goal in urban development and planning. Scholars criticise that the growth rationality subordinates the environmental consideration and even further strategically deploy environmental sustainability as a 'green fix' to stimulate and boost urban economic growth (While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2004; Aall and Husabø 2010; Holgersen and Malm 2015; Nørgård and Xue 2016). The sustainability outcomes are heavily challenged by researchers (see Heinonen and Junnila 2011; Næss et al. 2011; Xue 2014b), whose studies show that environmental benefits from an eco-modernist planning strategy (e.g. compact city) have been partly offset by a rising consumption scale, e.g. in per capita residential floor area and passenger travel volume, facilitated by a growing economy and purchasing power.

More recent critical scholarship under the academic umbrella of just sustainability has looked at the contradictions between urban environmental sustainability and social sustainability (Agyeman et al. 2016). Central to this rapidly growing scholarship is a critique of the urban environmental sustainability strategies, such as densification, neighbourhood eco-renovation, green infrastructure, that have generated ecological gentrification, social segregation or exclusion (Anguelovski et al. 2018, 2020; Connolly 2019; Rigolon and Németh 2020). This is partly because the neoliberal

paradigm has weakened the ability for state intervention in redistributing benefits and burdens among the population (Dale and Newman 2009; Cucca 2012).

Apart from the problematic nature of the growth planning paradigm, a more powerful change that can fundamentally dismantle the underpinning of current planning is the long-term stagnation of growth which is likely to be a new condition of the future. Despite a strong political desire to resurrect the conditions of the past (unsustainable and unequitable) growth, there are internal economic logics and external ecological imperatives pointing to the impossibility and implausibility of an ever-increasing economy (Nielsen and Næss 2011). Whether this future stagnation is desired or not, there might be an imperative to adapt to the new, inevitable context which constraints the prevailing planning paradigm built on and driven by an assumption of economic growth.

The abovementioned multifaceted critiques of the neoliberal, growth-oriented planning have, nevertheless, raised different responses that attempt at solving the problems, ranging from a reformist approach to a more transformative vision. Some authors suggest remedying the problems within the growth model and call for a growth-dependent planning for justice (e.g. Fainstein's just city theory). Although these scholars challenge neoliberalism, they do not necessarily question the growth rationality. As commented by Agyeman and Evans (2003, 48), 'these programs are attempting to address social and ecological concerns within an unsustainable and unjust economic system'.

Some scholars do not only question the neoliberalisation of planning but also confront its growth commitment. For example, scholars promoting just sustainability in urban communities abandon the idea of economic growth as the primary goal, but seek to combine environmental protection, social needs satisfaction and vibrant local economy as development goals and perceive the economy as a means to social and environmental goods (Agyeman and Evans 2003). These proposals do not draw explicitly on the term of degrowth, but share similar values advocated by it. They, therefore, have a strong affinity with the aforementioned local degrowth initiatives, such as urban gardening and eco-housing projects (see Section 2.1). Notwithstanding its inspiration for degrowth transformation, such scholarly endeavours predominantly concentrate on the community or neighbourhood level. The question again lies in how to scale up the relevance of the local initiatives to higher geographical scales. It can also be foreseen that new implications and challenges will arise when justice and sustainability are put together and taken up to the urban scale.

In the planning literature, challenges to the orthodox planning paradigm have also taken the form of the various traditions of transformative planning (such as radical planning, insurgent planning and emancipatory planning). These alternative planning traditions are counter-hegemonic, inspired by normative theories, utopian and are often initiated by grassroots, outside the state bureaucracy in opposition to the institutionalised planning (Beard 2003; Friedmann 2003; Miraftab 2009; Huq 2020). Transformative planning theories often do not suggest the substances of planning other than theorising around the process of planning at the community level (Albrechts 2003, 2015; Beard 2003; Huq 2020). As such, they are particularly enlightening for degrowth practices when it comes to mobilisation and empowerment of local citizens in making plans. What is at risk is that the outcomes of planning can contradict degrowth principles and ends.

So far, very few studies have addressed the growth rationality in the planning for urban/urban regional spatial development (e.g. Zovanyi 1998; Høyer and Næss 2001; Næss, Saglie, and Richardson 2019c; Xue et al. 2017; Mete and Xue 2020; Næss 2020; Næss et al. 2020). Some of these studies make a preliminary exploration of how degrowth in the sense of reduction in consumption level means in the context of urban physical development and how to secure a just distribution of a degrowing consumption level among social groups.

In light of the above-discussed critiques and the new changing circumstance towards a likely long stagnation, the role and rationale of planning have to be reconsidered and recast in order to assume a proactive role in transforming the society out of the crises and into a more desirable future. I argue that the degrowth idea offers a compelling framework directing a paradigm shift in urban planning for sustainability transformation, not the least with an emphasis on the substances and outcomes of

planning – a dimension that seems to be overshadowed by the precedence of studies on planning process (Section 4).

3. Spatialising degrowth

3.1. *Dialectic between space and society*

Defending a spatial concern in the degrowth debates is based on an ontology of dialectic between space and society, suggesting a mutually constructed relationship between the social and the spatial (Soja 1989). Based on the neo-Marxist understanding, *on the one hand*, space is socially produced, being the product of economic, political and ideological forces. Historically, social space is constantly produced, shaped and transformed by different modes of production within different epochs. Political, social and economic relationships are inscribed in space through designating land use purposes, providing different types of infrastructures, forming spatial structures, dealing with degraded built environment, etc. *On the other hand*, space is a medium through which production happens and social relations occur (Soja 1989), and it belongs to the set of productive forces at the same level of means of production, labour and raw materials (Harvey 1982; Lefebvre [1991]/1974/[1991]/1974). In this sense, the socio-spatial patterns have emergent powers constraining or enabling certain activities. Importantly, spatial structures are relatively enduring compared to several other structures in society. Once created, the urban land use and built environment, therefore, exert influences over a long time, often far beyond the lifetime of those actors who created the structures. Notwithstanding an inertia in spatial structures that may hamper societal transformations, the socio-spatial dialectic attributes to the spatial structure a potential to contest a society's dominant mode of production, power and social relations.

3.2. *Urban planning as a spatial intervention*

The existence of a socio-spatial dialectic, underlays the argument for spatialising degrowth. The 'spatial' here is understood as including both built and non-built environments. Parameters, determining the characteristics of a particular space, include the building density and type, infrastructure, location of various functions relative to each other, size and shape. There is also a scalar dimension of space, from the individual building, the neighbourhood, to city, urban region, national territory and even the global. As argued above, although we should avoid an environmental determinism by not exaggerating the influence of the spatial as the single factor determining behaviour (Næss 2016a), the causal power and liability of space is yet to be recognised and employed by the degrowth advocates. Planning, through deploying land use and structuring spatial development, constitutes one of the many institutions that have an impact on societal changes. Addressing the urban/urban regional scale, the following will give a more detailed account of the ways in which the causally effective characteristics of the spatial conditions unfold in the economic, environmental and social processes and, therefore, the potentiality of urban planning in intervening these processes towards degrowth.

3.2.1. *Downscaling the economy*

Given the inherent growth imperative of the capitalist economic structure, dismantling capitalist mechanisms and market-based relations is one of the fundamental premises for the materialisation of degrowth (Fotopoulos 2007; Kallis 2011; Demaria et al. 2013). Generally, the urban spatial development plays an essential role in perpetuating, expanding and saving the capitalist mode of production and consumption (Gordon 1978; Harvey 2009/1973). More specifically, *on the one hand*, the urban-built environment provides necessary physical conditions to facilitate the capitalist production (e.g. factories, offices, economic development zones), consumption (e.g. markets, shopping centres), exchange processes (e.g. roads, airports, harbours) and social reproduction (e.g. housing), and plays an important role in absorbing capital surplus. The latter is the core of Harvey's thesis that

capital surplus, stemming from over-accumulation in the production sphere, is switched to the urban-built environment, leading to periodic building booms (e.g. in Spain, the U.S., China, the U.K.) (Harvey 2008; Christophers 2011). Another case, showing the facilitating role of urban-built environment in capital accumulation, is the contemporary planning trend of providing infrastructure for high-speed transportation networks in major European urban regions. Political narratives around such projects and studies show the benefits of such an infrastructure in accelerating the speed of travel, enhancing accessibility, and enlarging workforce and market catchment areas, facilitating faster capital accumulation and economic growth (Monzón, Ortega, and López 2013). *One the other hand*, organisations of urban built environment are tangible manifestations of capitalist logics, such as the imperative of capital accumulation, the coercive law of competition. At the national and global levels, capital movements have produced uneven spatial development, continuously generating 'declining' and 'rising' cities and (re)defining their roles within the capitalist world (Smith 2010; Krätke 2014). The internal restructuring of cities and urban regions is also, to a great extent, shaped by capitalist forces, not the least due to the incorporation of the real estate sector into the sphere of financial investment (Krätke 2014). Here, I just name a couple of examples. The production of brownfields, as experienced by many western and northern European cities in the past decades, is an outcome of capital relocated more profitable locations. Meanwhile, the redevelopment of such vacant lands, often taking the form of commercialised real estate development, is driven by global investors who pursue to maximise urban land rents. The motivation of maximising urban land rents leads to creative destruction of land based on the verification of obsolescence (Weber 2002) and a general trend of upgrading the urban built environment that triggers a process of gentrification (Krätke 2014).

The conceptualisation of the urban spatial structure, as a causally effectual property enabling and constraining certain economic processes and activities, has a strong bearing on the degrowth strategies. The question for degrowth lies in how to employ urban planning, through intervening spatial development, to hamper the global capitalism and instead facilitate a downscaled, vibrant, resilient local economy. Globalisation of capitalism would be largely hampered if there were no construction and expansion of international airports and the free movement of labour and goods would then likely be slowed down. Based on a study of the urban regions of EU, Krähmer (2018) concludes that spatial concentration and proximity of related businesses at the metropolitan area creating agglomeration effects, constituting a spatial mechanism that drives economic growth. Urban agglomeration, in the form of integrated cities with cooperative relationships, such as in Yangzi delta region in China or the BosWash megalopolis in the U.S. (stretching from Boston via New York to Washington), constitutes one of the most important carriers for global economic development (Fang and Yu 2017). To counter economic globalisation can be facilitated by constraining airport construction, high-speed transportation infrastructure network and restricting land allocation for multinational corporations. Instead, to promote local economy suggests spatial rescaling and restructuring in the light of the degrowth economic rationales, such as providing spaces for local banks, shops and markets as well as transport infrastructure that benefits the local economic development.

3.2.2. Saving the environment

A degrowth society is first and foremost a society within the planet biocapacity. The acknowledgement and respect of environmental limits premise the claim for reducing the levels of production and consumption in addition to eco-efficiency solutions. Spatial organisation of human settlements significantly impacts human footprint and environmental sustainability. Environment-conscious planning is not new to the planning community and over the past few decades advanced knowledge has been developed on how to plan environment-friendly urban development.

Although not without controversies, on the urban and urban regional scales, some land use principles are widely accepted for the purpose of reducing transport and residential energy consumption and preserving natural and agricultural land. Firstly, an overall high-density urban structure is more efficacious in reducing total travel distances, including commuting and in promoting public

transport and non-motorised travel modes (Németh 1999; Næss 2012). High density at urban scale also implies densely built neighbourhoods that increase the population base for sustaining a diverse range of services and facilities, in a way helping keep daily activities within the local areas. In addition, proximity, promoted by dense urban development, encourages the use of public and non-motorised transport and reduces car dependency. The land use implications are, therefore, about densifying existing built-up areas, prioritising the use of brownfields over undeveloped land, abandoning the construction of suburban single-family houses and favouring the development of apartment buildings. Secondly, integrating a diversity of service facilities, such as grocery stores, primary schools, kindergartens, public libraries, facilities for local sport and cultural activities and cafes/restaurants in residential areas, promotes localised activities and reduces travel demand, compared to mono-functional neighbourhoods. Thirdly, since intra-metropolitan travelling distances by motorised transport are considerably influenced by the distance from the dwelling to the city centre, one land use principle is to locate a high proportion of dwellings close to the city centre (Næss, Tønnesen, and Wolday 2019a). This also applies to the location of workplaces, as studies have found that a higher proportion of inner-city employees commute by public transport or non-motorised modes of transport than among suburban employees (Næss and Xue 2016). Fourthly, suburban location of certain service facilities should be avoided, such as shopping malls which generate higher shares of car trips and longer travel distances by car (Næss 2012). Fifthly, other land use strategies that can promote active mobility and public transport while reducing car use include urban development near public transport nodes, reducing parking lots, providing infrastructures for biking and walking, reducing road capacity and eventually converting them to other uses (Cairns, Atkins, and Goodwin 2002). Sixthly, planning can allocate land to produce renewables at different geographical scales (Wächter 2013). Apart from reduced energy consumption and greenhouse emissions, these strategies are also beneficial in relieving other environmental burdens. One important argument in favour of compact urban structures is that they take up less land and therefore imply lower conversion of natural areas, ecosystems and farmland, compared to lower-density and sprawling built-up areas (Beatley 2000).

Some arguments speaking against compact cities draw on studies which show that the total household footprint tends to increase when people move from suburban or rural areas to urban areas (e.g. Ottelin, Heinonen, and Junnila 2015). For example, inner-urban dwellers may fly more often than suburban or rural residents (Næss 2016b; Czepkiewicz et al. 2018). However, the increased footprint is mainly a consequence of increased affluence and consumption level and cosmopolitan lifestyles, rather than the spatial urban structure. Nevertheless, the studies, showing that higher consumption offset efficiency gains in household (e.g. Ottelin, Heinonen, and Junnila 2015), suggest that to reduce total environmental impacts, a compressive growth in the form of compact city is insufficient (Næss, Saglie, and Richardson 2019c; Czepkiewicz et al. 2020). Issues of consumption level have to be addressed. For instance, an empirical estimate in the Oslo region shows that by reducing residents' average housing consumption per capita from the current 50.5 to 44.2 m² by 2030, it will be theoretically possible to stabilise residential energy consumption and no new construction of residential buildings will be needed, even in the face of projected population growth (Mete and Xue 2020). Realising such a scenario would, needless to say, require effective instruments to promote a more efficient and just utilisation of the existing housing stock. Addressing the sufficiency aspect calls for new potentiality of planning and innovative land use interventions that can favour downshifting consumption levels. Strategies could be capping land use for urban development, household consumption of residential floor area and travel volume (Næss, Saglie, and Richardson 2019c; Xue et al. 2017). To contain urban expansion, a physical boundary could be drawn against the zones of ecological preservation and farmland protection, forbidding the encroachment on protected land. More environment-friendly transport infrastructure planning than what is usually adopted can relocate road-space from car traffic to buses, pedestrians or cyclists. For the purpose of curbing consumption, the non-physical properties of planning can also be employed. The Planning and Building act can limit and allocate the amount of land allowed to be developed across

national territory and ban the construction of single-family dwellings. Zoning regulations need to abide to the designated land use and infrastructure development principles.

3.2.3. *Securing distributive justice*

Enhancing well-being and securing a more just inter- and intra-generational justice is argued to be the ultimate goal of a degrowth society. Urban space bears a strong connotation of social (in)justice and (in)equity (Marcuse et al. 2009), and planning can intervene in distribution and accessibility through allocating locations, providing infrastructures and regulating land use. It is one of the institutions influencing satisfaction of basic needs (such as food, housing, work and education) and equal access to the basic services. On the national territorial level, planning addressing balanced and equal development across the country through equally allocating e.g. workplaces, hospitals, educational facilities, housing projects and transport infrastructure can equalise the accessibility of these facilities by national populations. Conversely, a more skewed planning strategy concentrating resources to certain regions and big cities can widen the gap among regions (e.g. urban vs. rural) and cities (e.g. big vs. small) in accessing facilities and resources important for a good life. When it comes to the urban scale, the location of various urban functions and infrastructure provision affect people's availability of different facilities and the difficulties or easiness of reaching these facilities. A number of studies demonstrate that justice-inattentive locational decisions and development of housing projects, urban renewals and transport services can lead to social segregation and exclusion, gentrification and inaccessibility to varying degrees (Andersson and Turner 2014; Anguelovski et al. 2018; Vale and Freemark 2019). Nonetheless, with proper policies, urban development can also promote a higher level of equity in accessing to housing, more equitable distributive benefits of transport services, and equal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens (Agyeman and Evans 2003; Fainstein 2014; Pereira, Schwanen, and Banister 2017).

Planning, as it generally claims, is committed to the ethical stance of justice, in line with the degrowth advocacy for a more just society. Suggestions made by the above-cited planning scholars with the aim of avoiding and reducing injustices are, therefore, valid to the degrowth society. Yet, a degrowth society presents a crucial challenge for planning in seek of justice. That is, within limited resources, it is more necessary and imperative to highlight an equal distribution, in order to prevent the worsening of living conditions of the less well-off. How to prevent an enlarged gap between the wealthy and the poor and safeguard basic needs of all population groups within a non-growth condition implies redistribution from those who have excess to those who have less. For housing development it could mean a number of innovative planning policies that are distinctive from the existing ones. These may include setting minimum standard to secure everyone's basic need for housing, establishing maximum standard to prevent the rich from possessing even more space, and remoulding and sharing existing spacious dwellings (Næss, Saglie, and Richardson 2019c; Mete and Xue 2020).

All in all, given the varying bearings that urban space has on the economic, social and environmental processes, the spatial causal mechanisms are yet to be recognised and embraced as constitutive to the degrowth theory. Cities are experiencing different development trajectories (e.g. demographic growth, stabilisation, ageing, shrinkage), on different development stages and face different challenges. It is the prime concern for degrowth proponents to delineate what degrowth visions will be for urban development in a certain context. Urban planning can be employed as a tool to envision the degrowth future and to suggest spatial strategies to achieve the vision. The spatialisation of degrowth will mean that the existing spatial structures may be maintained, reused, reshaped, recycled, removed and replaced, while new ones may be added, depending on the context.

4. Degrowing planning

A prerequisite of spatialising degrowth is degrowing planning. The hostility to planning by some degrowth advocates derives from a valid criticism of mainstream planning's entanglement in the political pursuit of the pro-growth capitalist society. As argued in Section 2.2, mainstream planning,

in the majority of western, developed countries, is currently a system-maintainer rather than system-transformer. Degrowing planning intends to transform the mainstream planning into an engine of social transformation towards the degrowth future, a transformative perspective distinct from the existing transformative planning traditions that tend to contrast transformative planning practices with the institutionalised planning (Friedmann 2003). Addressing the potentiality of mainstream planning also avoids falling into the same trap as the degrowth adherents who reject the possibilities of transformation within planning and searching solutions by bypassing it (see criticisms in Section 2.1). Furthermore, degrowth planning intends to articulate explicitly the substantive values of urban planning, which have drawn less attention in transformative planning theories. In my conceptualisation, degrowth planning counters the hegemony of economic growth and facilitates a downscaling of urban physical development that enhances ecological conditions, satisfies basic needs and secures justice at the local and global level, in the short and long term. Degrowing planning can take place on three fronts: ideology, normativity and utopianism.

4.1. Subverting the growth ideology in planning

Ideology constitutes our dominant belief system that, in turn, shapes what we value, aim for and what we do to achieve the aims. Planning is inherently ideological in the sense that it is 'the ideology of how we define and use space' (Gunder 2010, 299). Thus, the ideological commitment of planning has a significant consequence to the purpose of planning and the choice of planning strategies in a specific context. An ideological reflection on planning practice is a prerequisite for degrowing planning.

Considering the important role of ideology in planning, planning scholars have not paid much attention to ideological reflection on planning practices. The recent decade seems to witness a raising interest in ideology inquiry in planning (Gunder 2006, 2010; Grange 2014; Sager 2015; Shepherd, Inch, and Marshall 2020; Xue 2018). Although the studies draw on different definitions and theories of ideology to inform analyses of various planning issues, they more or less confirm mainstream planning's commitment to the hegemonic political ideology oriented for growth and neoliberalism. This finding resonates with Harvey's claim back in 1985 who contended that the planner, without awareness, is committed to the ideology of harmony within the capitalist social order and contributes to the process of capitalist social reproduction through producing, maintaining and managing the built environment (Harvey 1985). The ideological commitment to economic growth is argued to be one of the fundamental barriers to sustainable urban development (Xue 2018).

The growth ideology, founded on 'the social imaginary signification that the unlimited growth of production and of the productive forces is in fact the central objective of human existence' (Fotopoulos 2005), has a prevalent manifestation in the mainstream planning, either explicitly enunciated or hidden. Urban planning often sets economic growth as the primary goal and pursues sustainability, attractiveness and liveability partly for the sake of being competitive. Urban planners, willingly or not, often adopt an urban green growth agenda. Underlying this goal and agenda setting is the belief in economic growth as an essential and necessary premise for citizens' well-being, welfare and even environmental sustainability. The growth ideology can also be hidden and is not readily detected. For instance, implicit in the seemingly 'scientific', value-free planning tools for planning transport infrastructure, such as traffic models and cost-benefit analysis, are certain beliefs and perspectives which may be affirmed as ideological. Næss (2016c) criticises that the way of discounting long-term environmental impacts represents ignorance about the vital functions of ecosystems as life support systems and bias against future generations. Likewise, the principle of willingness-to-pay as an indicator of people's need in cost-benefit analysis gives more influence on decision making to the affluent than the poor, which underestimates the needs of the people who have low ability to pay.

For planning to be a vanguard of social change to degrowth, planners need develop the intellectual capability to recognise and reflect on the growth ideology. Instead of uncritically seeking conformity with the mainstream political ideology, planners need to maintain certain professional

autonomy and critically scrutinise the ideological grounds of proposed strategies and tools. Planners can draw on the degrowth critiques on the growth ideology and paradigm to develop their own collective beliefs.

A shift from the belief in growth to degrowth would mean acknowledging that urban economic growth is not necessary for well-being, reconciling urban growth with long-term environmental sustainability is not plausible, and that post-growth is in the long run a likely new normal context conditioning future urban development. Such a shift in belief would provide an alternative paradigmatic approach to frame and solve urban problems. A degrowth perspective of the causes of urban problems, such as increasing social inequality, will show that they are not administrative failures but, rather, are outcomes of the capitalist economic and institutional mechanisms (Krätke 1988). Therefore, solutions must lie in restructuring the economic system instead of rectifying the capitalist system. Only if awareness is raised of the growth ideological ground of the existing strategies, can alternative logics of pursuing a prosperous urban future be possibly achieved.

4.2. Revitalising the framing of substantive values of urban development

The second front to degrow planning is to revitalise the planning's command in framing substantive values of urban development in light of degrowth. There are several reasons for doing so. Firstly, the primary focus of planning theories and debates since the 1980s has been on process and therefore procedural ethics (e.g. communicative planning, radical planning and insurgent planning) (Healey 2010; Albrechts 2015). According to these theories, planners' role is reduced to primarily a mediator. When it comes to value issues of planning content, a strong moral relativism can be discerned, which denies a formulation of universal values and the distinction of better and worse planning (Forester 1999). This reluctance and even denial of formulating substantive ethical values are in many ways linked to the commitment to the dominant thinking of postmodernism that considers perceptions and claims as equally valuable (Campbell 2012) and the influences from neoliberalism (Strand and Næss 2017). However, as many critics have pointed out, procedural equity does not necessarily lead to just outcomes (Huxley and Yiftachel 2000; Connelly and Richardson 2004; Fainstein 2014). Secondly, planning is a profession that cannot evade the inquiry of substantive values. This is due to the fact that planners' choices of solutions do generate outcomes in terms of the allocation and distribution of access to resources by different population groups and have consequences on non-human environment. Moreover, the very nature and purpose of planning – intervention and delivering a better future than would otherwise be the case – requires value inquiry of what is 'good' or 'better'. Planning is, therefore, in the position to suggest a normative envisioning of what is a better future.

Degrowth values that respect environmental limits, satisfy human needs and ensure social justice can be a springboard for the planning profession to reawaken an inquiry of substantive values. 'Respecting environmental limits' is a normative value stemming from the fact that we live on a limited planet with finite natural resources and ecological boundaries. Applying to urban development and planning, it means lowering *absolute*, not just relative, environmental impacts caused by urban development, including greenhouse gas emissions, resource depletion, environmental pollution, biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, etc. In light of the degrowth argument, the reduction in absolute environmental impacts cannot be achieved without downscaling the level of production and consumption. This suggests that planning should aim at stabilising or even degrowing the per capita consumption of residential space and built-up land area. This normative goal of urban development is in stark contrast with the current growth-oriented planning goals.

Satisfying human needs implies that future urban development and planning need to secure that everyone has the opportunity to obtain a minimum quality of life, e.g. housing, mobility, job, education, health. To secure everyone's satisfaction of basic needs under a ceiling of limited residential space and land area implies the normative value of social justice in the form of redistribution. In the field of urban development this includes a spatial distributive mechanism that can substantially

reduce the overconsumption (e.g. residential spaces) of certain population groups and redistribute them to the deprived.

Moving away from an economic focus to the above-formulated substantive values provides new norms for planners to propose strategies. In addition to the procedural moral norms of democracy and deliberation, planners can judge whether the consequences of the planning strategies contribute to the normative values as formulated above.

4.3. Practising concrete utopia through scenario planning

Degrowth planning can also be facilitated via practising utopian thinking that images a more desirable and better future state, alternative to the business as usual or the dominant (Pinder 2002). Although the planning profession originated from a vision of the good city that could bring efficiency and order to the chaotic and unhealthy environment caused by the industrial city (Fainstein 2009), the utopian thinking has gradually retreated from planning after the modernist urbanism (Friedmann 2000). Nevertheless, one may readily find that almost all plans have certain degrees of envisioning about ideal urban development futures, such as compact city, new urbanism, competitive and liveable cities. The problem lies in that these utopian visions of urban development are either in compliance with the degenerate utopia defined by capitalist forces or in the course of materialisation degenerated into that (Harvey 2000). Such utopia representation maintains status quo and mainstream values rather than providing a critical perspective to urban development. We, therefore, need to develop a more progressive type of urban utopianism that can pose critical challenges to the existing urban development and thus trigger transformation towards a better urban future.

Given the distinctive values promoted by degrowth, it could act as a concrete utopia inspiring the exercise of envisioning alternative urban futures. Scenario planning can be employed to explore how the degrowth vision – an urban development that reduces consumption level for the sake of environment, prioritises justice and needs satisfaction, can be spatially framed. The combination of explorative and normative scenarios is particularly fruitful in such exploration (Börjeson et al. 2006). The normative elements formulate degrowth-oriented urban visions, while the explorative elements investigate and compare different approaches to realising the visions. For example, a degrowth urban development scenario could mean a higher proportion of activities being localised, facilitated by spatial restructuring, demolishing or replacing some existing single-family houses with apartment buildings in more environment-friendly locations, transforming car-oriented infrastructures and urban spaces into lively public spaces for pedestrians, cyclists or public transport.

The utopian thinking can help urban planning to envision future urban development and address problems in a distinct way from the mainstream societal and planning paradigm. Distinct from using utopias and scenarios as imposing, static future blueprint, such urban visions can be used to broaden the horizon of future choices, raise awareness of alternatives, facilitate debating and recognising limitations and potentials, and are thus as tools for social change.

5. What can planners do?

So far, I have focused on the substantive dimension of planning. Some of the proposed changes within the planning profession may be well recognised and supported by urban planners. However, their efforts in articulating and promoting progressive social changes are constrained by the wider dynamic political, institutional, economic and cultural contexts (Healey 2007). In this section, I will briefly reflect on the challenges, dilemmas and opportunities of planners in contributing to a transition towards a degrowth society, mainly drawing on planning's role as governance with a focus on the process of planning.

Planners in public sectors, promoting a degrowth urban vision, may raise some tricky ethical issues related to democracy. If the majority of the population support the existing growth policies, consumerism and the capitalist system in general and have elected politicians representing these values, is it then ethically unproblematic for planners to impose their own degrowth values when planning interventions?

Needless to say, planners working in the public sector are, as civil servants, obliged to promote democratically adopted political objectives. Replacing the political objectives with planners' professional or personal values would be a technocratic planning in lack of democratic legitimacy, and there is no guarantee that such planning would promote environmental sustainability and give priority to the needs of the less well-off. However, in many cases, political objectives consistent with degrowth values have actually been adopted (although they may be in conflict with other goals also adopted). Planners could then, at least, inform politicians and the public at large about how alternative spatial solutions are likely to affect the possibilities of reaching the environmental and social justice goals in question. Planners could also propose solutions favourable to the achievement of these goals (although they should not be surprised if politicians would instead opt for solutions conducive to competing objectives).

Participatory and deliberative planning processes can contribute to the awareness of societal needs and consensus about solutions, and such processes are also widely believed to be beneficial with respect to fairness of the results (Friedmann, Nisbet, and Gans 1973; Sager 1992). Within groups who share some basic common values and interests compatible with degrowth ideals, dialogue and deliberation can play an important role in creating consensus. However, rather than aiming at consensus, including all stakeholder groups, planning towards a solidary degrowth society, should facilitate alliance-building among population groups who can support the basic equity and environmental values of such a trajectory. Such alliance-building can make those groups more powerful against actors harvesting profit from the present competitive growth society. Open and well-informed planning processes might then perhaps contribute to social mobilisation around common strategies for ecological sustainability and social justice, supported by a sufficient number of people to make a difference (Næss 2001).

Degrowth-minded planners could also, in their leisure time, assist NGOs or grassroots activities in participatory planning processes, for example by giving inputs to organisations' utterances in public hearings on plan proposals. Some planners might also choose to become full-time 'advocacy planners' (Davidoff 1965) employed by organisations working for environmental protection and social justice. Here, lessons learned from various transformative planning practices can help planners better engage in and facilitate degrowth-oriented struggles.

Planners taking an active pro-degrowth stance publicly could, however, be at risk of being accused of disloyalty to their superiors if the politicians, as is often the case, prioritise economic growth and consider income and wealth inequalities as incentives promoting a more prosperous society. Compared to planning practitioners, planning academics are normally in a freer situation to raise critique against currently favoured policies. Degrowth-oriented planning academics should spend more efforts on innovative development of scenarios for possible sustainable futures and pathways for their realisation (Xue et al. 2017; Mete and Xue 2020).

6. Conclusion

Through engaging in a dialogue between degrowth and urban planning, the paper has two-fold aims: enriching the degrowth theory by bringing the dimension of urban spatial development and planning into the debates, and transforming the planning paradigm in light of the degrowth values.

Firstly, I have defended the potentially significant role that urban development and planning can play in facilitating and driving the degrowth transformation. I argued that the imagination of degrowth and the transformation towards it have to be spatial, given that space is a structural

entity that has efficacious causal powers shaping, mediating and conditioning societal change. It is further argued that planning for urban/urban regions is an indispensable driver of that transformation. So, how can we engage with the urban development and planning in the degrowth narrative? The degrowth theory can embrace the urban development as a causal mechanism in understanding, explaining and criticising the crises associated with the growth paradigm, critically inquire the spatial dimension as obstacles or enablers of degrowth transformation, integrate the spatial strategy into presently non-spatial degrowth strategies, analyse the spatial consequences of degrowth policies and envision spatial forms of degrowth society.

The paper has centred on the potentiality of urban planning in solidifying the degrowth theory, without contextualising the planning strategies for the degrowth ends beyond the principle level. The proposal of more specific planning strategies has to consider the geographical diversity and the imagination of how the degrowth society is economically, socially and politically framed. This latter points concerns contested positions on topics such as the degree of localisation, the extent of rolling back modernity, the level and scope of individual freedom to be retained, the relationship between state, market and community, etc.

Secondly, I have contended that a shift of the role of planning from a system-maintainer to a vanguard of progressive societal transformation requires that the mainstream planning paradigm be confronted, not only through community-level innovations. Focusing on the substance of planning, I argue that subversion of planning's ideological commitment to growth, revitalisation of substantive values and resuscitation of utopianism are vital endeavours in advancing the transformative potential of planning. It should be noted that transitioning to a degrowth society requires radical innovation at an overall societal level. Societal innovation is highly needed to develop a new, democratic social order that can enable a fair and sustainable reduction in production and consumption, as well as to explore strategies and pathways for the process of transitioning towards such societal conditions.

In the end, I have reflected on planners' role in driving the transformation, taking into account their opportunities and dilemmas shaped by the society. Planners belong to a profession that has the task of looking into the future more than most other professionals need to do. Planners, therefore, have a professional responsibility to point at future consequences of policies and practices whose long-range impacts go unconsidered in current political debates. Spatial planners are also supposed to possess knowledge about driving forces of spatial development as well as the likely impacts of alternative strategies for spatial development, judged against key societal objectives. Planners could thus be expected to take a role in societal transition processes. Undeniably, the driving forces of a growth paradigm are deeply structural. By challenging growth, degrowth needs to subvert its underlying structural forces. Truly, being positioned within the growth-oriented political and economic landscape, planning's autonomy and action space for transformative practices are constrained. However, it is precisely because of this inside position of planning that planners are advantageous in confronting directly the established practices and values.

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