**Poverty, Growth, and the Environment**

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Darrel Moellendorf’s *Mobilizing Hope* represents only the latest in a series of valuable interventions into debates on climate and global justice. As with much of Moellendorf’s work, the book is characterized by a strong emphasis on the potential of human development: the possibility of expanding human capacities, and the importance of freeing people from the crushing constraints of poverty. Because of its pernicious effects on human flourishing, it is the impulse to eradicate poverty that ought to be in the driving seat when government policy is determined, he suggests, rather than the goal of aggregate economic growth. GDP growth, if it is valuable at all, is only instrumentally useful—and chiefly insofar as it helps to tackle the moral tragedy of poverty. Any commitment to it must, therefore, be informed and qualified by a clear-eyed focus on the distribution of the benefits it brings in tow. This focus explains Moellendorf’s skepticism towards some prominent ideas about climate politics and its imperatives. Too often, policymakers—and the economists who advise them—are content to simply compare the aggregate financial costs and benefits of the various climate policies open to them. But that approach can lead them seriously astray, both because it uses money as a proxy for well-being, and because it focuses on aggregate income rather than its distribution. In adaptation policy, for instance, a strategy of minimizing overall economic losses turns out to be morally disastrous. It can be used to justify what Moellendorf pithily calls a “Save Miami Beach First” policy (Moellendorf 2022: 104), which prioritizes protecting the homes of the privileged from rising tides, even where this means abandoning the vulnerable. But that would be utterly indefensible.

The same focus on genuine human development also informs Moellendorf’s views on mitigation, both here and elsewhere (see also Moellendorf 2014). Any reasonable climate policy would allocate mitigation costs in line with capacity, to ensure people are not pushed into poverty, or trapped in it any longer than strictly necessary. Capacity has to be understood here in terms of something like access to well-being, rather than the possession of hard cash. In all of this, Moellendorf proves himself an invaluable moral guide to the complexities of climate action, and *Mobilizing Hope* does much to extend and flesh out his view. In what follows I am going to focus on Moellendorf’s arguments about economic growth and its relationship to both poverty and the environment. But this is only one set of issues raised in this rich and rewarding book.

TWO CHEERS FOR GROWTH?

Notwithstanding Moellendorf’s skepticism that GDP growth is valuable in and of itself, chapter 6 of the book—entitled “Hope for the Paris Agreement”—provides two arguments for believing some degree of further GDP growth is still desirable, indeed even vital. As a result, the arguments of those who blithely recommend degrowth for our economies—or at least for the economies of the global North (see below)—are dangerously mistaken. First, if we are to have any future at all, we need to find some way to decouple human development from the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. To date, human development has proven to be a highly energy-intensive affair (Moellendorf 2022: 77). In recent decades, it seems to have been a truism that “effective national development strategies, which reduce poverty significantly, also result in steep increases in energy consumption” (Moellendorf 2022: 80). To continue the project of human development, we clearly therefore need a quick ramp-up in green energy production. Fortunately, Moellendorf suggests, renewable energy is now no more expensive than fossil fuels in most markets, and prices are falling. There is no great mystery to what a fair green transition would have to look like, however hard certain vested interests have tried to obscure matters.

However, it is also important to recognize, he argues, that the green transition will be *growth-inducing*. That is, the kinds of innovation that will drive Net Zero will involve (and require) economic growth (Moellendorf 2022: 150). They will involve people speculating, investing, diversifying, buying new goods, transforming transport infrastructures, and much else besides. Our economies will have to do new things, invest in new technologies, and the net result will be to increase both GDP and the material through-put of our societies, at least for a time. Whatever we think about the fundamental merits of GDP growth, this is a consequence we are going to have to live with if we are to exit quickly and safely from a fossil fuel economy. But it is also important to recognize there will be benefits along the way: Moellendorf argues the transition will be good for our economies, organized labor, health, and, in sum, that it offers “huge opportunities for improving human well-being” (Moellendorf 2022: 133).

The second argument for expecting some GDP growth to be part of a just future revolves around the unfinished project of ending poverty. As well as being instrumentally vital to achieving a green transition, some degree of growth is desirable simply because the project of human development is incomplete. The average per-capita global income of $11,500, Moellendorf suggests, is really not enough to sustain genuine prosperity. To achieve genuine prosperity, the world would require average (and hence aggregate) GDP to rise considerably beyond that. It might be that this further growth will have negative consequences for the environment and for biodiversity. But those are consequences we would have to accept, Moellendorf argues, because “Ending the human development project is morally not an option” (Moellendorf 2022: 191). On the basis of both arguments, we ought to be very cautious about any claims that degrowth—or even a moratorium on GDP growth—is a moral imperative.

GDP GROWTH FOREVER?

In some quarters, this argument will provoke immediate worries. Must GDP growth be never-ending, on this view? If so, is that compatible with a safe environment? Strikingly, even mainstream economists recently have argued indefinite economic growth cannot be secured within a livable biosphere. That is a key message, for example, of the Dasgupta Review on the Economics of Biodiversity (Dasgupta 2021). Or is there some point at which further GDP growth becomes unnecessary, either because human development beyond a certain point is no longer a moral requirement, or because GDP growth and human development can be successfully decoupled in absolute terms?

One view, recently associated with scholars such as Jason Hickel, is that GDP growth now adds little or nothing to human well-being (or human development) in the countries of the North. For ecological reasons, those countries both can and should reduce their rates of growth, and even *de*-grow their economies in GDP terms. That would enable the world to stay within ecological limits, even allowing for some pro-poor growth in the countries of the South (Hickel 2020). That is an argument Moellendorf rejects, however. The problem, he suggests, is that we do not know any way of uncoupling pro-poor growth, in the global South, from GDP growth within the global economy as a whole (Moellendorf 2022: 148). Any policy aimed at reducing living standards in the global North is in fact highly likely to trigger a global recession, which would be catastrophic for the poor. Voluntarily contracting rich-country economies, Moellendorf suggests, would produce “truly immense” suffering in low- and middle-income countries (Moellendorf 2022: 147). Hickel’s dream of shrinking GDP (or even halting GDP growth) in the North while expanding it somewhat in the South is therefore just that. It would be “utterly implausible” to expect zero growth in rich countries alone not to trigger global recession with terrible consequences for the poor (Moellendorf 2022: 146).

This constitutes a third argument for pursuing growth, and one with wide-ranging implications. Moellendorf, recall, is ambivalent about whether GDP growth is valuable in and of itself. We *do* have instrumental reasons for expecting some continued GDP growth to be necessary, to enable the transition away from fossil fuels, and to ensure everyone can lead a life of genuine prosperity. But the first two arguments could be taken to suggest merely that *some* growth will be indispensable, for however long it takes to achieve those goals. This third argument, by contrast, seems to imply we could *never* degrow rich-country economies, in GDP terms, in light of the likely devastating consequences of global recession for the world’s poor. As we do not know of any way of halting growth in the North without triggering recession, GDP growth—in the rich world *and* in the world as a whole—might actually have to be a feature of our economies forever.

I have two worries about this view, the first narrower in scope, and the second broader. First, if any effort to halt growth in rich-country economies is likely to trigger recession, with awful effects on the poor, can the same not be said about many other policies that significantly affect the assets of the rich? As I noted earlier, Moellendorf rightly criticizes the habit of using aggregate monetary costs or benefits as the yardstick for sound mitigation or adaptation policy. The Save Miami Beach First policy is repugnant because it illegitimately places greater priority on the claims of the advantaged (who have a good deal of wealth sunk into Miami Beach properties, we are to imagine) compared to those of the disadvantaged (who probably have modest property holdings, and not on Miami Beach). But what if refusing to Save Miami Beach First causes a significant hit to GDP, pushing the economy into recession? Might this mean we should in fact let the properties of the poor be flooded instead, on the assumption this will do less damage to the economy? That would be a troubling conclusion to say the least. One response would be that such a policy would hurt the poor even more than a recession would, and we should reject it for that reason. Interestingly, that response would cut the third argument down to size somewhat—because it grants there are things that are worse for the poor than recession. Perhaps the ecological consequences of unending GDP growth also fall into that category?

This brings me to my second, broader worry. If we take the arguments of economists such as Partha Dasgupta (2021) seriously, moves to rein in GDP growth are simply inevitable at some point, if the biosphere is to remain hospitable to human life. Moellendorf suggests we know no way of reining in growth without causing terrible consequences for the poor. Still, refusing ever to move away from GDP growth will have terrible consequences for everyone, including the poor. In such a tragic situation, is not stepping away from growth sooner rather than later likely to be the lesser evil?

DECOUPLING AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Moellendorf, though, appears to have greater faith in the possibility of unending GDP growth than Dasgupta does, in large part because of his faith in the potential for technological progress. The transition away from fossil fuels, he points out, necessarily involves decoupling growth from carbon emissions. That decoupling must be not just relative but also absolute, detaching growth from any increase in emissions (Moellendorf 2022: 141). Evidence suggests such decoupling will be technologically possible, and it is of course necessary, if we are to stabilize the climate without shrinking the economy. Perhaps this gives us grounds for faith that GDP growth in perpetuity is not as unlikely as Dasgupta thinks. In addition, Moellendorf declares himself somewhat skeptical about the language of ecological limits: he questions how we could measure such limits, and suggests he finds claims about “the capacity of the ecosystem” vague (Moellendorf 2022: 136).

But of course, even if decoupling GDP growth from fossil fuel use is possible, this does not show growth can be decoupled from material throughput, or ecological impacts, more generally. Certainly some scholars have suggested the existence of an ‘environmental Kuznets curve,’ which would allow increases in GDP to be achieved without greater environmental degradation. Those claims are contested, though. One problem is they tend to neglect processes of ‘environmental load displacement’ (Hornborg 2006), whereby the ecological demands of Northern lifestyles are increasingly placed on the ecosystems of the South. Some Northern countries *might* have decoupled growth from wider ecological impacts, at least relatively—but only if we focus on inputs into domestic production, rather than all inputs into consumption. There is much less evidence of success in absolutely decoupling growth from ecological impacts at the global level. To the contrary, Hickel suggests that far from being ‘dematerialized’, since the year 2000 the global economy has actually been *re*materialized—the link between GDP and material throughput, that is, has actually gotten stronger rather than weaker (Hickel 2020: 104). Hickel may or may not be right about that—as I said, much is contested in these debates. But it does seem clear, more modestly, that decarbonization is likely to reduce stress on the climate system while increasing many other pressures on the environment. Many green energy sources require large quantities of rare earth metals and other minerals, for instance, extraction of which is often linked to devastating environmental impacts. For advocates of deep-sea mining—which is, regrettably, inching ever closer—the go-to justification is the need to support the green energy transition. But mining the seabed promises to have terrible ecological consequences (Armstrong 2022). At the same time, the large-scale roll-out of wind and solar technology requires large quantities of land, and can be expected to have a significant impact on biodiversity as a result. The same can be said for technologies such as Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage, which would demand very large quantities of land and water if employed at the kind of scale that some advocates have envisaged.

Competing demands on land deserve especially serious reflection, because it is not obvious from where the physical space necessary to roll-out wind, solar, and/or BECCS at sufficient scale is going to come. If roll-out means clearing massive amounts of land of existing vegetation, that would have terrible consequences for biodiversity. If it means relinquishing existing agricultural land, that could well increase the price of food, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the poor (Armstrong and McLaren 2022). At the same time, the recently agreed Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework commits countries to protecting 30% of land for biodiversity by 2030, and holds out the prospect of protecting half by 2050. All of this is in a context where the human population is rising, and hundreds of millions of people are escaping from poverty and adopting more resource-intensive lifestyles. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that something will have to give.

Intelligent policy design might mitigate the land crunch, but it is hard to see how it can avoid it. A number of commentators have suggested that at some point, some sectors of the economy will simply have to be abandoned or at least significantly dialed down. Mark Rowlands (2021), for example, has argued the only feasible way to square the circle is to rapidly and radically downscale animal agriculture, allowing the incredible quantities of land it currently uses up to reforest. In fact, he believes this is the only way to meet our climate goals quickly enough, although protecting animals and biodiversity also points strongly in the same direction (ibid: 236). We can have rapid decarbonization, or we can keep eating meat, he suggests, but not both. I would be interested to know what Moellendorf makes of such arguments.

One of the virtues of *Mobilizing Hope* is that it prompts serious reflection about the relationship between human development, GDP growth, and the environment. It gives us pause to consider, for instance, whether the underlying commitment to human development is in principle satiable—whether, at some point, we can decide people have good enough lives, and it is time to devote ourselves to other ends instead. Is the drive to advance human development important just so long as it allows everyone to escape from poverty, or is it an ongoing moral commitment that never can be exhausted in that way? The book also prompts reflection on the various reasons we might have for pursuing GDP growth. Moellendorf’s general project aims to de-center GDP growth, which he certainly does not see as an end in itself. And yet, I have suggested, we have strong reasons on his account to expect GDP growth to be necessary at the very least in the short term (both to ease the green transition, and to help us secure universal prosperity), and perhaps in the long term, too (if we know of no way of getting off the growth bandwagon without wrecking our economies and therefore hurting the poor). I have asked whether, in practice, the spectre of economic catastrophe will not forbid *any* attempt to move away from GDP growth, at any time. I also have suggested if policymakers decouple growth from fossil fuels but only at the cost of intensifying other demands on the biosphere, they may solve the climate problem but exacerbate a much broader ecological crisis. A key question, then, is whether we have grounds for believing GDP growth can be absolutely decoupled from ecological impacts more broadly, as opposed to fossil fuel-related impacts more narrowly, or whether it is not only the fossil fuel industry that ought to be on the chopping block.

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