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Hasselbalch, Jacob; Kranke, Matthias

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FORUM

Dealing with dangerous abundance: Towards post-growth International Relations

Jacob Hasselbalch¹  and Matthias Kranke^{2,3} 

¹Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark; ²University of Kassel, Kassel, Germany and ³Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), University of Freiburg, Freiburg i.Br., Germany

Corresponding author: Matthias Kranke; Email: matthias.kranke@uni-kassel.de

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Abstract

Even though International Relations (IR) research increasingly recognises the unprecedented urgency of environmental degradation and the resulting ecological injustices, only few IR scholars have probed into the role of economic growth as a fundamental driver of global unsustainability. We level two critiques at the field of IR from a post-growth perspective. First, most IR theories are complicit in naturalising economic growth as a fundamental condition of global order. Second, IR scholarship has neglected to engage seriously with post-growth thinking. What happens when we start to question the background economic assumptions of the current international system? How might a global politics of post-growth challenge and enrich IR and environmental politics? This Editors Forum brings together a diverse group of scholars from across the globe to reflect on these pertinent questions. As a whole, the Forum begins to address the complicity and neglect critiques. To varying degrees, each contribution considers what IR can learn from post-growth research (both conceptually and empirically), and vice versa. In this introductory article, we set the stage for such an engagement by reviewing an interdisciplinary body of relevant work and synthesising the key contributions from a total of seven Forum articles.

Keywords: climate change; ecological justice; economic growth; North–South relations; post-growth; sustainability

Rapid and far-reaching transitions across all sectors and systems are necessary to achieve deep and sustained emissions reductions and secure a liveable and sustainable future for all.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)¹

Introduction

While many agree on the IPCC's diagnosis that societies and economies need to transform in the face of the declining ecological health of our planet, there is little agreement on the best cure. In contrast to the 1970s debate around 'limits to growth',² in which humanity's future was seen as circumscribed by rapidly approaching resource scarcities and peak production capacities, it is now clear that the problem is not that humanity has too little, but that it produces too

¹IPCC, 'Summary for policymakers', in *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds)]. (Geneva: IPCC, 2023), pp. 1–34 (p. 28, original emphasis), available at: https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf.

²Donella H. Meadows Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth. A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York, NY: Universe Books, 1972).

much. Concerns about dwindling fossil fuel reserves have been replaced by the spectre of ‘stranded assets’;³ and current projections predict that the total weight of plastics will surpass that of fish in the ocean by 2050.⁴ At the same time, large parts of humanity, such as the estimated 828 million people suffering from hunger,⁵ do not have their basic needs met although it would be possible to generate more than enough welfare for the entire world population.⁶ The crucial question then is how to forge a new social contract around a whole range of socio-economic issues, including a fair distribution of goods, without undermining the health of ecological support systems on which our livelihoods depend.⁷ What does this mean for the field of International Relations (IR)?

This question directs our attention to the configuration of the global economic order in general, and the relationship between economic growth and ecological degradation in particular. There is growing concern among various scholarly communities that humanity is on an extremely dangerous path. As recent evidence suggests, nations’ success in fulfilling social standards for a decent human life cannot keep up with the pace at which they degrade ecosystems.⁸ Looking at current trajectories of the rate of decoupling economic growth from CO₂ emissions, we are rapidly failing obligations under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change to limit warming to 1.5–2.0°C.⁹ These dire realisations call attention to system logics other than economic growth that could enable the much-needed transformation.¹⁰ ‘Post-growth’ – shorthand for such alternative, more ecologically sensitive logics – has recently become a buzzword in many academic debates, but IR scholars have mostly remained passive bystanders. Notwithstanding recent attempts to rethink global politics at the dawn of the ‘Anthropocene’,¹¹ a deeper dialogue with post-growth ideas has thus been virtually non-existent.

Against this backdrop, this Editors Forum interrogates the potential of a post-growth IR research programme to contribute to building a (more) sustainable global order. In short, we collectively reflect upon the implications of post-growth for global politics. There are many ways to draw distinctions between dominant and critical perspectives on global sustainability politics: ‘weak’ versus ‘strong’ sustainability,¹² piecemeal ‘trasformismo’ versus comprehensive ‘transformation’,¹³

³Jeff D. Colgan, Jessica F. Green, and Thomas N. Hale, ‘Asset revaluation and the existential politics of climate change’, *International Organization*, 75:2 (2021), pp. 586–610.

⁴World Economic Forum, Ellen MacArthur Foundation, and McKinsey & Company, *The New Plastics Economy – Rethinking the Future of Plastics* (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2016), available at: [<http://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications>].

⁵The figure of 828 million people is from World Bank, ‘Beyond hunger: A healthy diet for a healthy life’, available at: [<https://datatopics.worldbank.org/sdgatlas/goal-2-zero-hunger?lang=en>].

⁶Daniel W. O’Neill, Andrew L. Fanning, William F. Lamb, and Julia K. Steinberger, ‘A good life for all within planetary boundaries’, *Nature Sustainability*, 1:2 (2018), pp. 88–95.

⁷Ulrich Brand, Barbara Muraca, Éric Pineault et al., ‘From planetary to societal boundaries: An argument for collectively defined self-limitation’, *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 17:1 (2021), pp. 265–92.

⁸Andrew L. Fanning, Daniel W. O’Neill, Jason Hickel, and Nicolas Roux, ‘The social shortfall and ecological overshoot of nations’, *Nature Sustainability*, 5:1 (2022), pp. 26–36.

⁹Kevin Anderson, John F. Broderick, and Isak Stoddard, ‘A factor of two: How the mitigation plans of “climate progressive” nations fall far short of Paris-compliant pathways’, *Climate Policy*, 20:10 (2020), pp. 1290–304; Jefim Vogel and Jason Hickel, ‘Is green growth happening? An empirical analysis of achieved versus Paris-compliant CO₂–GDP decoupling in high-income countries’, *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 7:9 (2023), e759–69.

¹⁰Jacob A. Hasselbalch, Matthias Kranke, and Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, ‘Organizing for transformation: Post-growth in International Political Economy’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 30:5 (2023), pp. 1621–38.

¹¹Cameron Harrington, ‘The ends of the world: International Relations and the Anthropocene’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 478–98; Dahlia Simangan, ‘Where is the Anthropocene? IR in a new geological epoch’, *International Affairs*, 96:1 (2020), pp. 211–24.

¹²Robert U. Ayres, Jeroen C. J. M. van den Bergh, and John M. Gowdy, ‘Strong versus weak sustainability: Economics, natural sciences, and “consilience”’, *Environmental Ethics*, 23:2 (2001), pp. 155–68.

¹³Peter Newell, ‘Trasformismo or transformation? The global political economy of energy transitions’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 26:1 (2019), pp. 25–48.

or ‘green growth’ versus ‘degrowth’.¹⁴ Here we take a broad and open-ended approach to exploring what ‘post-growth’ means for global politics. In doing so, we acknowledge a rich vein of interdisciplinary research with multiple genealogies of post-growth thinking, including Indigenous knowledges,¹⁵ post-development,¹⁶ ecological economics,¹⁷ feminist economics,¹⁸ geography,¹⁹ political ecology²⁰ and other traditions.²¹ The contributions to this Editors Forum emphasise different understandings of post-growth, thereby painting a diverse picture of post-growth global politics.

The rationale of this Editors Forum is to investigate alternative system logics and associated orders not premised on the relentless pursuit of economic growth. Economic growth is just the latest ‘cosmological shift’ in how states view their purpose and international order, but there is no reason to expect it to be the last.²² If humanity does not actively manage this transformation to post-growth societies, we risk being forced into new circumstances neither of our making nor of our choice.²³ This undertaking presents enormous challenges not only to the practice of global politics but also to the field of IR, as the Forum contributions show by addressing two critiques that apply differently to different parts of the field. The first critique is one of *complicity*, which suggests that much mainstream IR research has, at least tacitly, accepted the pursuit of economic growth as a quasi-natural state of affairs in global politics.²⁴ The second critique is one of *neglect*, which highlights that even while critical IR scholarship has certainly identified growth as problematic, it has usually stopped short of engaging with post-growth ideas.²⁵ Both shortcomings keep IR from more fully grasping why (un)sustainability must be treated – analytically and politically – as a global condition, rather than an environmental issue only.²⁶ If human impacts on the Earth system are so pervasive that we must expect a radically altered global ecological and, hence, political landscape, the questions that we raise here surrounding (post-)growth have ramifications for all of IR, not just for global environmental politics.

This introduction to the Editors Forum proceeds as follows. In the next section, we briefly review the relationship between global order, growth, and sustainability in existing scholarship. Then, in the following section, we synthesise key insights from the different contributions to the Forum. We conclude by summarising what IR can learn from post-growth thinking, and vice versa.

¹⁴Hubert Buch-Hansen and Martin B. Carstensen, ‘Paradigms and the political economy of ecopolitical projects: Green growth and degrowth compared’, *Competition & Change*, 25:3–4 (2021), pp. 308–27.

¹⁵Padini Nirmal and Dianne Rocheleau, ‘Decolonizing degrowth in the post-development convergence: Questions, experiences, and proposals from two Indigenous territories’, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 2:3 (2019), pp. 465–92.

¹⁶Arturo Escobar, ‘Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: A preliminary conversation’, *Sustainability Science*, 10:3 (2015), pp. 451–62.

¹⁷Clive L. Spash, ‘A tale of three paradigms: Realising the revolutionary potential of ecological economics’, *Ecological Economics*, 169 (2020), 106518.

¹⁸Corinna Dengler and Birte Strunk, ‘The monetized economy versus care and the environment: Degrowth perspectives on reconciling an antagonism’, *Feminist Economics*, 24:3 (2018), pp. 160–83.

¹⁹Federico Demaria, Giorgos Kallis, and Karen Bakker, ‘Geographies of degrowth: Nowtopias, resurgences and the decolonization of imaginaries and places’, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 2:3 (2019), pp. 431–50.

²⁰Susan Paulson, ‘Political ecology’, in Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (eds), *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 45–8.

²¹In anthropology, for example, see Julie Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); or in the humanities, see Avram Alpert, *The Good-Enough Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

²²Bentley B. Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²³Matthew Paterson, ‘Climate change and international political economy: Between collapse and transformation’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 28:2 (2021), pp. 394–405 (p. 395).

²⁴See also Michael J. Albert, ‘Beyond continuationism: Climate change, economic growth, and the future of world (dis)order’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 35:6 (2022), pp. 868–87.

²⁵But see Lucy Ford and Gabriela Kütting, ‘Global environmental governance in the Anthropocene: Breaking out of the enclosures?’, *System Change*, 1:1 (2017), pp. 1–13.

²⁶Frank Biermann, ‘The future of “environmental” policy in the Anthropocene: Time for a paradigm shift’, *Environmental Politics*, 30:1–2 (2021), pp. 61–80.

Order, growth, and sustainability in current IR research

The idea that an economy ought to grow has a relatively short pedigree. Although economic growth was facilitated by the large-scale industrial use of fossil fuels already in the 19th century,²⁷ it was not until after the Second World War that ‘economic growth’ was assembled as a rallying concept and mainstreamed as a political objective by leading states and international organisations (IOs).²⁸ Its rise to prominence was significantly aided by the Cold War context of economic and military superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.²⁹ Despite a long history of extensive criticisms,³⁰ growth as a prerogative and gross domestic product (GDP) as the underlying metric remain alive and kicking. Today, major IOs promote this norm increasingly under the banner of ‘green’ and/or ‘inclusive growth’,³¹ which reflects ‘the compromise of liberal environmentalism’ once identified by Steven Bernstein.³² So ingrained has it in fact become that ‘all types of state government’, as Stephen J. Purdey highlights, now aspire to continuous economic growth.³³

Not only is the pursuit of growth baked into contemporary international institutions, major IR theories have also barely accounted for this embeddedness despite its potentially wide-ranging socio-economic and socio-ecological consequences. Within the given space, we can review only some of the pre-eminent theoretical schools in very broad strokes here. In realist thought, economic growth is necessary to ensure national security, which means that, ideally, a nation grows more than its competitors to afford a relatively larger military. Liberal perspectives instead focus on the realisation of absolute gains, whereby international cooperation, especially in the domain of trade, can generate growth and thus shared prosperity. Marxist theories, for their part, identify growth as a structural feature of the world capitalist system, which must expand to not collapse. Exemplifying our complicity critique, these theories make it difficult to analytically challenge the taken-for-granted need for economic growth because their base assumptions naturalise it as a fundamental condition of global order.

Reflexive theories are more attentive to the contingency of economic growth, but they nonetheless often disregard lineages of post-growth thinking, which illustrates our neglect critique. For example, social constructivist approaches point to economic growth as a norm, whose strength and reach depend on the degree of its intersubjective acceptance and institutional uptake. In feminist analyses, the highly gendered (as well as classed and raced) organisation of social reproduction is cast as either facilitating or at least not hindering the pursuit of economic growth. Post-colonial accounts, finally, draw direct links from growth-friendly political agendas to the enrichment of a few (typically groups/nations in the Global North and some elites in the Global South) at the expense of many others (typically groups/nations in the Global South). Yet even leading reflexive IR theories tend to not move beyond criticisms of growth-centric politics, thus failing to grapple

²⁷ Jan Selby, ‘International/inter-carbonic relations’, *International Relations*, 36:3 (2022), pp. 329–57 (pp. 335–6).

²⁸ Allan, *Scientific Cosmology*, ch. 5; John Barry, ‘A genealogy of economic growth as ideology and Cold War core state imperative’, *New Political Economy*, 25:1 (2020), pp. 18–29; Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Daniel Speich, ‘The use of global abstractions: National income accounting in the period of imperial decline’, *Journal of Global History*, 6:1 (2011), pp. 7–28.

²⁹ Lorenzo Fioramonti, ‘A post-GDP world? Rethinking international politics in the 21st century’, *Global Policy*, 7:1 (2016), pp. 15–24 (p. 17); Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth*, ch. 4.

³⁰ See Stephen J. Macekura, *The Mismeasure of Progress: Economic Growth and Its Critics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

³¹ Rianne Mahon, ‘Broadening the social investment agenda: The OECD, the World Bank and inclusive growth’, *Global Social Policy*, 19:1–2 (2019), pp. 121–38; Jonas Meckling and Bentley B. Allan, ‘The evolution of ideas in global climate policy’, *Nature Climate Change*, 10:5 (2020), pp. 434–8; Ali Saqer, ‘Repackaging growth at Davos: The World Economic Forum’s inclusive growth and development approach’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 30:3 (2023), pp. 914–38.

³² According to Bernstein, this compromise is defined by the simultaneous pursuit of economic growth and environmental protection within a liberal international order. Steven Bernstein, *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001).

³³ Stephen J. Purdey, *Economic Growth, the Environment and International Relations: The Growth Paradigm* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 4.

more extensively with post-growth thinking. This is where the contributions to our Editors Forum come in, which build on some recent innovations in IR scholarship and insights from other fields.

One such innovation that has inspired a vibrant body of research in IR is the ‘Anthropocene’ concept, which directs our attention towards the unique position held by the human species as a geological force altering the biophysical parameters of the Earth system.³⁴ IR scholarship on the Anthropocene makes an important ontological shift by abandoning the artificial separation between humans and nature, instead placing humans and society squarely within nature.³⁵ For some, the end of this separation means ‘the end of nature’, heralding a new era of dramatically increased hybridity in the form of ‘human/non-human entanglements’.³⁶ For others, it is rather a revival of ‘many natures’ in Indigenous bodies of knowledge, especially their more diverse views on human connections with nature.³⁷ Whether there is now ‘no nature’ or ‘many natures’, the common recognition of the onset of the Anthropocene does seem to mark a critical turning point for the field, in particular by calling for alternative ontologies and epistemologies.³⁸ Some go so far as to suggest that the Anthropocene should signify ‘the end of IR’, including a complete revamping of our theories and practices.³⁹

Yet other scholars are less convinced that there is anything new about the Anthropocene. They criticise the separation of the increasing awareness of global ecological degradation from the historical conditions that have caused it (and are still causing it), thus advocating terms such as the ‘Capitalocene’ or ‘Plantationocene’.⁴⁰ This strand of thinking is less concerned with placing humanity and social systems inside nature, arguing that their distinction helps to render visible the human-made structures and processes responsible for environmental destruction.⁴¹ For example, in analysing the role of political violence as a primary driver of global warming and mass extinction, Jairus V. Grove calls for a ‘Eurocene’ label to replace the ‘Anthropocene’ in order to stress the ongoing destruction wrought by both historical and contemporary dynamics of colonialism.⁴² Regardless of whether one views the Anthropocene as constituting a novel human condition, which might, in turn, warrant a post-growth mindset, the debates around this concept have been generative of vast amounts of new scholarship on the relationship between human societies, global order, and nature.⁴³

While recognising emerging IR scholarship on the Anthropocene as a key source of inspiration for this collection, we remain focused on the more narrow question of economic growth. Specifically, we ask how (post-)growth relates to transformations towards a more sustainable global

³⁴For a review, see Simangan, ‘Where is the Anthropocene?’

³⁵Harrington, ‘The ends of the world’.

³⁶Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Depoliticized environments: The end of nature, climate change and the post-political condition’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 69 (2011), pp. 253–74 (p. 254 specifically on the ‘human/non-human entanglements’); Paul Wapner, *Living through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

³⁷Cristina Y. A. Inoue and Paula F. Moreira, ‘Many worlds, many nature(s), one planet: Indigenous knowledge in the Anthropocene’, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 59:2 (2016), e009.

³⁸Scott Hamilton, ‘I am uncertain, but We are not: A new subjectivity of the Anthropocene’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:4 (2019), pp. 607–26; Harrington, ‘The ends of the world’; Tom Lundborg, ‘The Anthropocene rupture in international relations: Future politics and international life’, *Review of International Studies*, 49:4 (2023), pp. 597–614.

³⁹Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Daniel J. Levine, ‘Planet politics: A manifesto from the end of IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 499–523.

⁴⁰See, for example, Donna Haraway, ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making kin’, *Environmental Humanities*, 6:1 (2015), pp. 159–65; Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: Pm Press, 2016).

⁴¹Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

⁴²Jairus V. Grove, *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁴³For recent overviews, see David Chandler, Franziska Müller, and Delf Rothe (eds), *International Relations in the Anthropocene: New Agendas, New Agencies and New Approaches* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2021); Eva Lövbrand, Malin Mobjörk, and Rickard Söder, ‘The Anthropocene and the geo-political imagination: Re-writing Earth as political space’, *Earth System Governance*, 4 (2020), 100051.

political order. From an edited volume on global environmental politics, we can discern the following functions of economic growth: (1) an imperative of the state; (2) a component of ecological modernisation (for example, 'green economies' or 'green growth'); (3) a remedy for relations of domination according to some traditional liberal and Marxist theories; (4) an enabler of consumptive lifestyles; (5) an accelerator of capitalist accumulation processes; (6) a background assumption driving many regime complexes; and (7) a priority of different kinds of security policies, including energy, environmental, and ecological security.⁴⁴ While this overview shows that economic growth is clearly considered as directly impacting a wide range of topics within IR, it is too often assumed to be a stable policy goal or an inevitable background condition of global politics. As demonstrated by Bentley B. Allan, when we take economic growth as given in this manner, we limit our imagination of new forms of global political order.⁴⁵ That is not to say that all narratives of green transformation involve a commitment to economic growth,⁴⁶ but we have barely begun to consider what a post-economic growth global order could look like. Some important groundwork has been undertaken, however.

Recent examples that connect post-growth thinking, global politics, and ecology chart a direction forward. In parts of *Global Green Politics*, Peter Newell engages head-on with the relationship between global prosperity, sustainability, and economic growth. After broadly surveying green critiques of the global economy and contrasting different visions, including steady-state economies and degrowth, Newell raises a number of difficult issues for post-growth global politics to consider.⁴⁷ With economic growth so deeply inscribed into the imagination and instruments of mainstream economic policy, it is a Herculean task to transform not only what we measure and how we measure certain things, but also how these measurements are institutionally embedded. This is the central concern of Lorenzo Fioramonti's book *The World after GDP*, which argues that alternative metrics of progress need to replace GDP as the standard measure of well-being.⁴⁸ But changing economic metrics and their institutional embeddedness is unlikely to be sufficient for overturning the growth imperative.⁴⁹

Further complicating matters, populations tend not to respond positively to calls for restraint or ecologically justified limits, raising thorny questions especially for democratic societies and the global liberal order. Newell reviews strategic possibilities for supporting a degrowth transformation, such as orienting economic activities towards eco-social goals, curbing the power of high finance and transnational capital, or generally expanding collective ownership of resources.⁵⁰ Yet any concrete examples that illustrate these possibilities are only imagined at the level of the community or the nation-state. Other contributions to International Political Economy underline what it means to view the global economy as ecologically embedded and what it would mean to move it beyond growth.⁵¹ Building on and extending these insights, we do not aim to prescribe a specific

⁴⁴ Olaf Corry and Hayley Stevenson (eds), *Traditions and Trends in Global Environmental Politics: International Relations and the Earth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 32, 67, 73, 130, 144–5, 156, 161, 175. We identified these functions by checking the index of the book (on p. 198) for mentions of the concept 'economic growth' across different chapters of the volume.

⁴⁵ Allan, *Scientific Cosmology*.

⁴⁶ See, for example, the 'citizen-led' transformations illustrated by Ian Scoones, Peter Newell, and Melissa Leach, 'The politics of green transformations', in Ian Scoones, Melissa Leach, and Peter Newell (eds), *The Politics of Green Transformations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–24.

⁴⁷ Peter Newell, *Global Green Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), ch. 4.

⁴⁸ Lorenzo Fioramonti, *The World after GDP: Economics, Politics and International Relations in the Post-Growth Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

⁴⁹ Giuseppe Feola, Olga Koretskaya, and Danika Moore, '(Un)making in sustainability transformation beyond capitalism', *Global Environmental Change*, 69 (2021), 102290.

⁵⁰ Newell, *Global Green Politics*, pp. 103–4.

⁵¹ See, for example, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Alexander Paulsson, and Stefania Barca (eds), *Towards a Political Economy of Degrowth* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Ryan Katz-Rosene and Matthew Paterson, *Thinking Ecologically about the Global Political Economy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Max Koch and Hubert Buch-Hansen, 'In search of a political economy of the postgrowth era', *Globalizations*, 18:7 (2021), pp. 1219–29; Sebastian Strunz and Harry Schindler, 'Identifying barriers toward a post-growth economy – A political economy view', *Ecological Economics*, 153 (2018), pp. 68–77.

agenda for post-growth; rather, we seek to explore the different ways in which post-growth thinking challenges IR, and vice versa, and to present possible paths forward. We leave it to the Forum contributors to give their own perspective on how they understand post-growth and what it entails for a specific area of global politics.

Current IR theorising on global socio-ecological crises reflects the ontological possibilities that arise from reassessments of human–nature relations through the ‘Anthropocene’ lens and related concepts. However, these theoretical moves have done little yet to directly question the embeddedness of economic growth in global politics and gauge the prospects of its disembedding. The debate around the politics of post-growth transformations suggests that global ecological injustices, both historical and contemporary, will have to come to the forefront as IR begins to interrogate the relations between growth, order, and sustainability – and that repairing these injustices would be very likely to go against the interests of many powerful actors who benefit from the status quo.

Towards post-growth IR

In response to the challenges to IR research outlined above, all seven Forum contributions following this introductory article tackle post-growth in global politics directly, answering the complicity and neglect critiques in different ways. The Forum continues with an article that extends the conceptual and theoretical foundations for starting to develop post-growth IR (Fioramonti). Three articles with a sectoral focus follow, addressing, respectively, peace and conflict (Simangan), industrial policy (Allan), and agricultural policy (Raina and Kachroo). The two subsequent articles take a more regional angle: one on Africa (Okereke) and the other on Latin America (Lang). The Forum ends with an article that offers a speculative outlook on global post-growth futures (Albert).

Taken together, these interventions acknowledge core insights from, among others, economic history into the trajectory of the growth imperative, from ecological economics into the biophysical systems of the Earth, and from Anthropocene scholarship and global environmental politics into the dynamics of planetary change. At the same time, the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical insights that they develop push the field of IR towards elaborating the links between the global politics of growth and the rapid escalation of transboundary socio-ecological crises. In this spirit, we collectively make four important contributions to the interface between IR and post-growth scholarship.

Our first contribution consists in laying *conceptual foundations* for the urgently needed deeper conversations between IR and post-growth scholarship. Doing so requires, on the one hand, translating bodies of post-growth knowledge found in other fields for IR audiences and, on the other, advancing post-growth thinking via IR theories, concepts, and empirics. The Forum embarks on this crucial journey in several ways. While Lorenzo Fioramonti provides an overview of the tenets and policy proposals of three prominent post-growth strands – steady-state economy, degrowth, and well-being approaches – Miriam Lang introduces post-extractivist thought in Latin America as a challenge to conventional degrowth agendas in the Global North.⁵² Relatedly, the ‘growth hegemony’ framework, which Michael J. Albert develops, complicates the widespread argument that a future post-growth order would have to dislodge capitalism first. These contributions nuance post-growth debates in a manner that reflects the complexity of the contemporary global order. In turn, they will serve as important conceptual foundations for future work on the global politics of post-growth.

Our second contribution is to detail the conditions for and workings of emerging *post-growth institutions, policies, and practices* within an otherwise growth-based global order. There is already some work addressing relevant constraints at the domestic level, especially the dependence of

⁵²See also Escobar, ‘Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions’; Ashish Kothari, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, ‘Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the Green Economy’, *Development*, 57:3–4 (2014), pp. 362–75. We address this point in more detail below.

welfare state institutions on continuous growth.⁵³ Bentley B. Allan takes up this issue by arguing for industrial decarbonisation strategies that, in pursuit of progressive social and environmental ends, could push post-growth agendas. Similar questions need to be posed about the propensity of transnational industries and international institutions to advocate pro-growth policies and to normalise unsustainable practices.⁵⁴ As Rajeswari S. Raina and Rishabh Kachroo show, the growth-oriented global agrifood system fails to overcome hunger and malnutrition. They argue that decentralised agroecological systems better reflect post-growth thinking, thus delivering both more just and more sustainable outcomes. Perhaps more surprisingly, Dahlia Simangan highlights how international peacebuilding missions prescribe growth for ‘development’ with little regard for its socio-ecological ramifications. Overall, the Forum articles address post-growth in various national, transnational, and international settings, which helps to transcend the methodological nationalism and methodological localism so common in post-growth research to date.⁵⁵ This wider analytical scope clarifies that most institutions, regardless of scale, still have a long way to go towards growth independence and, more generally, what John S. Dryzek calls ‘ecosystemic reflexivity’.⁵⁶

Our third contribution lies in discussing *North-South disparities*, which have long been and continue to be grounded in forms of (ecologically) unequal exchange.⁵⁷ For this reason alone, scholarly debates about (post-)growth need to involve researchers from various world regions, as this collection deliberately does. More substantially, however, what implications a post-growth agenda has for the Global South and North turns out to be a bone of contention even among some of our contributors. Appraising low-carbon development efforts in African countries, Chukwumerije Okereke contends that pursuing ‘strong’ green growth in line with ecological commitments is justified given rampant climate injustices that people in the Global South experience. With ‘the rich imposing risks on the poor’,⁵⁸ this view demands that significant shares of remaining carbon budgets be reserved for countries with greater development needs. By contrast, Lang builds on Indigenous bodies of knowledge and on non-mainstream development frameworks from Latin America to dispute the alleged socio-economic benefits of extractivist growth for communities in the Global South. This article extends crucial reflections on what post-growth ought to look like outside affluent countries,⁵⁹ calling for South–North degrowth alliances to undo the many asymmetries entrenched in global governance arrangements. By casting doubt on mainstream renderings of ‘development’, Simangan’s analysis also suggests that more growth, even if supposedly

⁵³Daniel Bailey, ‘The environmental paradox of the welfare state: The dynamics of sustainability’, *New Political Economy*, 20:6 (2015), pp. 793–811; Christine Corlet Walker, Angela Druckman, and Tim Jackson, ‘Welfare systems without economic growth: A review of the challenges and next steps for the field’, *Ecological Economics*, 186 (2021), 107066; Francesco Laruffa, ‘The dilemma of “sustainable welfare” and the problem of the future in capacitating social policy’, *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 18:1 (2022), pp. 822–36.

⁵⁴Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron, ‘The social cost of environmental solutions’, *New Political Economy*, 18:3 (2013), pp. 410–30; Hayley Stevenson, *Institutionalizing Unsustainability: The Paradox of Global Climate Governance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

⁵⁵See Inês Cosme, Rui Santos, and Daniel W. O’Neill, ‘Assessing the degrowth discourse: A review and analysis of academic degrowth policy proposals’, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 149 (2017), pp. 321–34.

⁵⁶John S. Dryzek, ‘Institutions for the Anthropocene: Governance in a changing Earth system’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 46:4 (2016), pp. 937–56.

⁵⁷Christian Dorninger, Alf Hornborg, David J. Abson et al., ‘Global patterns of ecologically unequal exchange: Implications for sustainability in the 21st century’, *Ecological Economics*, 179 (2021), 106824; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 50–1.

⁵⁸Chukwumerije Okereke, ‘Climate justice and the international regime’, *WIREs Climate Change*, 1:3 (2010), pp. 462–74 (p. 471).

⁵⁹Prapimphan Chiengkul, ‘The degrowth movement: Alternative economic practices and relevance to developing countries’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 43:2 (2018), pp. 81–95; Cle-Anne Gabriel, Samira Nazar, Danfeng Zhu, and Jodyanne Kirkwood, ‘Performance beyond economic growth: Alternatives from growth-averse enterprises in the Global South’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 44:2–4 (2019), pp. 119–37; Julien-François Gerber and Rajeswari S. Raina, ‘Post-growth in the Global South? Some reflections from India and Bhutan’, *Ecological Economics*, 150 (2018), pp. 353–8; Nirmal and Rocheleau, ‘Decolonizing degrowth in the post-development convergence’.

green, may not help Southern communities but in fact aggravate ecological injustices. This vibrant debate within the Forum mirrors wider discussions among scholars who challenge the norm of economic growth without necessarily agreeing on the implications of their shared criticism.

Our fourth and final contribution is to unveil the politics of *post-growth imaginaries*. All contributors broadly subscribe to the position that future prosperity cannot be secured through continued economic growth everywhere. On the contrary, business-as-usual growth-friendly policies risk eroding prosperity by further damaging the ecosystems in which all economies are embedded.⁶⁰ Fioramonti explicitly presents well-being as an important manifestation of post-growth. Despite their disagreement just outlined, Lang and Okereke consider processes of national and international transformation, respectively, as bound to imaginaries of economic growth. According to Raina and Kachroo's account, democratic experimentation with post-growth agriculture, supported by transnational alliances, can create openings for reimagining the global food regime and addressing its structural inequalities. For Simangan, post-growth peacebuilding showcases a new understanding of prosperity that could bring more lasting peace precisely because it is not fixated on economic growth. Finally, both Allan and Albert reflect on hybrid future orders arising from combinations of green growth and post-growth agendas, and of capitalism and socialism, respectively. While Allan describes how green industrial policy could eventually beget 'an age after growth', Albert imagines a scenario that culminates in an 'ecology' of various post-growth political economies. In this sense, all seven articles add a much-needed global political perspective to ongoing debates about transformative change that does not rely on economic growth for material and ideational validation.⁶¹

Conclusion

The contemporary growth-based global order has a poor track record of ensuring the fulfilment of climate and other environmental targets. And IR, for its part, has a poor track record of critically thinking beyond this order, which threatens human and non-human lives in unprecedented ways. The arguments advanced across the articles in this Editors Forum not only underscore that the pursuit of economic growth cuts across scales and sites, but also expose IR's double problem of *complicity* in the growth-centric status quo and *neglect* of post-growth orders. As far as the centrality of economic growth in global politics is concerned, IR has much to learn from the diverse contributions to post-growth scholarship, many of which inform our thinking and reasoning here. A key takeaway from the collection is that IR needs to pay greater attention to how politics is embedded in and, thus, dependent on life-sustaining ecosystems. Put differently, political orders are not ecologically innocent.

At the same time, IR has important insights to offer to research on post-growth. Above all, its systemic outlook shines a spotlight on the structural embeddedness of the growth imperative, which helps to explain why the international system has so dramatically failed to deliver socio-ecological sustainability. This kind of global political perspective is especially important given the tendency for methodological nationalism and localism in much post-growth scholarship.⁶² To date, this literature has tended to work with a theory of change that envisages transformation through bottom-up democratic movements and small-scale organising,⁶³ although there is growing recognition of the need to counterbalance this lens by focusing directly on how to convert structures

⁶⁰See Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009).

⁶¹Robyn Eckersley, 'Greening states and societies: From transitions to great transformations', *Environmental Politics*, 30:1–2 (2021), pp. 245–65; James S. Vandeventer, Claudio Cattaneo, and Christos Zografos, 'A degrowth transition: Pathways for the degrowth niche to replace the capitalist-growth regime', *Ecological Economics*, 156 (2019), pp. 272–86.

⁶²See again Cosme et al., 'Assessing the degrowth discourse'.

⁶³Corinna Burkhart, Matthias Schmelzer, and Nina Treu (eds), *Degrowth in Movement(s): Exploring Pathways for Transformation* (Alresford: John Hunt Publishing, 2020).

from the top-down.⁶⁴ IR offers the toolbox to carry out this analytical work from a global political angle, especially when we sensitise it to its own growth-centric assumptions and the ecological embeddedness of global politics. The core question for IR to answer is how to not merely reform but to transform a set of sticky institutional arrangements that make it difficult to imagine, let alone enact, post-growth alternatives.

As we have argued in this introductory article, IR scholarship needs to rectify its intellectual complicity in the growth-based global order and its neglect of post-growth thinking. This agenda calls for both conceptual and empirical work that helps to move us towards a more sustainable global order. The contributions to this Editors Forum, provided by a diverse group of scholars from various parts of the world, take a first step towards developing an interdisciplinary research programme around the global politics of (post-)growth and sustainability. The future of not just IR itself depends on the insights that such work yields.

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Jacob Hasselbalch is an associate professor at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark.

Matthias Kranke is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute of Political Science, University of Kassel, Germany. During the 2023–24 academic year, he is a fellow within the Young Academy for Sustainability Research at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), University of Freiburg, Germany.

⁶⁴Hasselbalch et al., ‘Organizing for transformation’; Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan, *The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World beyond Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022), ch. 6.