

Research Space

Journal article

**Debate on de-growth in tourism: reply to Higgins-Desbiolles and
Everingham**

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Reply to 'Degrowth in tourism: advocacy for thriving not diminishment', Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham's response to my article 'Covid-19, tourism and the advocacy of degrowth'.

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Reply to ‘Degrowth in tourism: advocacy for thriving not diminishment’, Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham’s response to my article ‘Covid-19, tourism and the advocacy of degrowth’.

It is positive that Tourism Recreation Research has facilitated an exchange of views on the issue of degrowth. As my original paper (Butcher, 2021) contains the substantial arguments against degrowth, rather than simply repeat those arguments I have focused here on the specifics of the response from Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham (2022). This reply begins by looking at some of the substantial differences of view they highlight, and then also takes up some inaccuracies and confusions in their response.

Is degrowth ‘marginal’ and in defence of the marginalised?

Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham write that in their ‘reading of tourism scholarship to date, we find the dominant discourse is ‘tourism as industry’, engine of economic growth and development. Scholars examining degrowth in tourism arguably sit on the margins’ (2022: 1). If you categorise any paper that treats ‘tourism as industry’ as being pro-growth, then degrowth advocacy may seem marginal. However, there are many published ‘tourism’ papers that are explicitly pro degrowth, and many that imply broad agreement. As far as I know my 2021 paper is the only one in the tourism studies field directly challenging the claims of tourism degrowth advocates.

Speaking from ‘the margins’ is combined with an implied claim to speak for the marginalised in Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham’s response. They ask a good question: ‘Does the right for tourist freedom override the right of local communities for sustainable livelihoods and the rights of nature and biodiversity for thriving’ (2022:2). There is no suggestion in my original article that it does. But equally there is no basis for assuming local communities’ views in general, or even very much at all, align with degrowth or the sort of ecodevelopment aims some associate with ‘sustainable livelihoods’. I would reverse the question. When communities desire the benefits of modern development, even where it involves a transformation of their relationship with the natural world (which has been, after all, the experience of all developed societies) do degrowth advocates put their own philosophies to one side and support the claims of those communities? Degrowth advocates often present themselves as noble defenders of the poor from the ravages of development. The denial of development to the poor – the traditional focus of radical, internationalist politics – is deprioritised.

As I have argued elsewhere, an important but neglected aspect of the resolution to these questions lies in a deepening of democracy and strengthening of sovereignty, so that communities, national as well as local, get greater control over the shape of their societies and their lives (Butcher, 2021a). Where there is so called ‘overtourism’ – be it pressure on housing from tourism lets, tourism real estate changing the character of cities or objections to rural projects that impact culture negatively - democratic processes are paramount. Where people want to limit tourism in some way, through a democratic process, that is eminently supportable.

There is a debate to be had about democracy and local community participation – local interests are rarely homogenous and also can conflict with regional and national interests. The mantra of ‘community participation’ is not wholly adequate in addressing these questions

(Butcher, 2007: ch 4). Democracy (with attendant issues relating to majoritarianism, devolved democracy, issues of minority rights etc) and sovereignty (the capacity of a people or a nation to determine their own fate) are too rarely considered.

Also, and importantly for this exchange, instances where a community seeks to limit tourism in some way are not at all the same thing as degrowth. Degrowth is a development philosophy seeking radical, fundamental change throughout the whole of society. Degrowth is not about a particular project being 'green' or regenerating a particular ecosystem. Equally, to be pro growth does not mean to endorse every developer's demands without question (which at times is implied in Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham's response). So for example, the promotion of localised economic circuits or the protection of local cultural norms from tourism may be justifiable in a particular context. But degrowth as a generalised development philosophy, applied as an organising principle across the whole economy, is neither desirable nor realistic, as I argued in the original paper.

Is tourism growth a 'Northern' imposition on the marginalised?

Whilst Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham associate their view with the interests of local communities up against the powerful, they associate pro-growth views with the Global North. They assert that I 'offer(s) a universalising defence of modernity and western/Eurocentric development models' and that 'Butcher's voice is positioned as universal, but it is perhaps more properly positioned in the Global North in advocacy for the 'freedom' to endlessly continue high rates of consumption' (Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham, 2022: 2). Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham are suggesting that the freedoms enjoyed by wealthy consumers are a part of a distinctly Northern / Western outlook, and that degrowth better reflects the diverse systems of knowledge in poorer parts of the world, amongst the marginalised.

Different epistemological 'knowledge' assumptions lie behind our different views. I have previously written on the decolonial disaggregation of human knowledge as 'Western', 'Northern', 'Southern', 'white' and so on (see Butcher, 2018). However, to broach this briefly here, as it has been raised in the response: I take the humanist view that a desire for material progress through development is generally a shared characteristic across cultures. This view is set out in Vivek Chibber's critique of postcolonial thought, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013). In relation to the development of ideas, I hold the Enlightenment shaped view that we are engaged in a common human conversation, across time and space and culture – albeit one different people have unequal levels of access to. Philosopher Anthony Appiah put it succinctly: 'When people speak, they speak ideas, not identity. The truth value of what you say is not indexed to your identity' (cited in Malik, 2017). If you want to criticise an argument, then better to focus on the argument rather than the identity of the person making it. For me, the key 'equality' argument is how we can ensure greater access to the world's scientific and cultural advances, wherever they originate, to poorer countries and regions (Butcher, 2018). That requires development and economic growth.

However, that is not to deny that views in the richer countries can involve false assumptions about societies in the Global South. A recent book from Nigerian intellectual Táíwò Olúfẹ́mi broaches this theme, arguing that contemporary decolonial politics, in coding modernity as 'western' (or 'northern') or 'white', simultaneously reduces African agency to the role of being 'resisters of modernity' (2022). This denies the marginalised their capacity to be agents of

history, capable of changing their condition and, if they choose, adopting what Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham think are 'Northern' ideas of development and growth. Instead, the marginalised are expected to defend 'traditional livelihoods and subsistence modes of living' (Higgins Desbiolles and Everingham, 2022: 3) from dangerous modernity. As Olúfemi argues, this thinking involves a 'racialisation' of knowledge that reifies rather than challenges marginalisation (2022).

Sutcliffe and others have long argued that disillusionment with development and growth in the West has led some to deprioritise the pressing need for development and growth in poorer parts of the world. He argued that: 'Because the destination, which in the West we experience every day, seems so unsatisfactory, then all aspects of it are rejected as a whole: along with consumerism out goes science, technology, urbanisation, modern medicine and so on and in sometimes comes a nostalgic, conservative post-developmentalism' (Sutcliffe, 1999: 151-2). There are certainly elements of this in degrowth advocacy. My original paper broached this with reference to Campbell's notion of 'modern primitivism', which involves a defence of the local, rooted and natural 'primarily as a response to profound despair towards the advancement of western society' (Campbell, 1998: 7).

Growth and dependency

Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham are understandably concerned about dependency on tourism. Few would argue that this is not a big issue in some instances. They regard the tourism system as 'rigged', 'with exploitation baked in from historical imperialism' (Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham, 2022: 3). They add that: 'Dependency on tourism pressed on the Global South by some agents of development actually exacerbates poverty and undermines traditional livelihoods and subsistence modes of living. In this context, forms of extractive tourism privilege tourist consumption at the expense of host communities and their environments, perpetuate economic inequality and vulnerable dependencies and exacerbate global divisions of power that dependency theorists have long pointed out'(ibid.).

My paper was for growth, *in principle*. It was not an endorsement of unequal terms of trade or rigged markets, both of which exist. But the dependency on tourism is often itself a symptom of a lack of modern development. Where 'traditional livelihoods and substance modes of living' (ibid.) are undermined by tourism then clearly that is an issue. But there is absolutely nothing necessarily virtuous or worthy in 'traditional livelihoods and substance modes of living'. The problem with degrowth is that it stands against all growth, and hence also attempts by societies to transcend 'traditional livelihoods and subsistence modes of living' in pursuit of a richer future for themselves.

Power and politics

Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham argue that my analysis ignores power. Had the subject of my original paper been power, this would be a relevant criticism. However, the subject of my paper was not the power relations in society, *but growth itself*. Who organises growth and gets to decide the form it takes is a crucial, closely related, but in an important sense logically separate question. Parties from across the world and political spectrum have looked to growth and continue to do so. They debate the level, type and priorities of growth. This is true for many people advocating versions of green growth, such as the 'Green New Deal' in the

UK. The Cold War involved claims that each system, capitalism and communism respectively, would yield the most growth and development. Trade unions have generally advocated for growth. Employers look for profits, which are likely to be premised on growth. Conversely, as I pointed out in the original article, opposition to growth, and a neo-Malthusian emphasis on the natural or cultural limits to development, have also historically come from movements and individuals with a variety of political agendas, from the Left and Right.

The key point is that degrowth advocates are opposed to growth *qua* growth, *regardless of political power*. A society's orientation towards growth and modern development is an important issue in and of itself. As I made clear in the original article, whether you see it as part of the problem, as Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham do, or part of the solution, as I do, is a salient distinction.

Modernisation and dependency theories

Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham's references to modernisation theory and dependency theory do not support the general arguments they are making. They refer to Rostow as 'the founding father of modernisation theory', and state that he 'argued that by participating in capitalism, countries would follow a linear path from underdevelopment to development, eventually resulting in all countries reaching high mass consumption' (2022: 3). I did not mention modernisation theory in the original paper. Many people who see modern development as beneficial would balk at the specific view of Rostow, which was more Cold War propaganda as economic theory (his book was titled 'The Stages of Economic Growth: a non-Communist Manifesto'). Also, if you are seeking a 'father' for this theory, you could equally look to Karl Marx. In fact thinkers across the political spectrum, and the leaders of most newly sovereign post-colonial states in the post war decades, agreed with Rostow on the narrow point that economic growth and modern development are desirable, but often on little else at all (see Preston, 1996). Thinking that modern development through growth is beneficial has only a tangential relationship to Rostow's ideas.

Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham's response then moves to the Dependency Theorists who 'have argued that the North has developed by extracting the resources and exploiting the labour of the South (see Frank, 1966)'. They did, but it is pertinent to this discussion that the Dependency Theorists saw the economic structures of the post-World War 2 world as perpetuating inequalities and stunting economic growth. They were for economic growth as a route to development, as was the norm across radical thought at the time. To present the Dependency School as a precursor to the more recent degrowth viewpoint, as Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham's response does, involves a very big leap of faith.

To diminish: make smaller, fewer

Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham criticise what they regard as my characterisation of degrowth as 'diminishment'. They write that: 'Examination of definitions of degrowth reveal that degrowth is not a simple focus on 'diminish[ment]' as Butcher suggests' (2022:1) . They add: 'Degrowth is [...] not so much connected to downsizing *per se* but to the notion of "right-sizing" and the creation of a steady state economy' (ibid.)

In fact my original paper looks at the ‘right sizing’ and ‘steady state’ aspects of degrowth’ explicitly (Butcher, 2021: 2), as well as the claims that it is culturally enriching and beneficial to people’s lives. There is no ‘simple focus on diminishment’ in the paper. It is, though, absolutely the case that the aim of a diminished level of economic activity is fundamental to degrowth. To diminish means *to make smaller or fewer*. Less leisure mobility, less international travel and less consumption generally are at the centre of the philosophy as it applies to tourism, as I clarified in the original paper, and as Higgins-Desboilles has advocated consistently.

Straw men

Higgins-Desboilles and Everingham’s reply contains some misrepresentation of the anti-degrowth, pro-mass tourism view that I hold. This is an issue I have addressed previously (Butcher, 2020). Their response claims that ‘Butcher’s intervention contradicts calls that action is essential to address the confronting crises that arise as a result of negative human impacts on the planetary ecosystem.’ My original article does not contradict this. It accepts it, but sees the route to change as involving, not against, growth. It provides examples of where growing, relatively dynamic economies are able to reduce both reliance on carbon based energy, and pollution, on the basis of economic growth (Butcher, 2021: 7). That seems to me to be a realistic, and progressive, approach to the issue. That is the argument to be engaged with.

Of course there are important differences between us on that issue. I hold that economic growth and development are important whilst we transition from reliance on carbon based energy. This is because climate change is not the only problem facing societies. Poverty arising from a lack of development has meant that many have been and continue to be subject to the vagaries of nature. Poverty means that societies are unable to innovate to mitigate damaging natural phenomena such as flooding, fires, earthquakes and indeed pandemics. It denies societies access to the fruits of modern science, including advances that promise to make emission and pollution producing power generation a thing of the past, potentially within the lifetime of today’s young students. The legacy of economic growth is in improved literacy, life expectancy, health and material freedoms, including the freedom to travel. Deaths from fires, floods and pandemics are far lower than in the past, and this would not have been possible without industrialisation and transformative economic development that has been powered through fossil fuels. Tourism is a one part of that development.

Higgins-Desboilles and Everingham claim that in one passage I mislead the reader through a partial quote out of context (2022, 2/3). They write that: ‘Addressing degrowth in tourism, Hall suggested a precise understanding of degrowth: ‘Degrowth is not a theory of contraction equivalent to theories of growth... Degrowth is therefore not so much connected to downsizing *per se* but to the notion of “right-sizing” and the creation of a steady state economy’ (2009, p. 10). It is misleading that instead of giving us this precise passage from Hall, Butcher instead elected to describe Hall’s exposition on degrowth in this way in his article: ‘Hall (2009) refers to degrowth as encompassing: the principle of equity; participatory democracy; respect for human rights and; respect for cultural differences’ (2021a, p. 3).

There is unequivocally nothing misleading here. There was no suggestion in my original article that the quote was a full exposition of Hall’s position. When you place the quote in its context

it is clear that I was making the simple point that degrowth's laudable general claims regarding equity, participation, human rights, and respect for cultural difference – stated clearly by Hall, hence the quote – are not the sole preserve of degrowth. A full exposition of degrowth, including 'right sizing' and the 'steady state' idea, were already covered in the original article.

Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham state that 'Butcher's analysis suggests that the liberty of the tourists for 'leisure mobility' offers the countries of the Global South the best opportunities for modernising development' (2022: 2). This is a caricature. In my opinion the 'best opportunities for modernising development' are not tourism, but infrastructural development, large scale investment, cheap and reliable energy and agricultural modernisation etc. Their response also states, in typical hyperbolic fashion, that I argue: '... that if we implement policies of reining in the capitalistic mass tourism, growth-fuelled system the countries of the Global South will be poorer, cut off from modernity, environmentally dirtier and bereft of the benefits of tourism' (ibid.). I have simply argued that mass tourism has been generally very positive in development terms, and to reverse that will have a negative impact.

Further, Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham assert: 'Butcher presents the modernising development programme as one of steady progress and suggests that tourism delivers this to developing communities that engage with it' (ibid: 3). I don't think, or argue, that progress has been steady or consistent. They state, 'Butcher argues that inequality and environmental degradation can be dealt with within the framework of capitalism and that even more growth is needed' (ibid.) I did not make that argument. Throughout the authors confuse growth with capitalism. This suggests they may think that there are no alternatives to capitalism that involve growth, or perhaps no way to modify capitalism to deal with environmental degradation and pursue good growth. I think there are on both counts, and I think history bears that out. Their response also states: 'Contra Butcher, degrowth does not advocate economic recession or deterioration of social conditions' (ibid.). Obviously I have not claimed degrowth supporters 'advocate' these things. I think these are the results of what they propose. I take the arguments about improving the world through degrowth in good faith and make my counter arguments on that basis.

Concluding comment

As the abstract to my original article clarifies: 'economic growth – in tourism and generally – is a necessary, *albeit far from sufficient*, condition for addressing the varied problems facing contemporary society manifest in modern tourism.' There is an important divide between 'those who see *economic growth as a part of the problem and those who see it as a part of the solution*' (italics added). That is the difference set out in the original article. I feel that at times the response does not fully engage with the arguments made, or assumes, *a priori*, a certain moral superiority based on being on the side of the marginalised versus the powerful capitalist. What is most striking for me is that in the intellectual current known as degrowth, a defence of the marginalised from development trumps a recognition that development is needed to tackle marginalisation and poverty. Although we disagree on fundamentals, further engagement around these issues would be very welcome, possibly in debate form at an upcoming conference that cover these issues.

END

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