Growth and its Discontents: Paving the Way for a More Productive Engagement with Alternative Economic Practices

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Cite this paper as: Lloveras, J. and Quinn, L. (2016) 'Growth and its discontents: Paving the way for a more productive engagement with alternative economies,' *Journal of Macromarketing*, (online first), available at: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0276146716670213

Abstract
Fragmented marketing debates concerning the role of alternative economies are attributable to the lack of a meaningful macromarketing dimension to which alternative economic practices can be anchored. The research frames an evaluation of existing macromarketing developments aimed at reformulating the mindless fetish for economic growth. Raising concerns with the treadmill dynamics of marketing systems, three different approaches - green growth, a-growth and degrowth - are critically evaluated to: (a) introduce degrowth as a widely overlooked concept in the macromarketing literature; (b) expose how each perspective entails a specific organization of provisioning activities; and (c) foreground the role of alternative economic practices beyond the growth paradigm. The article concludes by arguing that socially sustainable degrowth is central to elucidating current marketing debates concerning the future direction of alternative economic practices.

Key Words: Alternative economies; green growth; a-growth; degrowth

"Lack of realism consists in imagining that economic growth can still bring about increased human welfare, and indeed that it is still physically possible."

- Gorz (1980, p. 13)

Our research is sensitive to the fact that complex civilizations should never be characterized as anything but fragile and impermanent. We therefore open with a powerful reminder that human history is littered with examples of highly complex and prosperous socio-economic systems that once flourished but eventually faltered and failed (e.g. Orlov 2008; Diamond 2005; Tainter 1988; Olson 1982; Glub 1978). While the cited causes for collapse here are diverse (Tainter 1988), we are frequently reminded that environmental degradation lies behind some of the greatest downfalls (Fagan 2008; Ponting 2007; Chew 2006; Hughes 1996). Furthermore, there is every reason to believe that a systemic collapse could be happening again (Orlov 2013), although this time on a scale without historical precedent (e.g. Parker 2013; Hertsgaard 2011; Gilding 2011; Greer 2008; Heinberg 2007; 2011). Scientific evidence continues to expose an alarming fragility in the health of ecosystems upon which the global economy, and ultimately humankind, depends (e.g. Wijkman and Rockstrom 2012; Gilding 2011; Greer 2008). Indeed, as Ehrlich and Ehrlich (2013, p. 1) remind us:

> "Today, for the first time, humanity's global civilization – the worldwide, increasingly interconnected, highly technological society in which we all are to one degree or another, embedded – is threatened with collapse by an array of environmental problems."

The implausible scale of economic growth, which lies at the heart of such an apocalyptic warning, is palpably overwhelming. Ecological economists demonstrate that unprecedented rates of economic expansion during the Twentieth Century have been sustained on the equally unprecedented consumption of raw materials and fossil fuels - most notably coal and oil (Krausmann et al. 2009). For example: the world economy consumes more fossil fuels today that at any other point in human history (IEA 2014a); global energy demand is set to grow by 37% by 2040, with China expected to surpass the US as the largest oil-consuming country by the year 2030 (IEA 2014b); and the planetary carrying capacity of natural ecosystems has been exceeded in key areas, ranging from climate change to biodiversity loss (WWF 2014). These arguments foreground a conflict between the global economy, immersed in a process of rapid exponential expansion, and the finite nature of our planetary limits to material growth (Scott, Martin and Schouten 2014).

Within this context, the quest for alternative economies is receiving increased attention within the marketing discipline. To date, however, it is also apparent that current marketing debates concerning the role of alternative economies 'remain fragmented leaving larger scale questions … largely underexplored and undertheorized' (Campana, Chatzidakis and Laamanen 2015, p. 151). This is precisely the central concern that our work seeks to address. Subsequently, while we concur with Gibson-Graham (2014) that alternative economies engender great potential to enable more sustainable ways of living, we contend that this potential cannot be critically evaluated until the topic is theorized in relation to the relentless pursuit of economic growth.

This becomes a worthwhile project within the field of macromarketing where any critical engagement with the growth conundrum is long overdue (Kilbourne 2010). Consequently, our work provides a twofold contribution. First, we identify and critically evaluate the most prominent competing discourses which are gathering pace in response to the dominant growth paradigm. Second, we draw upon these discourses to frame and theorize the potentially transformative role of alternative economies in more critical terms (Campana, Chatzidakis and Laamanen 2015). Our work charts an unexplored macromarketing territory, one which is currently characterized by dispersed, fragmented debates. Consequently, we pave the way for a more productive engagement with alternative economic practices.

Our article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the notion of growthmania to frame the obsessive and mindless pursuit of economic growth. Second, we critically discuss the three primary criticisms of growthmania to expose a core set of humanistic, environmental and inequality concerns. Third, our argument draws attention to the institutional forces driving economic growth. We establish a categorization of competing positions that seek to reform these institutional forces, namely: green growth, a-growth, and degrowth. A subsequent critique and evaluation focuses upon the macromarketing implications demanded by each perspective. In recognizing degrowth as a meaningful overarching framework within which to anchor progress towards socially sustainable alternative economies, our article closes with remarks concerning the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Growthmania

When Daly (1992) used the term “growthmania” he did so to denote a set of assumptions about human progress deeply embedded in orthodox economic theories. Such chrematistic assumptions lead to the tireless utilitarian advocacy of economic growth as the ultimate foundation for wellbeing and a panacea to many kinds of societal problems. Historically, the pursuit of economic growth has been associated with societal benefits that are believed to signify prosperity. These include higher incomes, freedom of choice, and trade efficiencies that have lowered prices of commodities and made consumption possible for the masses (Wilkie and Moore 1999). Throughout the Twentieth Century, sustained rates of economic growth yielded a substantial increase in material standards of living, realizing, for some, the implicit promise that each generation will be ‘better off’ than the previous one. This assumption has become questionable.

The pursuit of economic growth was an overriding policy objective prior to the twentieth century despite policy-makers not having a consistent set of national accounting indicators until the 1930s. Immediately following the Great Depression of 1929, the United States government commissioned economist Simon Kuznets to develop a national accounting system which became a precursor of the GDP indicator (Alexander, 2012). In 1944, following the end of World War 2, the US Treasury’s work on the GDP index informed much of the discussion at the Bretton Woods agreements (Costanza et al. 2009). Subsequently, Costanza et al. (2009) argue, the IMF and the World Bank adopted the GDP indicator as the primary measure of national progress - thereby pushing the adoption of GDP throughout an increasingly interdependent global economy.

Gradually, the use GDP as a mere proxy of prosperity mutated to become a macroeconomic fetish dominating every dimension of social, political and economic discourse (Hamilton 2004). Such a preoccupation with GDP occurred despite a wealth of opposition over several decades (e.g. Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2010; Douthwaite 1992; Scitovski 1976; Hirsh 1976; Schumacher 1973; Meadows et al. 1972; Mishan 1967; Galbraith 1958). Critics highlight that GDP indicators do not actually involve a measure of the total wealth created by marketing systems, as frequently assumed, but a measure of the actual costs of running an economy.

The prevalent fixation with GDP, therefore, is dangerously misleading. It conceals the real social and environmental costs of economic growth and represents them as benefits (e.g. Jackson 2009; Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2011). Consequently, it is essential to recognize the negative consequences of economic growth as foregrounded within manifold critiques of the growth paradigm. For the purposes of the present discussion, these critiques can be framed as the *environmental critique*, the *humanistic critique*, and the *social critique*.

Critiques of Economic Growth

Given that the global cost of economic growth can be measured as a degradation of sixty per cent of the Earth's natural ecosystems (MA 2005), it is not surprising that the negative environmental impact of economic growth can be identified as receiving the most attention in marketing debates (see: Kilbourne and Beckmann 1998; Leonidou and Leonidou 2011; McDonagh and Prothero 2014). Notably, within the *environmental* *critique*, the material wealth generated by marketing activities has come at a great cost for the environment (e.g. Fisk 1973; 1974; Shapiro 1978; van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996; Campbell, O'Driscoll and Saren 2013; Scott, Martin, Schouten 2014), not least because the global ecological footprint already exceeds the earth's carrying capacity (WWF 2014). The list of ecological damage inflicted by the mindless pursuit of economic growth is extensive and well recognized (e.g. climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, etc.). This already delicate situation is expected to worsen substantially under an on-going business as usual scenario (IPCC 2014; WWF 2014), thus further undermining the natural ecosystems upon which life depends.

Placing concerns with environmental sustainability to one side, the discrepancy between economic growth and wellbeing indicators is also acknowledged as a fundamental concern (Layton 2009). Embracing a humanist position, which begins with a recognition that once basic human needs are satisfied, materialistic aspirations should tend to decline in importance, Speth (2008) argues that macromarketing efforts geared towards increasing national GDP typically work in the opposite direction, namely by promoting a way of life based upon long-working weeks and wasteful consumption. For the sake of maintaining the effect of a treadmill in motion (Galbraith 1958), growth-oriented economies operate by seeking new ways to expand the so-called work-and-spend cycle (Sanne 2002) rather than using gains in labour productivity to attain a better work/life balance (Jackson and Victor 2011). Moreover, Shankar, Whittaker and Fitchett (2006, p. 500) argue that marketing technologies play a central role in constructing people as "potential agents of unhappiness or misery" (see also Bailey and Porter 2008) rather than promoting simpler lifestyles built upon sufficiency (Gorge et al. 2015) or mindful consumption (Seth, Sethia and Srinivas 2011). Similarly, scholars highlights that a legitimation for this work-spend cycle has been buttressed by a culturally specific ideology, namely consumerism, which subordinates identity construction to a playful acquisition of sign-values agglomerated as the result of an ever-expanding flurry of commodities (Burns and Fawcett 2012; Assadourian, 2010; Burns, 2006).

While the implications of consumerism are contested (e.g. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002), it is apparent that overconsumption can negatively affect wellbeing by steering individualism and weakening communities (Cova 1997). Consumers are drowning in an ocean of choice (Markus and Schwartz 2010). The emergence of "desiring people", for whom wanting becomes more pleasurable than having (Richins 2013), only serves to echo Fromm's (1976) concern that materialistic values in modern societies leads people to prefer "having" to "being". Within this context, the *humanistic critique* stresses that pressure to sustain growth hinders progress towards humanistic values, most notably those related to increasing the availability of free-time, people's autonomy from waged labour, the encouragement of self-reflection, work-life balance creativity, good citizenship, generosity, conviviality and sense of community (Nierling 2012).

The third main criticism of economic growth as a proxy of prosperity addresses issues of poverty and inequality. During the last century, global GDP growth has made the world appear substantially more affluent than at any other point in history.

Admittedly, this has meant a dramatic increase in material standards of living for many, with the quest for economic growth symbolizing the possibility of consumerist lifestyles becoming available to the masses in the affluent world. Nevertheless, if a global perspective is considered, it becomes evident that the benefits of economic expansion have arisen at a great cost in terms of inequality. Indeed, the gap between the global rich and poor has widened considerably during this period of economic growth (Piketty 2014). Despite substantial increases in global household wealth in the past decade (Credit Suisse 2014), progress towards the Millennium Development Goals has been slow and insufficient (UN 2014). While the global number of billionaires is flourishing, particularly in Asia (Credit Suisse, 2014), the totality of global wealth is increasingly concentrated among small numbers of a wealthy elite. Currently, the richest eighty-five *individuals* in the world accumulate the same wealth as the bottom fifty per cent of the global population (Oxfam 2015: our emphasis).

Drawing upon the evidence outlined above, it is apparent that critiques of economic growth are well established. Commentators suggest that, beyond a certain point, the notion of further economic growth becomes synonymous with environmental and social destruction, inherently “uneconomic” as Daly (2013, p. 24) argues. Therefore, with the exception of the Global South, where further economic growth is justified upon ostensibly low material standards of living, questions surrounding the transition towards a post-growth economy begin to emerge as a potentially desirable policy objective for the affluent world (Varey 2010).

The Growth Dilemma

It is apparent that the social, environmental and economic costs of growth currently outweigh the purported benefits, particularly within affluent economies of the Global North. However, even if our multidimensional critique of growth is accepted, doubts remain as to whether any planned economic contraction offers a feasible macroeconomic policy (Alexander 2012). Typically, low rates of GDP growth denote a disruption to the smooth workings of marketing systems. They correlate to a spiral of economic debt, unemployment, budgetary constraints, reduced levels of disposable income, diminishing consumer confidence and localized underinvestment (Jackson 2009). Moreover, failure to sustain rates of global GDP growth above three per cent is generally regarded as an "unhealthy" performance for the world economy (Harvey 2010). The argument to maintain economic growth, however, is not simply dependent upon securing an "acceptable" material wellbeing of people. Instead, the relentless pursuit of profit is not a matter of choice but a *sine qua non* condition for capitalist firms to operate under competitive market conditions (Gould, Pellow and Schnaiberg 2004; Harvey 2010; 2006). Indeed, market competition implies that any surplus profit realised requires capital reinvestment in order to cyclically renew the production and consumption process on an expanded scale (Harvey 2010).

Drivers to grow on the supply side can be constrained by limits, or bottlenecks, on the demand side. In this regard, Harvey (2006) notes that capitalists must collectively lay out sufficient variable capital in the form of wages to ensure that effective demand is able to absorb the goods and services produced. As Keynes understood, the expansion of aggregate demand is a necessary condition to sustain the treadmill dynamics of uninterrupted growth and to avoid supply-side overcapacity. However, by itself, the creation of purchasing power is not sufficient to create effective demand. From this perspective, marketing systems are important for growth because, as Shankar, Whittaker and Fitchett (2006, p. 490) point out, "people, acting as consumers and participating in market-based exchange relationships lubricate the economy and keep it ticking over." Consequently, in a growth economy, the role of marketing is justified by its ability to stimulate demand and circumvent bottlenecks for economic growth. In this vein, marketing scholars recognize the growth-driven dynamics of capitalism noting that while "market economies are moving, they are not moving towards some final state, such as a Pareto-optimal, general equilibrium" (Hunt 2011, p.11). In this respect, Hunt and Morgan (1995) argue: "the comparative advantage theory explains why market-based economies *continuously create resources* that can produce *ever more efficient production processes*, which in turn produce abundance" (p. 8, emphasis added). Inevitably, as Hunt (2011) continues, capitalist competition involves "a constant struggle for comparative advantages in resources that will yield marketplace positions of competitive advantage and, thereby, superior financial performance" (p. 11).

Hence, these arguments transcend the neoclassical model to conceptualize the capitalist system in a constant state of disequilibrium. The only way to sustain its viability is to keep it in motion. Indeed, as Rosa (2010) so poignantly reminds us, the accelerated processes involved in the pursuit of capitalist growth are no longer simply experienced as constituting a forward motion:

> When politicians and economists remind us of making every effort to overcome the economic slowdown, to increase the rates of innovation, to speed up our efforts, they no longer appeal to the idea of a better life or a better society: they scare us with images of a bleak future and decay instead. Society can only reproduce itself and remain stable by increasing its intrinsic tempo: we have to dance faster and faster not to get anywhere, but to stay in place. (Rosa 2010, no pagination).

It is the consequence of these treadmill dynamics operating within marketing systems that a serious long-term problem emerges in a world characterized by ecological constraints and population growth.

Green growth: Concept and implications for marketing systems

While acknowledging the criticisms levelled at the pursuit of conventional GDP growth, green growth typically depicts the choice between "green" and "growth" as a false choice (Ekins 2011; Jänicke 2012). In one instance, it is argued that solutions to the most pressing sustainability concerns of the time cannot afford to forsake growth given that governments and consumers are more likely to turn their money away from sustainability concerns in times of economic hardship. However, in the other instance, green growth advocates acknowledge that "growth as usual" has become uneconomic, not least because its pursuit is accelerating climate change and other ecological problems that threaten the prosperity of present and future generations (Stern 2007). From a green growth perspective, the solution to this conundrum lies in continuing the pursuit of GDP growth by means that are substantially less wasteful and reliant on fossil fuels and scarce natural resources (Jackson 2009). Advocates of green growth argue that technological development could enable faster rates of resource efficiency than industrial economies have so far succeeded in achieving (Ekins 2011). It is assumed that negative environmental and social impacts will be gradually decoupled from GDP units, or even reversed in some cases, as capitalist enterprises shift their productive capacities towards activities and technologies which better contribute to resolving ecological (Porter and van der Linde 1995) and social problems (Porter and Kramer 2011).

As far as the implications for marketing systems are concerned, green growth assumes that sustainability challenges can be effectively addressed within the boundaries established by a capitalist political economy (Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Prothero, McDonagh and Dobscha 2010; Hunt 2011). Hence, the transition towards green growth is framed as an opportunity for turning sustainability into a thriving source of investment, jobs, profits, or technological innovations (Fletcher 2009), paving the way towards a green industrial revolution. A revolution that will reverse the damages inflicted on natural ecosystems during the previous two centuries. This transformation requires the coordinated action of all capitalist actors, including businesses, governments and consumers.

Commencing with the role of the capitalist state, marketing scholars have long acknowledged that governments are key enablers in the process of greening marketing systems' activities and actions (e.g. Fisk 1974; 1998; Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995; van Dam and Apeldoorn 1996). However, the role of the capitalist state as an enabler of green growth is not monolithic, and more nuanced discussions of the role of government can be found within the literature on varieties of green capitalism (see: Buch-Hansen 2014;

Tienhaara 2014). For conceptual purposes of the present focus, emphasis is placed on the role of governments as configured by the two prevalent environmental policy strategies identified in contemporary debates, namely the neoliberal and the neo-Keynesian approaches towards green growth (Bina and La Camera 2011). Central to the neoliberal perspective is the implementation of market-friendly policy instruments, with the role of government being limited to the tasks of regulating and allocating property rights to scarce natural resources, valuing ecosystem services and pricing externalities, or enabling trading permits of "environmental bads", to name a few (Arsel and Büscher 2012). To clarify, therefore, neoliberal approaches to green growth give government the responsibility of levelling the playing field for green industries without undermining the competitive dynamics of capitalism (Porter and van der Linde 1995). In addition to the former approach, the neo-Keynesian perspective involves the use of green stimulus policies, typically by drawing upon a combination of green fiscal advantages and public spending on greener public infrastructures, through which governments seek to achieve a beneficial impetus to the green economy (Tienhaara 2014).

However, while the position of the capitalist state typically oscillates between the neoliberal and the neo-Keynesian principles, the centrality of capitalist markets remains unchallenged by the green growth agenda (Hunt 2011; Kilbourne 2004). Within this context, the bulk of provisioning activities is carried out by profit-seeking enterprises whose "innovative socially and environmentally responsible practices are more likely to generate additional income and operating efficiencies" (Mitchell, Wooliscroft and Higham 2010, p. 166). Capitalist firms are thus bestowed with the responsibility for marketing a new set of eco-friendly technologies. These technological developments focus on issues such as waste, climate change, or resource scarcity which are able to reconcile economic, social (Porter and Kramer 2011) and environmental measures (Porter and van der Linde 1995). Subsequently, the green entrepreneur emerges as an apparently crucial actor whose purpose is to channel environmental concerns through the market in more innovative, customer oriented, strategic, and transparent ways. In other words, they can become more competitive than their non-green counterparts (Ottman 1993; Menon and Menon 1997).

Moreover, green growth relies on the expansion of a so-called green commodity discourse (Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Prothero, McDonagh and Dobscha 2010). Although green entrepreneurs and governments are crucial elements in the pursuit of green growth, the latter remain largely dependent on the actions of environmentally responsible consumers, whose purchase decisions reward greener business practices with significant market advantages. As consumer choice becomes a fundamental driver for the emergence of green markets (Moisander, Markkula and Eräranta 2010), the green consumer emerges as a necessary counterpart in the creation of win-win green marketing strategies (Peattie 2001). Such arguments suggest that the boundaries of environmental action are fundamentally confined to the realm of businesses and consumers, with governments and civil society playing the role of enablers (Prothero et al. 2011). Consequently, "the sanctity of the market" and a belief in the purported superiority of market-based solutions to sustainability have been embraced as a "key article of faith" (Peattie 2007, p. 199), whereas "distrust of markets is often dismissed as simply the expression of outdated left-wing, centralist tendencies" (Peattie 2007, p. 200). Given that most of the provisioning activities for green growth are carried out within capitalist marketing systems, any consideration of the contribution of alternative economies is of minimal significance.

A-Growth: Concept and implications for marketing systems

In presenting a justification for a-growth, van den Bergh (2011, p. 885) states: "GDP growth might be good in some periods or for some countries, but unconditional growth is not a wise aim." In fact, the assumption that higher GDPs lead to higher societal benefits contradicts a wealth of statistical evidence suggesting that the positive correlation between income and wellbeing indicators does not hold once a certain threshold has been surpassed (Layard 2005; Jackson 2009). Layard (2005), for example, observes that despite the steady pace of GDP growth in most affluent countries, measures of subjective well-being started to stagnate, or even reverse, somewhere in between 1950 and 1970. Similarly, a substantial increase in the numbers of people seeking fulfilment by embracing new forms of sufficiency (Gorge et al. 2015), and voluntary simplicity (Alexander and Usser 2012), suggests that the inflexion point might have already been reached by many consumers within the affluent world (Ahuvia and Friedman 1998). These changes are embedded in a broader shift towards what Varey (2010, p. 121) calls "transindustrialism", an emergent value-system whose consolidation entails "fundamentally different values to the industrial society—for example, nonmaterialism and spiritualism."

The a-growth perspective recognizes that a primary focus on profit-making currently obstructs what otherwise would be the natural emergence of new marketing practices which do not pursue economic "ends", but meaningful enhancements of social and environmental wellbeing (Varey 2010). It follows, therefore, that macromarketing debates must effectively distance themselves from the prevalent fixation on economic growth in order to focus on the pursuit of meaningful improvements in pressing areas related to the environment, labour, healthcare or education (e.g. van den Bergh 2011; van den Bergh and Kallis 2012). This position of “agnosticism” towards GDP is supported with a parallel development of alternative indicators for evaluating the contribution of marketing systems to both society and the natural environment in more holistic terms (Layton 2009). For example, macromarketing scholars have previously focused on quality of life (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997; Lee and Sirgy 2004), subjective wellbeing (Pan, Zinkhan and Sheng 2007), or environmental sustainability (Simkins and Paterson 2015), to name a few. Even outside of the marketing field a number of alternative metrics aligned to the a-growth position have been explored. Examples here include *The Genuine Progress and Well-being Indicator*, the *Gross National Happiness*, *Human Development Index,* or the *Sustainable Welfare Index* (cf: Kubiszewski et al. 2013; Thompson 2005; Lawn, 2003).

As a corollary of these arguments, it becomes apparent that a-growth’s core proposition lies in decentering the pursuit of economic growth from its prevalent position within macromarketing policy and practice. In doing so, two key differences between green growth and a-growth can be identified with regard to the institutional reorientation of marketing systems. First, as the pursuit of welfare displaces the traditional focus on economic growth, it is argued that addressing issues of redistribution is of critical importance due to the pernicious impacts of inequality, environmental sustainability and subjective welbeing (Wilkinson and Picket 2009). In this regard, the pivotal role of government in the a-growth transition is not only different, but also substantially more significant than is the case with its green growth counterpart (van der Bergh 2011). Simultaneously, a-growth most likely requires a substantial curtailing of the centrality of capitalist firms, as agents of social provisioning, in favor of organizations working within the so-called third sector, also referred to as the voluntary or not-for-profit sector.

In enabling the scope and role of the third sector, it is argued that organizationss operating between spheres of the state and the market (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005), most fundamentally social enterprises (Ridley-Duff 2008), are less dependent on the growth imperative than their for-profit counterparts (Johanisova, Crabtree and Fraňková 2013), while retaining their dynamism and flexibility. Moreover, reduced pressures to enhance their economic performance beyond a sufficiency threshold ultimately means that social enterprises have more scope than conventional, or rather, only-for-profit, enterprises to focus on the production of products, services and activities which generate high ecological and social value (Ridley-Duff 2008). In these circumstances, social marketing has an increasingly important role to play in enabling the transition towards a-growth (Hastings 2013). Environmentally and socially harmful products will have to be de-marketed through social marketing campaigns (Peattie and Peattie 2009), encouraging businesses and consumers to distance themselves from those products and organizationss which cannot demonstrate significant social and environmental value (Hastings 2013). Therefore, while green marketing is observed as the micromarketing expression of green growth (Kilbourne 1998), social marketing emerges as a micromarketing contribution towards the welfare agenda advanced by a-growth (Peattie and Peattie 2009; Hastings 2013).

Nevertheless, the rise of a post-materialistic culture and a thriving third sector could hardly sustain the transition towards a-growth without decisive institutional support at multiple levels. In terms of national policies, a-growth requires increasing the amount of public investment in natural capital and resources conservation, the implementation of more stringent environmental regulations, and a shift in taxation from labour towards financial capital, fossil fuels, or scarce natural resources (van den Bergh, 2011; van den Bergh and Kallis 2012). Moreover, the welfare agenda advanced by a-growth combines work-sharing policies with the parallel expansion of social coverage as a means to safeguard citizens' wellbeing against a subsequent decline in income-per-capita. According to van den Bergh and Kallis (2012), this can be achieved through a compulsory reduction of the working week, alongside a strengthening of the social-security system, particularly in areas such as healthcare, housing and education. Importantly, the effectiveness of these policies depends on the acceptance of complex international agreements. These include progressive caps on carbon emissions or non-renewable natural resources (Daly 1992), the eradication of tax havens (Janský and Prats 2015), the renegotiation of trade agreements which clearly favour the economic interests of the Global North (Witkowski, 2005), or relief from unpayable sovereign debts that continue to undermine the viability of welfare policies in many parts of the world (Jones 2013).

Degrowth: Concept and implications for marketing systems

Latouche (2009, p. 9) describes degrowth as “a political slogan with theoretical implications”, operating at the crossroads of critical theory and radical praxis (Sekulova et al. 2013). Notions of degrowth involve a conceptual critique of the dominant social paradigm of growth, as well as the multifarious praxis of grassroots movements operating within the realms of social and environmental justice (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010). Aries (in Fournier 2008), presents degrowth as a symbolic weapon, or “missile word”, to wage a conceptual war on the taken-for-granted naturalness of economic thinking and systems that see growth as an unquestionable necessity. Although a-growth and degrowth both share a critical oppositional stance towards growthmania, a key difference emerges in how each perspective conceives the transition towards a post-growth economy. Whereas a-growth opts for shifting the focus of provisioning systems towards a welfare agenda, as a strategy to “ignore” (van den Bergh 2011, p. 885) or “de-emphasize” (Varey 2010, p. 124) the growth imperative, the strategy advanced by degrowth subverts the causality. Thus, a degrowth perspective recognizes that, at least for the time being, humankind cannot afford to simply “ignore” or “de-emphasize” economic growth (Victor and Jackson 2012; see also Jackson and Victor 2016). Consequently, through the lens of degrowth, a welfare agenda can only be realized if preceded by “a socially sustainable and equitable reduction (and eventually stabilisation) of society's throughput” (Kallis 2011, p. 874).

Moreover, while arguments put forward by a-growth proponents endorse a shift away from growth within affluent economies, resulting from generalized levels of material saturation (Varey 2010), Martinez-Alier (2002) criticizes such a post-materialist position for having nothing to say about the "poor". Degrowth therefore contends that any preoccupation with economic growth must be contextualized within the history of power and domination shaping the relationships between the Global North and South (Muradian and Martinez-Alier 2001). As Patel (2007) depicts, growth-driven capitalism has given rise to a world inhabited by "the starved" and "the stuffed", a world in which overconsumption and underconsumption have become mutually constitutive phenomena (Gorz, 1980). For example, it is known that the size of ecological footprints vary greatly across international economies, with consumers in the Global North consuming overwhelmingly greater amounts of natural resources than their counterparts in the Global South (Assadourian 2010; 2012; Dolan 2002). It has even been estimated that the ecological footprint of most domesticated canine and feline pets within the affluent world exceeds that of an average person living in countries such as Vietnam (Ravilious 2009). In light of such grotesquely uneven access to resources, the imperative downscaling of the world economy has to be undertaken in combination with parallel efforts geared towards enabling a convergence between low-income and high-income countries (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010). Consequently, a double path of planned contraction and convergence means that only if overdeveloped economies embrace degrowth - contraction - will their underdeveloped counterparts be able to converge without exceeding biophysical planetary boundaries (Kallis 2011; Latouche 2009; Martinez-Alier et al. 2010).

Nevertheless, the issue of global convergence and redistributive justice highlights another important difference between a- and degrowth approaches. While a-growth typically justifies the convergence of consumption levels between high and low income countries on the basis of a rather standardized understanding of human development - one which is enshrined in Western-centric concepts such as quality of life, welfare, or subjective-wellbeing - degrowth, on the contrary, solicits skepticism towards the imposition of universal concepts that seek to define “the good life” without any sensitivity towards culturally-specific variations of the construct (Escobar 2015). This concern, raised by Dolan (2002) within the realm of sustainable consumption, reflects the strong affinity between post-development studies and the literature on degrowth (Escobar 2015). Consequently, degrowth thinking embraces locally defined ways of defining “the good life”, most notably evident in the concepts of Ubuntu in Africa, Sumak Kawsay and Buen Vivir in Latin-America, or Ghandianism and Confucianism in Asia (cf. D’Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2014).

Although, as Kallis (2011) notes, critics of degrowth are often tempted to dismiss the concept as an equivalent to negative GDP growth in a growth-driven economy, it is important to recognize that associated terms such as recession or depression are not applicable to the degrowth vision, as Latouche explains:

> Just as there is nothing worse than a work-based society in which there is no work, there is nothing worse than a growth-based society in which growth does not materialize. And that social and civilizational regression is precisely what is in

> store for us if we do not change direction. For all these reasons, de-growth is conceivable only in a de-growth society, or in other words within the framework of a system that is based upon a different logic (Latouche, 2009, p. 8).

Therefore, contrary to processes of economic recession or depression, advocates of degrowth argue that a decline of GDP only signposts an alternative route if we allow ourselves to escape the treadmill dynamics of growth-driven economics (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010; Schneider et al. 2010). In this respect, degrowth ultimately seeks to smooth the disruptive process of economic downshifting, advancing a series of institutional changes that would enable affluent societies to initiate a "prosperous way down" (Odum and Odum, 2006). In order to illustrate the implications of these differing perspectives, Table 1 is provided for two reasons: first to summarise the key arguments and implications as presented above and, second, to facilitate a more holistic synthesis of the critical evaluation that subsequently follows.

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Evaluating the Possibilities for Post-Growth Alternative Economies

Each alternative possibility outlined rests upon a different arrangement of the provisioning system. In order to evaluate each perspective the argument begins with a turn towards green growth, an approach that relies extensively on institutional arrangements which characterize contemporary marketing systems (Fisk 1998; Prothero and Fitchett 2000). In this regard, the advocacy of green growth is consistent with developmental macromarketing approaches to sustainability that seek to reform, rather than transform, capitalist institutions (Mittlestaedt et al. 2014).

Justification for this strategy rests largely on the supposition that a radical anti-capitalist agenda for sustainability is likely to be resisted by a large majority of people who either live their lives fundamentally as consumers, or at least aspire to do so. Furthermore, even if a green revolutionary process could eventually overturn capitalist institutions, such changes are deemed unlikely (Prothero and Fitchett, 2000). Therefore, with the number ecological problems accelerating at an alarming pace, waiting for an exit from capitalism delays urgent collective actions that are overdue. In fact, current economic conditions have already signposted an opportune window for linking economic recovery to environmental concerns under an overarching capitalist framework (Mittlestaedt et al. 2014; Prothero, McDonagh and Dobscha, 2010). Within this context, supranational organizations - such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), or the World Bank (Bina and La Camera 2011), alongside national governments such as China, India, or the US (Jänicke 2012) - have developed ambitious strategies to redress the development of low carbon and environmental technologies as a new source of GDP growth.

Critics remain cautious about the adoption of sustainability approaches which fail to subvert the dominant social paradigm, as these are likely to bring about superficial changes rather than a meaningful transformation of society (Kilbourne 1998). This is particularly apparent in the context of green growth, not least because the institutional arrangements underpinning this approach fail to challenge the treadmill dynamics of the capitalist system. Consequently, the greatest promises of green growth are paradoxical. They resurface to expose its greatest shortcomings. For example, due to the rebound effect, also known as Jevons' paradox, the more efficient an economy becomes the more resources it uses rather than vice versa (Binswanger 2001; Sorrell and Dimitropoulus 2008). Therefore, any savings resulting from a more efficient use of energy or natural resources are re-appropriated through additional consumption activities, thereby offsetting their previous environmental gains (see: Druckman et al. 2011; Murray, 2013).

Further criticisms highlight that the quest for green growth is largely unconcerned with redistributive justice. For instance, by modelling the different scenarios set by the UN's Green Economy strategy, Victor and Jackson (2012) argue that the gap between rich and poor is a likely to widen as a result of green growth policies. It is entirely plausible to suggest that these negative implications for global inequality might even be exacerbated within other green growth strategies, such as the ones formulated by the OECD or the EU, which place even less emphasis on redistribution (Bina and La Camera 2011). Similarly, green consumerism has been theorized as a medium/upper class phenomenon, not least because the premium price label of most environmentally friendly products renders sustainable living as a luxury, a display of elitism which remains largely unaffordable to many (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Other commentators highlight green growth as a technocratic project which relocates questions of governance among large corporations, particularly those in technological sectors (Viitanen and Kingston 2014). In summary, therefore, green growth is characterized as the subterfuge of "polluting less to pollute longer" (Daly 1992), a forward-moving escape option for a capitalist system "running out of steam" (Harvey 2006; Bina and La Camera 2011). Viewed in this sense, it becomes visible as a technocratic project, epitomized by the rise of smart cities aimed at creating islands of prosperity within oceans of poverty, pollution, and resource shortages (Caprotti 2014). Ultimately it is a strategy denoting a collective failure to avert the self-inflicted collapse that lurks menacingly larger in the background (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2013).

Contrary to green growth, advocates of a-growth acknowledge that the mindless pursuit of GDP growth must be abandoned if economies are to make meaningful progress towards a genuinely sustainable future (e.g. Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2010; Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). This is a well-established position within the macromarketing literature aligned to what Mittlestaedt et al. (2014) label as "critical" perspectives on sustainability. Nonetheless, while macromarketing scholars of a more reformist persuasion have not ignored the purportedly radical implications of this approach (Varey 2010), Borroughs (2010), for example, dismisses it for entailing a proposition which is *de facto* an anti-capitalist one. While the current research paper argues that a-growth requires an accelerated substitution of the prevalent only-for-profit business model, typically with a third stream alternative, the role of government will also require expansion in order to secure the following; a fairer redistribution of wealth; a shift away from consumerism; and the strengthening of public services provisioning in areas such as energy, education, healthcare, and housing. As strongly "anti-capitalist" as a-growth proposals may sound one needs to asks the following question: What is anti-capitalist about an approach where neither waged-labour, private property, market exchange, or credit-money would be abolished (cf. Jackson 2009)?

Thus, in order to further understand the limitations of a-growth it is important to draw on Varey's (2010) notion of welfare marketing, an approach which epitomizes a-growth as encapsulating extant macromarketing efforts premised upon decentering the current focus on economic growth as the ultimate goal of marketing systems. To this effect, Varey (2010, p. 124) affirms that "the marketing system can produce collective well-being, if the growth imperative is de-emphasized and well-being is defined collectively." However, while not denying that this is an important step in the right direction, critics suggest that a-growth crucially fails to acknowledge that a period of socially sustainable degrowth will be necessary before affluent economies can learn to manage without growth (Alexander 2012; Kallis 2011). The challenge of escaping growth dynamics cannot be reduced to a question of doing less of the same or consuming and producing differently (Latouche, 2009). Therefore, critics recognise that the a-growth proposal of "de-emphasizing" or "decentering" the pursuit of economic growth in the name of well-being falls short of the task at hand, at least for the time being.

Consequently, it is apparent that disconnecting the plug of the growth treadmill poses a challenge that exceeds the framework of a-growth, compelling macromarketing scholars to, first and foremost, "provide a critique of the economy and its colonising effect… [before] pointing to escape routes" (Fournier 2008, p. 541). For degrowth, what is needed is to conceptualize and engage with existing practices of social provisioning that do not rely on an economic vocabulary (Gibson-Graham 2006; 2008). This strategy will contribute to the performance of social organizations and modes of exchange that break-up the hold of economic rationality, creating new spaces in which citizens can experiment with non-economic relationships and identities (Fournier 2008). As Fournier further argues (*ibid.*), highlighting the constructed nature of the ‘‘economy’’ and recognizing the openness of economic possibilities does not negate the importance of the various material practices that go into meeting people’s needs. However, for proponents of degrowth, it is of critical importance to “re-embed such practices within the social and the political rather than be seen as belonging to an autonomous, reified field of ‘‘the economy’’ (Fournier 2008, p. 534).

Degrowth, therefore, translates into a vision of social change from below, largely consistent with the diverse economies framework elaborated by Gibson-Graham (2006; 2008) in that it seeks to denaturalize the myth of a totalizing capitalist economy by rendering visible a myriad of provisioning activities that undermine the purported prevalence of economic rationality and profit-maximization (Gibson-Graham 2006; 2008). Likewise, degrowth insists that the economy is open to choices and multiple possibilities so that it can contribute towards freeing the macromarketing imagination and conceptualization of material practices from the grip of capitalism (Fournier 2008). Degrowth thus supports an emphasis on performing alternative provisioning systems, alongside modes of social organizations and consumption based on solidarity and mutual support. Without being too prescriptive, degrowth proponents maintain pressure to subvert the relationships that sustain the treadmill dynamics, most notably including: debt (Graeber 2011) and financial power (Dholakia, 2012); economic calculation (Fournier 2008); cut-throat competition (Latouche 2009); the endless quest for productivity and efficiency (Jackson and Victor 2011); the subordination of human autonomy to their participation in waged-labour (e.g. Nørgård 2013); or the sacred value of property ownership. Commodity-relations underpinning market exchange within formal capitalist economies must be challenged with a new social logic. This needs to be a logic that is built upon sufficiency (e.g. Gorge et al. 2015), cooperation and mutual support (Johanisova, Crabtree and Franková 2013). It should be a logic which emphasizes a growing culture of sharing and open access (e.g. Belk 2010) and a logic which underpins a recuperation and expansion of the commons (e.g. Patsiaouras, Saren and Fitchett 2015).

Consequently, to supplant the void left by the subsequent withdrawal of capitalist markets and the capitalist state in a purported degrowth society, the practices of social provisioning must increasingly rely upon new arrangements and social innovations currently encompassed by the umbrella term alternative economies. In fact, the list of alternative economic practices that can contribute to degrowth is intentionally broad and open-ended, most likely including: the proliferation of complementary currency schemes, LETS and time banks (North, 1999; 2007); co-housing projects (Lietaert, 2010), eco-villages or rurban squats (Catteneo and Gavalda 2010); initiatives aimed at creating and recuperating the urban commons, such as community gardens (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014), alternative water infrastructures (Domenech, March and Saurí 2013) and community-owned electricity production (Hain et al. 2005); the promotion of counterhegemonic forms of urban mobility (Dalpian, Silveira and Rossi 2015); and consumption practices which challenge the hegemony of consumerism (Assadourian 2010), such as; voluntary simplicity (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Gorge *et al.* 2015); freeganism (Pentina and Amos 2011); sharing and freecycling (Ozzane and Ballantine 2010); or anti-consumption (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013). In this regard, degrowth reframes heterotopias of resistance as spaces for social innovation and experimentation within which it is possible to negotiate new parameters for consumption and production without growth (Chatzidakis, Maclaran and Bradshaw 2012).

Concluding commentary

Our categorization and evaluation of the debates presented provides a number of contributions. It charts the territory for a more productive approach to the study of alternative economies. It reconnects debates dispersed across disciplinary boundaries to expose neglected tensions between consumption, sustainability, development, inequality and growth. It also reveals degrowth as an overlooked opportunity from which marketing scholars can meaningfully theorize and critically evaluate the role of alternative economies. In particular it exposes why researchers should remain hesitant to celebrate the rise of alternative economic practices unless they provide a self-conscious alternative to the continuation of growth-driven capitalism. These are important considerations, particularly in terms of positioning future macromarketing inquiries which seek to challenge the growth paradigm.

In the evaluation and critique of economic possibilities outlined, we conclude that the transition towards degrowth cannot be realized while social provisioning remains dependent upon growth-driven institutions (Latouche 2009). While the pursuit of profit by capitalist firms is typically argued to be the most important driver of economic growth (Varey 2010), it is necessary to not overlook the fact that government provisioning is no less dependent on economic growth than that of capitalist firms (Hunt 2012). This outcome leads Gorz (1980) to observe that growth-oriented socialism reflects "the distorted image of our past, not our future", assuring that "socialism is no better than capitalism if it makes use of the same tools" (p. 20). This observation pitches degrowth in opposition to both the expansion of capitalist markets (Fournier 2008) and the capitalist state (Gorz 1980). Degrowth sidesteps the false market/state dichotomy to support alternative forms of social organization and provisioning whose development subverts, even if only precariously and temporarily, the language and values of capitalist institutions (Latouche 2009). In this sense, as Fournier (2008) suggests, the most important contribution of degrowth to environmental debates lies precisely in its emphasis on "escaping from the economy" and the colonizing elements of economic thinking - most notably, but not exclusively, the GDP indicator. In doing this, degrowth invites us to rethink economic practices in terms of democratic choices and acts of citizenship rather than logical imperatives dictated by purportedly uncontestable treadmill dynamics (Fournier, 2008).

Such a formulation of degrowth also renders the approach open to the same criticism and charges as any other strategy seeking social transformation from below: the question of power. This emerges as a critical concern which requires urgent attention from macromarketing scholars interested in advancing the possibilities of degrowth. In fact, as Kallis (2011) acknowledges, big social changes such as those entailed by degrowth will never appeal to the “kings” and “priests” of the time. In this respect, and despite knowing that the pursuit of economic growth is no longer delivering increasing levels of prosperity within the affluent world, perhaps one cannot help feeling intimidated, if not pessimistic, by the scale of the challenge ahead. And yet, as Kallis (2011, p. 878) also suggests, in the gap and loss of meaning created by what increasingly appears as a systemic crisis, a window of opportunity is likely to open for “a new cultural story and the alternative, liberated social spaces and practices that embody it.”

Strong reason to be concerned here (R2, comment 15).

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