

## **Interview mit Joan Martinez-Alier**

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Interviewer: Christine Schickert

Technik/Transkript: Peter Rabe

Video: <http://youtu.be/T6UuGa6vZOU>



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Interviewer: The first question is: What is growth and what is the problem with growth?

Joan Martinez-Alier: What is growth? Economic growth means the increase in the GDP. In the macroeconomic accounting we count the GDP, which means the value added from all the enterprises. Of course we criticize the calculation of the GDP already for many years. One of the strongest critics came from the feminist or ecofeminist side. A book by Marilyn Waring from Australia – she said: The GDP doesn't count the services from nature – the rain and the sun energy. All this is not counted and the GDP does not count either, all the services in the families where the women do them or men do them. Because they are free. The GDP only counts things which are in money-terms and therefore is not a very good measure of welfare, is a very bad measure of the destruction of the environment. Many people think the GDP should be abolished. But growth in the GDP is what we mean by economic growth, meaning growth in the market economy, but not in the real economy.

Interviewer: And what would be an alternative?

Joan Martinez-Alier: There would be to have several indicators: social and also physical. And some of them we already have people know for instance, what is happening with carbon dioxide emissions. Many people in Germany would know – I don't know how many, but at least the newspapers talk about it – that you are about ten tons per capita per year on average of carbon dioxide, what is about four times as much as we should have to achieve a decrease in the concentration in the atmosphere. So these are physical measurements and is not so difficult to remember - ten tons is very easy to remember. So this is a physical indicator and then we could have social indicators like: life expectancy - how many years people live on average or infant mortality. Other people make questionnaires, asking about happiness or life satisfaction. This – I think – is interesting, because people are very coherent in what they say depending on their income but also depending on personal relations

more than income, on age. They say they are happy or not happy. So one can study the science of life satisfaction and that could provide a very good indicator – so we need physical and social indicators. Then the prime minister or chancellor would say: Germany is going well, because we have improved in the physical indicators; going down – carbon dioxide and material flows – going up in life satisfaction, going down in violence for instance, going up in education. We can not add them up because they are in different units. We are doing all right and this could be a topic for political debate. But now all the political debate is concentrated on the GDP, because the GDP is very important to pay the debts, is very important for economic policy, but is not very important for the environment and for real situation of the people.

Interviewer: Different topic: What is the idea of degrowth?

Joan Martinez-Alier: Degrowth. In Germany there is a debate: What is "Postwachstum" or "Entwachstum"? Can one say "Entwachstum"? Because people say you can not translate "Décroissance" – it has been translated as "degrowth" in English and it works quite well. I am sure that in German one can also find an appropriate word for this. But many people don't like this idea of degrowth, because they think: Well, what is going to happen with economic degrowth? Unemployment will increase. Without growth unemployment increases. So what are we going to do? In the last few years there are a number of new books on ecological macro economics by Tim Jackson – a book called "Prosperity without Growth" and another by Peter Victor called "Managing without Growth" and in the '70s already there were books about this from Herman Daly and other people about the steady state economy or a book by Georgescu-Roegen in France in 79 called "Demain la décroissance", "Tomorrow degrowth". I'm favor of degrowth, but of course not degrowth as in Greece for instance, where the economy has degrown 25% in three or four years. This is a very savage thing to do. Degrowth should be little by little one percent per year in the physical aspects – doesn't matter the economic accounts. Because economic accounts depend on the accounting conventions. You don't include domestic work, except if you pay for it. You don't subtract anything for the damage to the environment you are doing. Unless you do damage which is valued in money terms. But for instance polluting the atmosphere is not in money terms. Therefore we are not subtracting anything. So GDP is not a good measurement – either for growth or for degrowth. We have to look at degrowth in physical terms and I think we should degrow a little bit in the rich countries 10%, 15% and then go to a steady state economy in which some sectors

would grow, like agroecology would grow, solar energy would grow. And in fact this is what is already happening. The European economy is not growing since the last six years. And in some places as in Germany or in Austria things are not so bad. Partially because you are importing raw materials quite cheap. You are exploiting the rest of the world. You are producing too much carbon dioxide. So it is not that everything is alright, but you are still keeping public services, not as in Spain or in Greece or in Portugal, where degrowth is being too quick. But we could have a little degrowth in a steady state economy with some sectors growing and others degrowing for instance. I don't have a car now. I live in the center of Barcelona. I don't need a car. I can rent a car. I can share a car. This is bad for the car industry, including Volkswagen, there is one main factory in Barcelona. But I feel good. Then we need new institutions. Because if there is no growth, there is unemployment and therefore we need a sort of basic income for everybody and then to reduce the hours of work, to share paid work, to have more independent work perhaps, but the basic income – I don't know how much, 500/600 € per month for everybody as a human right. Everybody in Europe knows that school is free for everybody, health is more or less free for everybody or not very expensive. So these are like human rights. So the next one should be 600 € per month for everybody above 18 years old.

Interviewer: Earlier you talked about degrowth in the rich countries. What about the global south? Because a lot of people say: They don't have a right to consume.

Joan Martinez-Alier: I know a lot about some places in the global south, because I worked in Latin America, I've gone often to India and I have learned a lot in India and Latin America. I have learned about what they call "The Environmentalism of the Poor" and indigenous people – in rural areas especially. That they are the frontiers of extraction. Suddenly Chinese firms are also coming – or Texaco used to be there and now it is Chevron or Shell or Repsol from Spain. The oil companies go there and they want to take the oil, to take their gas, to take copper, to take coal for instance in Colombia. Colombia is now exporting a lot of coal to Germany. And what happens there is terrible. It is the extractive industries including also biomass like soybeans. In Amazonia they destroy the forest to put cows for export of meat. Many people in the south are against this kind of extractive economy and they complain, but these are not the presidents. The presidents they like to export, because this means more money and sometimes they are corrupt like in the Equatorial Guinea for instance with oil, total corruption. But in other

places like Ecuador or Bolivia or Argentina or Brazil a lot of this money from exports is distributed to people. So that is better than corruption. But on the other hand many people are against these extractive economies. What would happen in the global south without growth in the north? Well the pressure to extract raw materials would be less – much less. The driving economy now is not Europe. It is China. If China would grow less it would not become this kind of imperialist country. They have Mao in the embassy portrait, but they behave as an imperialist country, because of economic reasons. It would change the worlds economy – making it more sustainable, but really sustainable. In the south this kind of vision would have some allies. People who talk about Bven Vivir. In Europe we have similar words. They don't believe in uniform development or economic growth. They want to preserve their own cultures and the environment. So this exists. I'm not inventing these theories. I know people who believe in them like Alberto Acosta, Eduardo Gudynas, or in India, Ashish Kothari. There is a NGO called "Global Witness" and in Rio last year, when Rio plus 20 took place in June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, they published a report with the number of environmentalist killed in southern countries. They are normal peasants or indigenous people including quite a few women, who had been killed in Brazil, in Mexico, in Indonesia, in Cambodia, in India, defending the environment, because they depend on the environment very directly for their livelihood and they are killed. So they have a list of 700/800 names of poor people killed defending the environment in the last four five years, you can look at this report. It is not a surprise for me, but for many people in the north. They think being an environmentalist means being a member of Greenpeace – which I think is a very good idea – or the WWF and nobody from the WWF has been killed – fortunately. Some fishermen in the Bay of Guanabara – which is near Rio de Janeiro – were complaining against oil spills for a few years already. They were captured by somebody and they were killed. When the governments were talking about sustainability, the Rio environmentalist were being killed just ten kilometers from the meeting place. It is very sad, but it is the reality. For many of these people degrowth in the north would be like a relief, because a lot of the pressure comes from the growing economy. These movements of resistance we call "The Environmentalism of the Poor", we call them "The Environmental Justice Movement", which is increasing.

Interviewer: Well - Thank you very much.