**A degrowth strategy**

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In a May 30 essay for TheNew York Times titled ‘The New Climate Law Is Working. Clean Energy Investments Are Soaring’, one of the architects of last year’s Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Brian Deese, wrote, “Nine months since that law was passed in Congress, the private sector has mobilized well beyond our initial expectations to generate clean energy, build battery factories, and develop other technologies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

There’s just one problem. Those technologies aren’t going to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The only way to reduce emissions fast enough to prevent climate catastrophe is to phase out the burning of oil, gas, and coal by law, directly and deliberately. If, against all odds, the United States does that, we certainly will need wind- and solar-power installations, batteries, and new technologies to compensate for the decline of energy from fossil fuels. There is no reason, however, to expect that the process would work in reverse; a “clean-energy” mobilization alone won’t cause a steep reduction in the use of fossil fuels.

I think top leaders in Washington are using green-energy pipe dreams to distract us from the reality that they have given up altogether on reducing US fossil fuel use. They’ve caved. This month’s bipartisan deal on the debt limit included a provision that would ease the permitting of energy infrastructure, including oil and gas pipelines like the ecologically destructive Mountain Valley fossil-gas pipeline so dear to the heart of West Virginia’s Democratic Senator Joe Manchin.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has issued new rules allowing old coal and fossil gas power plants to continue operating if they capture their carbon dioxide emissions and inject them into old oil wells. And under the IRA, those plants that capture emissions will receive federal climate subsidies, even if they use the carbon dioxide that’s pumped into the old wells to push out residual oil that has evaded conventional methods of extraction. And the IRA did not even end federal subsidies to fossil-fuel companies, which could have saved somewhere between $10 and $50 billion annually. Taken together, these policies could extend the operation of existing coal and gas power plants much further into the future.

The 20th century’s fossil-fuel bonanza, with its extension well into this century, has enabled an explosion of economic growth that dwarfs anything humanity had previously achieved. Not coincidentally, it has also empowered our species to cause ecological degradation on an unprecedented scale. Humanity’s industrial and agricultural activities have an impact on the Earth that now exceeds, by a whopping 75 per cent, nature’s ability to endure them without lasting damage. In other words, we would need almost two Earths to sustain a world economy this size over the long term – more than two, if it continues growing.

This is an old story, long ignored. But no more. The enormous resource requirements of the ‘green’ energy rush are drawing a lot of public attention to a disturbing phenomenon discussed in last month’s installment of ‘In Real Time’: the insupportable damage that will be done to humanity and Earth in the quest for the mineral resources needed to build new energy infrastructure.

The unfathomable quantities of ores that will be mined to manufacture batteries required by electric vehicles and vast new power grids, and the damage and suffering that will result, have been the subject of many recent headlines. But if countries keep pushing for new energy systems big enough to fully support 100 per cent of the economic activity now made possible by oil, gas, and coal, they will not only fail to stop greenhouse gas emissions but will fail to prevent the violation of other critical planetary boundaries, including biodiversity loss, nitrogen and phosphorus pollution, and soil degradation. We’ve already crossed those red lines, and we’ve kept going. Nothing can grow forever. But the mere attempt to keep the world’s big, rich economies growing into the long future will crush any hopes we may have for that very future.

At the heart of industry’s claim that the world’s economies can expand without limit is the idea of ‘green growth’. Like the fabled economist’s can opener, the green-growth assumption allows us to believe that the impossible can be made possible. In this case, that means generating greater aggregate wealth year by year while emitting fewer tons of greenhouse gases, extracting fewer tons of resources, and causing less ecosystem destruction, biodiversity loss, and other damage to the Earth and our fellow humans.

Here’s one of the many research papers from recent years finding that economic growth has never been achieved over large geographical areas for extended time periods without having serious environmental impacts. The authors further find that “there are no realistic scenarios” for sustaining a 2% annual growth rate without excessive resource extraction and greenhouse-gas emissions, even with a “maximal increase in efficiency of material use.”

To hear a less technical takedown of green growth, one that even politicians can understand, enjoy this presentation by social scientist Timothee Parrique to the European Parliament’s recent ‘Beyond Growth’ conference. Much has been made of the fact that in recent decades, Europe’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has grown steadily without increasing carbon dioxide emissions. This has prompted giddy claims that ‘decarbonization’ of economic growth is finally happening. But producing more wealth with the same quantity of climate-altering emissions is not the same as reducing emissions.

One of Parrique’s slides at the conference showed that over the past 30 years, as wealth accumulated on the Earth’s surface while carbon dioxide accumulated in the atmosphere and oceans, the European Union achieved no significant reductions in the rate of carbon dioxide emissions – except from 2008 to 2014, the Great Recession years. The EU managed to reduce emissions only when their economy didn’t grow!

Societies must decide: Do we want a growing GDP or a livable future? We can’t have both.

Let’s assume for the sake of argument that the US makes the right decision and pulls back within ecological limits. For starters, that would require rapidly phasing out fossil fuels and building a modest renewable energy system that would only partially compensate for the diminishing supply of fossil energy. Under those conditions, the economy would shrink, and it would need to keep shrinking until it’s small enough to stop transgressing ecological limits. At that point, we would have achieved, in the late ecological economist Herman Daly’s words, a steady-state economy.

That period of shrinkage would not be a recession. A reversal of growth induced by a deliberate, well-planned reduction in the supply of energy and material resources available to the economy would have effects wholly different from the misery caused by recessions – if we establish policies to guarantee material sufficiency and equity throughout society. That is to say, if we ensure that everyone has enough while preventing excessive production and consumption.

Last month, The Economist expended 1,400 words belittling the EU’s Beyond Growth conference and treating its attendees as recession-loving misanthropes. Alluding to recent GDP stagnation in some European nations, The Economist asked, “For what is Europe, if not a post-growth continent already?” Parrique took on their rhetorical question with this pithy response: “In reality, degrowth differs fundamentally from a recession. A recession is a reduction in GDP, one that happens accidentally, often with undesirable social outcomes like unemployment, austerity, and poverty. Degrowth, on the other hand, is a planned, selective and equitable downscaling of economic activities... Associating degrowth with a recession just because the two involve a reduction of GDP is absurd; it would be like arguing that an amputation and a diet are the very same thing just because they both lead to weight loss.”

Excerpted: ‘We Need a Degrowth Strategy or Another Planet’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org