

Milena Buchs and Max Koch

Postgrowth and Wellbeing: Challenges to Sustainable Welfare

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

ISBN: 978-3-319-59902-1 (HB) £39.99. 144pp.

Postgrowth and Wellbeing: Challenges to Sustainable Welfare is a comprehensive and detailed overview of the relationship between human wellbeing and economic growth paradigms by Milena Buchs and Max Koch. Drawing from political economy and social practice perspectives, as well as theories of human needs, it explores ways in which wellbeing can be maintained or improved without growth. The book highlights the need for a critical examination of definitions of wellbeing for it to be compatible with the premise of postgrowth and offers a comprehensive, critical evaluation of the postgrowth and wellbeing debate. Aimed at students and scholars from a variety of backgrounds, from political ecology and economics to social sciences and human geography, the book guides the reader easily through a variety of key arguments in the emerging postgrowth literature. Reflecting on the literature, the authors present an important discussion surrounding core principles and policy proposals in the context of sustainable postgrowth. As a result, the book develops suggestions for policies and institutions that have the potential to support wellbeing in phases of degrowth and work towards the achievement of a steady state economy.

Buchs and Koch begin by introducing the reader to important insights into the definitions of wellbeing and postgrowth. Providing context and rationale for the chapters that follow, they present two key discussion points regarding the need to question economic growth which the book is framed around: the diminishing capacity for growth in most western economies and the negative consequences of growth on both the environment and society. Alongside these key discussion points, two crucial arguments are formed. Firstly, the recognition that current conceptions and societal frameworks of wellbeing are geared towards growth and market capitalism and, as a result, the transition to a postgrowth society requires a collective reframing of wellbeing concerned with the fulfillment of basic human needs. Secondly, it is argued that there is a lack of knowledge concerning the impact that rapid socio-economic change and degrowth can have on wellbeing and the ways in which wellbeing and economic growth are intertwined. Simultaneously within this book, these two threads present an overarching argument for the need of cultural change to occur alongside economic change in phases of degrowth, to minimise the potential negative effects of economic contraction on people's wellbeing.

Following on from the introduction, the book is broken down into a further seven sections focusing on key issues surrounding the relationship between postgrowth and wellbeing, each contributing to the narrative that is formed in the introductory chapter. Chapter 2, 'Capitalist development and the growth paradigm', provides an overview of the relationship between the economic growth paradigm and capitalism. Drawing upon historical and current contexts of economic activity it reviews the socio-economic processes that have led to the universal application of economic growth, as well as the societal structures and

mindsets that have developed alongside the emergence of capitalism. The chapter provides a critical overview of the implications of economic development and how these challenge progress towards the future of economic change. The primary discussion point in chapter 3, 'Growth and the welfare state as we know it', is the evolution of welfare states in western capitalism and the role they play in the development and support of people's wellbeing. Drawing upon literature discussed in chapter 2, this chapter begins by introducing the evolution of economic growth in capitalist societies and the role of the state, before turning its focus to a critical overview of welfare states and regimes. Here, Buchs and Koch provide a concise evaluation of the relationship between welfare regimes and environmental protection, presenting a clear need for further evaluation of the impacts (both positive and negative) that arise from introducing ecological sustainability into welfare states as we know them. The central concern that arises throughout these discussions is the universal satisfaction of basic human needs for society now, as well as in the future.

Chapter 4, 'Critiques of growth', presents the primary concerns and critiques that surround economic growth. The authors draw from ecological, social and psychological perspectives to form a broad critique of continued economic growth. The chapter highlights the dangers that our current economic climate and consumerism habits hold for individual and collective wellbeing, in conjunction with the fundamental importance of acknowledging the ties between ecological and social wellbeing. Moving into chapter 5, 'Postgrowth and wellbeing', the discussion about economic growth is expanded upon to include debates surrounding the relationship between postgrowth and wellbeing; building on the introduction it details definitions of wellbeing that have been commonly used in postgrowth literature. In relation to this, a clear argument is presented for the need of a more conceptual definition of wellbeing. Correspondingly the authors build upon discussions in chapter 3 and introduce theories of basic human needs as an important approach to viewing wellbeing and its compatibility within the frameworks of postgrowth. As a result, this chapter paints a complicated view of the operability of a postgrowth society and takes a critical look at the effects of economic contraction on human wellbeing. Chapter 6, 'The generation of human wellbeing: social practices theory', offers a significant introduction to social practice theory as a useful lens for exploring in more detail the potential impacts of postgrowth on wellbeing. This approach highlights key questions about the ability of our current social structures to change away from economic growth paradigms rapidly enough, alongside economic deceleration to avoid deteriorations of wellbeing.

Lastly, chapter 7, 'Welfare in a global steady state economy', effectively ties together the discussions throughout the book to think about the core principles and institutions that have the potential to support wellbeing in a postgrowth era. This chapter draws from themes of Herman Daly's *Steady State Economy* (1972) to frame a debate around appropriate approaches towards a sustainable welfare system. One of the most pertinent arguments within this chapter is the need to produce a more global approach to a sustainable economy, whilst supporting local regional and national considerations – this builds upon Gough's (2011) view that current policy proposals are still studied within separate economic silos.

Postgrowth and Wellbeing is a timely and systematic account of the postgrowth literature. The book methodically highlights important social science theories and approaches towards a sustainable economy and the implications for both environmental and human wellbeing. Taking a critical approach to our current economic climate and social structures, it challenges the reader to take a deeper look at the power structures within our society and reconsider currently held conceptions of wellbeing and economic progress. Overall the authors present complicated and, arguably, potentially disempowering ideas to the reader in a clear and concise manner; equally the structure of the book allows for key theories to flow throughout each chapter keeping the reader engaged with the important debates and analysis. This work offers a new direction of thinking for those engaged academically with sustainability, wellbeing and economics and positively contributes to current literature, as well as holding valuable insights for those working in areas of future policy development

References

- Daly, H. 1972. 'In Defense of a Steady State Economy'. *American Journal of Agricultural Economy*, **54**: 945–954.
- Gough, I. 2011. *Climate Change and Public Policy Futures*. London: British Academy.

RACHEL MANNING
University of Exeter