

HOLISTIC CARE ECONOMIES

Degrowth ways of provisioning and the Global East

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the severity of the care crisis became manifest. This led to various manifestos from degrowth scholar-activists for a ‘care-full radical transformation’ (FaDA 2020; Paulson et al. 2020), urgently calling for rethinking and rebuilding the reproductive and socio-ecological caring dimensions of society. These calls recognised and problematised how the current extractive and externalising economic system continues to devalue, appropriate and exhaust the reproductive and regenerative capacities of the living world, especially women, nature and the former colonies/majority world (Mies et al. 1988; Mies 1986). Numerous authors, such as Eisler (2008) and Tronto (2013), have presented models for a change of perspective, writing about ‘caring economics’ and ‘caring democracy’, respectively. Subsequently, various proposals have been offered to rethink, transform and rebuild the society more holistically around the values of socio-ecologically sustainable and caring societies. Some of these proposals, such as Universal Basic Income (UBI) and Universal Care Income, aim to redistribute monetary resources to ensure a dignified life for all and to revalue caring activities. Others, such as Universal Basic Services (UBS) and the Foundational Economy (FE), propose the provision of needs-based common infrastructure to meet the basic human needs of all (Coote 2020; Bentham et al. 2013; FEC 2018). Combining these perspectives, the Unconditional Autonomy Allowance (UAA) has been conceptualised specifically with a degrowth horizon in mind (Liegey and Nelson 2020; Liegey 2013).

What do we expect from *holistic caring economies* as one of the leitmotifs of degrowth? It means an expansive concept of caring economies as multi-dimensional, deeply felt, and lived approaches and practices of care – nurturing earth and people alike. ‘*Holistic*’ refers to care work, whether it is providing ‘services’; making, creating or growing products from the land directly, or indirectly as ‘value-added’; or regenerating and reproducing the self, others and the ‘more-than-human’ parts of the living world. As such, and perhaps most importantly, holistic economies defy the ‘structure of separation’, a line of valuation that disconnects the monetised and ‘productive’ from the maintenance and ‘reproductive’ economies – as critiqued by a range of feminist scholars, including ecofeminists, Marxist feminists and feminist ecological economists (Dengler and Strunk 2018; Jochimsen and Knobloch 1997; Salleh 1997). In other words, ‘holistic’ economies look at the *whole* iceberg rather than just the ‘tip of the iceberg’ (monetised, industrial economy and wage

labour), as the common critique goes (Mies 1986; Gibson-Graham 1996; compare with Collard and Dempsey 2020; Henderson 1980).

Furthermore, due to their normative positioning, holistic caring economies would not only take into account the needs of the minority world but also care for the majority world, future generations and the more-than-human world (de la Bellacasa 2017; Krzywoszynska 2019; Morrow and Davies 2022). A *caring* economy (not to be confused with the narrower ‘care economy’) means putting care at the heart of a degrowth economy and shaping policy and the socio-economic system around this overarching goal. Various scholars, such as the Network for Caring Economy (NVW 2013), Eisler (2008), Tronto (2013, 2018 [1996]) and Gottschlich and Katz (2020), have contributed to this expansive concept. They call for a radical reorientation of our economic system around regenerative and reproductive spheres of economic processes and activities.

Finally, following on from the critique of the ‘structure of separation’, a degrowth *economy* would include the larger and neglected part of the ‘iceberg’ and bring it to the fore. A variety of ecofeminist ‘iceberg’ models demonstrate – and revise – the hierarchical and human-made ‘structure of separation’ between different forms of economic activities and processes (see Jochimsen and Knobloch (1997, p. 109); Hazel Henderson (1980); Gibson-Graham (1996); Dengler and Strunk (2018, p. 163). Figure 20.1 shows Mies et al. (1988) iceberg model of capitalist patriarchal economies, with its structure of separation, ‘tip’ and ‘bottom’ parts. Here, the full range of resources, services, livelihoods, subsistence and reproductive economic activities are seen as interdependent processes that meet societal needs, provide for the well-being and ‘good life for all’, and together form an essential part of the *oikos* (Bennholdt-Thomsen 2015, p. 163; Gibson-Graham 1996). Therefore, holistic care in degrowth ways takes into account all spheres of the economy highlighted by Marilyn Power’s (2004) Social Provisioning Approach (SPA), including paid and unpaid activities, material and immaterial social processes and relationships that are necessary to sustain human life. In addition, it emphasises that all socio-economic systems are embedded in the biosphere, leading to an extended redefinition of social provisioning to a social-ecological provisioning, as outlined by scholars such as Dengler and Lang (2022) and Spash and Ryan (2023).

In the context of this critique of the current economic system and informed by the scholarship on socio-ecological provisioning, we present and discuss the aforementioned FE, UBS and UAA proposals. These contemporary attempts conceptualise and accentuate a variety of basic services and collective care infrastructures that are essential for holistic caring economies. They could

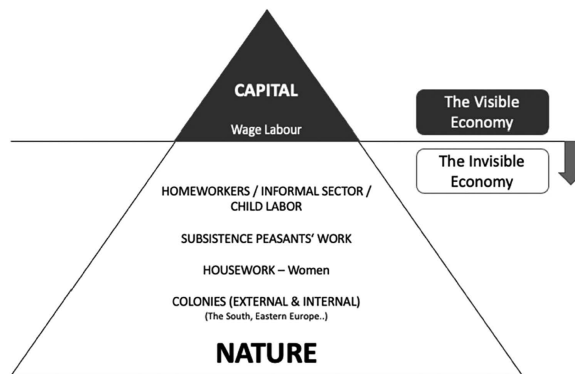


Figure 20.1 Colonialism-Capitalism-Patriarchy-Nexus of the Bielefeld Subsistence approach. Drawn from Mies et al. (1988), depiction by Pungas (2024, p. 55).

also dissolve the structural separation of economic spheres and strengthen other unrecognised but indispensable caring activities. In this context, we seek to understand, how these relatively new approaches can benefit from the rich experiences of people living in what Müller (2020) has called the Global East.

In this chapter, we apply the term ‘Global East’ as both an epistemological and a territorialised category, encompassing Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) in East Germany, and the former Soviet Union – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Despite differences in geography, culture, history and economy, these countries share extensive real-life and on-the-ground experience with basic services and infrastructure provided by the state and made available to all with no or low user prices. We fully recognise the incompatibility of the concept of degrowth with the authoritarian and centralist political regimes and their devotion to growthism and techno-scientific industrialised progress, and we do not suggest state socialism as an example of holistic caring economies. However, what we consider important in relation to the FE, UBS and UAA proposals are socialist policies around the common sense that certain basic services and infrastructures are essential for a decent human life, and people’s responses and practices which were formed in their everyday lives and from which we ought to learn.

In what follows, we briefly introduce FE, UBS and UAA, and then open up the perspective to explore what can be learned from the experiences of the socialist East as useful inspirations and critical lessons. We conclude by discussing how these inspirations and lessons can be integrated into FE, UBS and UAA scholarship to enrich and advance a degrowth-oriented leitmotif of holistic caring economies.

Providing collectively for shared basic needs – three proposals

We have put forward the FE, UBS and UAA as recent proposals, rethinking our economies to better provide for our basic needs, and we briefly present them in the following.

The *Foundational Economy* (FE) is an action research-based approach to socio-economic development that focuses on the collective provision of everyday universal basics within planetary limits. Its starting point was set in 2013 by a collective of academics in the United Kingdom (FEC 2018), who discussed what the economy should really provide for. The answer – access to food, housing, health, care, education and utilities – was set out in an FE manifesto (Bentham et al. 2013), a work-in-progress. FE is based on a zonal understanding of coexisting economies and distinguishes between the *core* economy (family and community), the *foundational* economy (provident services such as health, care; material infrastructure such as pipes, cables, housing), the *overlooked* economy (lifestyle and comfort support systems such as tourism, leisure, furniture) and the *tradable competitive* economy (industry, finance) (FEC 2020). Each zone has its own principles and objectives and follows a different logic. While politicians focus on the competitive economy (a rather small sector of the ‘whole’ economy), citizens are more concerned with the public service system of the foundational economy – the latter being the core interest of FE and its call to a different political focus.

Universal Basic Services (UBS) is another progressive political proposal and, like FE, a needs-based approach. It promotes securing livelihoods (*basic* – access to life’s essentials) independent of wage labour for all (*universal*) in the form of public goods (*services*) in order to enable human flourishing, not just mere survival (Portes et al. 2017; Coote 2020). The first mention of UBS in a report by the Social Prosperity Network in 2017 (Portes et al. 2017) called for the unconditional and collective provision of seven shared basic needs: food and water, shelter, education,

(digital) information and communication, healthcare, public transport, and democracy and legal services. UBS therefore includes sectors that already exist in some countries (healthcare, education) but aims to improve their quality and to extend the idea to new areas. Over time, other basic needs have been added: care (including childcare, elder care and adult social care), safe and secure work, physical and economic security and a safe environment.

An *Unconditional Autonomy Allowance* (UAA) has been conceptualised by scholars with an explicit degrowth horizon in mind (Liegey and Nelson 2020; Liegey 2013). The UAA proposes a list of demands that include a right to housing and real estate; the provision of basic needs such as food, clothing, furniture and more; free access to limited quantities of basic goods such as water, fuel, wood, and so on; a right to mobility, including free local public transport and a collectively decided per capita allowance for long-distance transport; and public services such as health and care, education, culture, information and communication (Liegey and Nelson 2020). UAA also calls for a so-called maximum acceptable income, which would further reduce social inequalities while financing the UAA (Liegey et al. 2012). Advocates call for transitional steps towards a UAA, such as a continuous process of cultural transformation that leaves growthism behind, the strengthening of local alternative practices and initiatives that prefigure desirable degrowth futures, the reduction of working hours to allow time for provisioning activities, and an unconditional basic income that evolves over time through demonetisation into an UAA (Liegey and Nelson 2020).

All three proposals offer a perspective that complements the approach of unconditional monetary payments, such as in the form of UBI. Various scholars such as Büchs (2021), Bärnthaler and Dengler (2023), Dengler and Lang (2022), Uhde (2018) and Liegey (2013) have explored the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches – monetary transfers versus provision of basic goods – and their careful combination with time policies, commoning or a public care model.

From a degrowth and sufficiency perspective, all proposals for collective provisioning of shared needs offer leverage points for the much-needed socio-ecological transformation. Their inherent and strong redistributive element reduces income inequalities and promotes collective abundance and sustainable consumption rather than individual luxury and consumerism (Büchs 2021; Coote and Percy 2020). Moreover, collective provision of basic needs is not only a socially essential normative goal regarding employment and equitable access. It is also ecologically crucial, as key sectors such as food, mobility and housing are major sources of global greenhouse gas emissions and thus require collective solutions and public investment.

From a political perspective, proponents of all three proposals argue that the right to basic services is ‘the substantive basis for the actual exercise of citizenship’ (Calafati et al. 2023), which otherwise remains an empty, formal status and undermines democracy itself (FEC 2018; Barbera and Jones 2020). Only with a certain degree of autonomy can citizens, as political subjects, make use of their ‘positive’ social rights (Marshall 1965), fulfil their role as citizens, and contribute to shared collective responsibilities (Coote 2020; Liegey 2019).

Common to the FE, UBS and UAA is the overarching fundamental debate about what the economy should provide, and the deeply normative goal of social well-being with collectively provided high-quality and low-cost basic goods and public services within planetary boundaries. In addition, all approaches envision systematic, pragmatic and incremental (yet radical) change – rather than a quick policy fix (Liegey and Nelson 2020). As such, in their theoretical debates and implementation designs, they all seek to expand the purpose and goal of the economy towards more socio-ecological care, with an explicit commitment to livelihood well-being – essential for a degrowth ‘good life for all’.

The cost of implementing basic services, covered by redistribution, progressive taxation and a cap on income, to name but a few, would depend on the precise scope and quality of the services

provided. However, as several proponents have pointed out, it is important not to evaluate proposals for basic services in terms of a conventional cost-benefit analysis. Not only would this mask the additional costs that would otherwise arise from the absence of public services and the costly socio-political interventions that would follow (Coote 2020). Even more importantly, the social, environmental and economic value of improving human and planetary health, well-being and social cohesion cannot be monetised.

All three proposals implicate fundamental democratic issues and need to be ‘designed’ with care. Gough (2019) points to the methodological dilemma of identifying the need-satisfiers (the concrete services and infrastructure) in different socio-cultural, historical and geographical contexts without being patronising. Dengler and Plank (2024) call for a normative interrogation of any provisioning system from an intersectional feminist perspective, asking: ‘For whom, defined by whom, and whose perspective is (not) included?’ (Dengler and Plank 2024, p. 2). Specifically in relation to FE, Dengler and Plank (2024, p. 4) criticise the separate categorisation of the core economy (family and community), claiming that this ‘core’ is not only an integral part of the ‘whole’ oikos, but:

as a cross-cutting, rather than separate, zone – constitutes the foundation and *infrastructure* of all other economic zones, as nothing could be produced in the monetized economy from 9 am to 5 pm without the unpaid work of social reproduction occurring from 5 pm to 9 am.

State-socialist public provisioning systems: experiences from the Global East

Providing basic services through an economy that serves the whole of society is not a new approach. The economies of the former socialist states of the Global East had precisely this role: to meet people’s basic needs and contribute to the common good by providing basic services and infrastructure that were affordable to all. In this, the Global East is often overlooked – invisibly caught in the ‘cracks’ (Müller 2020) and a social, economic and political ‘in-between’ that is neither the Global North nor the Global South – the axis along which degrowth ideas are usually developed (Pungas et al. 2024). We as activist scholars would argue, however, that it could provide us with important lessons on essential aspects considered crucial for degrowth or socio-ecological transformation in general (Gebauer et al. 2019, 2023; Pungas et al. 2024; Cima and Sovová 2022; Sovová et al. forthcoming). The strong orientation towards economic growth, large-scale techno-industrial progress and fossil-based productivism of the socialist states (see, for instance, Chertkovskaya 2019) became manifest in physical and mental infrastructures. This is comparable to the capitalist economies of the Global North as the *starting point* for degrowth calls. However, much longer than in these countries (and often still today), people in the Global East maintain practices that can be also observed in the Global South. These are practices of (semi-)subsistence agriculture, do it yourself/ do it together (DIY/DIT), maintenance and repair, resource sufficiency and circularity, and so on – a *reference point* for degrowth calls. Finally, people in the Global East have extensive experience with transitional and transformational processes, from political-economic shifts to system change – a *process dimension* of degrowth calls.

All of this can provide valuable insights and competencies that degrowth advocates should be aware of and study in order to gain lessons and inspiration (Melegh 2021; Gebauer et al. 2023). Not least because decolonial degrowth requires spatial contextualisation and ‘provincialising’ of knowledge production, the need to study the Global East becomes self-evident. On the ground, we find both a rather high degree of receptiveness, not in language but in practice, and a rather high degree of reluctance, for a variety of reasons rooted in socialist and post-socialist times. Both

should be taken into account in their specificity when making the case for degrowth *in and from* the East. However, learning from local Eastern experiential knowledge is a ‘messy’ endeavour, full of contradictions, imperfections and inconsistencies (Pungas et al. 2024). Here, we join scholars such as Aradau (2024) in suggesting that post-socialism is not only a spatio-temporal description, a contested analytical dimension and a situated experience but also a method of inhabiting and productively exploring contradictions. All these characteristics are similarly argued, and confirmed, by Slavomíra Ferenčuhová et al. (Chapter 9, this volume).

In this chapter, we focus on basic needs and their collective provisioning, and therefore seek to understand what recent degrowth-motivated proposals can learn from the motives, approaches and implementation of basic provisioning in the former socialist countries of the Global East. A comprehensive analysis of their provision systems is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, based on our research and personal experience of the GDR (1949–1990) and the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR, 1940–1941 and 1944–1991), and their socio-economic and political transitions after the collapse of the USSR, we outline entry points for exploring the potential and shortcomings for future holistic and caring degrowth economies. As authors, we share an interest in studying the quality of everyday life, practices, infrastructure and well-being of the past and present Global East, applying critical decolonial and ecofeminist lenses, and using inductive and practice-based theorising in our research (see, for instance, Gebauer et al. 2023; Pungas 2024). We draw on observations from our fieldwork, workshop experiences, qualitative research, and biographical experiences and memories. For instance, Figure 20.2 shows a collage-based group discussion on GDR and ESSR basic services and infrastructure with respect to degrowth. Using examples from these two countries, we now explore five sectors relevant to ideas of basic services common to all three proposals of FE, UBS and UAA (housing, food, health and childcare, mobility, education and culture).



Figure 20.2 Collage-based group discussion (2024, Haus des Wandels, Heinersdorf, Germany). Photograph by co-authors.

Housing

Once the worst of the damage of World War II had been repaired, the GDR government launched a massive housing programme in the 1970s, using industrial prefabricated construction (now rediscovered as ‘serial construction’) and enormous financial and human resources. The housing situation had previously been very problematic, and the new construction method not only made it possible to provide housing quickly and cheaply but also to raise the standard of living to a similar level for everyone (with central heating, hot water, baths, fitted kitchens, central laundry rooms and so on). New settlements were particularly important where new industrial and agricultural facilities had been allocated throughout the country. This allowed large numbers of people to move in very quickly; where there had been a village there was now often a small town (Lemke 2021).

Spatial planning was an integral part of the new social and economic model in the socialist countries. The aim was to create holistically planned, modern, efficient, multifunctional and aesthetic settlements in public ownership, which expressed appreciation of working people and abolished separation according to social status. Not only in the famous socialist planned cities and neighbourhoods, such as Nowa Huta in Poland, Novi Beograd in Serbia, Poruba (Ostrava) in Czechia, Lasnamäe in Estonia, Eisenhüttenstadt and Hoyerswerda in East Germany but in all new development areas, the proximity and integration of living, working and provisioning in ‘micro-rayons’ (micro-districts) was a fundamental aspect of urban design (Schlögel 2018). Such neighbourhoods were typically built with grocery stores and service cubes housing a variety of amenities, including post offices, hairdressers, florists, laundries, repair shops and youth clubs. Green spaces and playgrounds were provided between the houses, often laid out and cared for by unpaid collective work shifts (*subbotniks*). Local care facilities and public transport links were established, and electricity and central heating pipes were laid.

The new housing blocks – *Plattenbauten* in German, *khrushchevkas* in Russian – offered affordable accommodation and, with all their comforts, were initially welcomed by many. The integrated public infrastructure made it much easier to provide for everyday needs. The limited size of standardised apartments, together with communal spaces and the (theoretical) right to swap apartments as needed, reduced the individual consumption of resources. However, new settlements were often built on green-field sites or on the outskirts of cities, while old buildings in city centres were demolished or neglected, not least because they appeared too bourgeois in their architecture. The new architecture reflected the development orientation of state socialism but also industrialism, productivism and growth – quite typical for the time, resource-intensive and focused on quantity rather than quality. Even more, some architecture, such as Soviet Brutalism, seemed as intimidating as the authoritarian regime and ideology itself. Heavily subsidised and fossil-fuelled central heating could not be individually regulated, and without technical means or financial incentives, energy and heat-saving tips on television as in the GDR had little impact on often wasteful usage. What’s more, most of the remaining old buildings still had coal-burning stoves and, combined with the traffic circling the new neighbourhoods, the air was thick with pollution. Finally, as social proximity in the neighbourhoods increased, so did social (political) control, and housing needs were still not fully met (Mau 2019).

With contemporary ideas such as Carlos Moreno’s 15-minute city or Salvador Rueda’s super-blocks (exemplified within Barcelona), holistic and care-centred urban planning is now being rediscovered in the West. Meanwhile, in the East, the now-aged housing blocks have been partially dismantled and many service cubes abandoned. The neighbourhoods have lost their residents and their reputation to the economic and demographic effects of the transition. However, as a new housing crisis increasingly hits Eastern cities, more blocks, service cubes and green spaces are falling victim to new resource-intensive construction activities. Not least for this reason, exhibitions

such as ‘Ohne Ende Anfang – Endless beginning’ (2021) at the Museum Utopie und Alltag (Eisenhüttenstadt) present and critically reflect on the complexities of socialist urban planning, seeking to inspire contemporary attempts to accommodate all the reproductive needs of residents and livelihoods alike.

Food

The socialist agri-food system also followed the leitmotif of providing well for all: politically determined and state-subsidised food prices made many basic products accessible to all. Nevertheless, constant but unpredictable shortages of various products made the notorious and time-consuming queues a daily ritual – picturesquely illustrated in an essay of Karl Schlögel (2018, p. 553). This led to counter-productive phenomena such as hoarding, informal exchange, and bartering – the so-called second economy. One Estonian gardener interviewed recounted how they always bought more of what was sold because they never knew if, when, or what would come next – leading to food waste (Gebauer et al. 2023). Similarly, recalling memories of shopping in the GDR, if the shelf said ‘only one pack per person today’, you knew that the item was in short supply – and you quickly sent the whole family out to buy it, even if you didn’t need it.

In essence, the system of large-scale, industrialised and, to this end, forcibly collectivised state farms needed complementary subsistence production in order to meet people’s food needs. During the Soviet era, food self-provisioning on *dacha* allotments – already made famous by Anton Chekhov’s 1903 play *The Cherry Orchard* – became a mass phenomenon in most socialist countries. The boom in the USSR began with a decree issued in 1949 (LibUSSR 1949), and in several waves over the following decades, all factories and municipal units were called upon to provide their employees with unused land in small units (usually 600m²) for long-term subsistence food production (Lovell 2003). Within a few decades, one in two citizens had access to very affordable arable land for growing food – often close to home, work and public transport. This also provided additional seasonal housing and was supported by policies such as early retirement.

This continues today, with an estimated 60 million people in Russia growing food on *dachas* (Grimonpont 2020). Kai Ehlers (2010), in *We will Always have Potatoes*, explores how *dachas* play a crucial role in the socio-economic resilience of Russians to external shocks. *Dacha* gardening has always served as an additional source of diverse, seasonal, pesticide-free and self-determined food supply (Pungas 2024). The small, egalitarian and decentralised structures of collective and individual subsistence increased people’s autonomy and contributed to networks of reciprocity through gifts and mutual aid. While collectivisation destroyed much of the traditional peasantry and know-how, the *dacha* continued to provide the basic infrastructure for people to maintain and share common knowledge, methods and tools, and to practice food sovereignty towards a kind of frugal abundance (Pungas 2023). Although increasingly losing ground to more consumerist lifestyles and financialised land and housing markets, the scale of *dacha* gardening in and around many post-socialist cities still far exceeds gardening practices in Western Europe – as do the skills and know-how of gardeners in growing, processing and preserving food in ways that have been described as ‘quiet sustainability’ (Smith and Jehlička 2013).

Health and childcare

Socialist child and healthcare sectors were also under state management, control and planning. The health system intended to provide equal and safe health and living conditions for all and, like

other basic services, was heavily subsidised to ensure free care, treatment and medication. At the same time, facilities were located close to where people lived and worked. In the GDR, for example, outpatient polyclinics or ambulances and inpatient hospitals were easily accessible in both urban and rural areas, with local support from community nurses. There was a well-developed medical system for workers and their families in the larger companies. In addition to treatment in the event of illness, prevention and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle were important pillars of healthcare, with a wide range of preventive and screening examinations and counselling (Böttcher 2022). Today, the idea of polyclinics and ambulances is once again gaining practical relevance as centralised facilities in which several specialists and pharmacists were housed and worked together. The aim was to shorten distances and waiting time for people, and to facilitate communication and coordination between specialists. Over time, however, the financial, material, technical and human resources of various institutions became increasingly strained, resulting in a widening gap between aspiration and reality in the provision of healthcare.

This discrepancy between aspiration and reality also applied to the state's ideal of child and family care, especially in relation to gender equality. Crèches and kindergartens were located in (newly built) neighbourhoods and, therefore, easily accessible. They were also partly adapted to early and late working hours and shift work, including weekly crèches. However, it was mostly women who took care of their children before and after work. Although domestic and family work was indeed recognised as 'work', it was still unpaid and mainly the responsibility of women, who therefore worked second and third shifts alongside their jobs. As a symbolic compensation, women in full-time employment received at least one paid day off per month. Nonetheless, child-care was – like healthcare – identified as an overarching state priority and taken seriously. In various conversations we had, people confirmed that the wide range of paid care work and reproductive infrastructure made it much easier to carry out various care activities.

Mobility

In many socialist countries, it was common to have to wait many years to get a car; people in the GDR usually applied for buying one when they were 18 years of age. If they didn't need or want it, they would sell it when it finally arrived. At the same time, there was an extensive public transport network that catered for the needs of the population and was very affordable. In addition, larger enterprises were expected to contribute to the construction and maintenance of the necessary mobility infrastructure and to provide transport (shuttle bus, tram or train) for their employees. In general, state enterprises had various obligations to provide basic infrastructure, such as roads and transport, leisure and recreational activities (Liuhto 1999).

Travelling within and – with some exceptions – between the countries was affordable and accessible for most people. Most of the CEE socialist states had a very extensive railway network – the USSR, for example, had invested heavily in the Trans-Siberian Railway in its early decades. At the regional and local levels, various forms of public transport met the mobility needs of most people. While there were relatively few cars on the roads, bicycles were seen as an additional and even natural way of getting around, sharing the same roads.

Nevertheless, there was a widespread desire to own a private car. Given the limited resources, most vehicles in the socialist states, whether passenger or commercial, had to be very robust and repairable, and lasted practically forever if you had the right skills or people to fix them. A widespread reflection of this were the same old types of commercial vehicles in all the countries, and the rows of garage houses that people used as workshops to repair all kinds of vehicles

while exchanging practical skills and spare parts (Bonvin 2023, see also Vladimir Loginov's documentary 'Anthill', 2015). However, identification and satisfaction with Eastern brands fluctuated greatly and, as soon as Western models became available, the long-awaited and well-maintained car was easily replaced.

Education and culture

Education and culture were immensely important in socialist countries. Socialism, education and culture were virtually congruent. First, it was a very social(ist) ideal to provide access to good free education and culture for everyone – especially for the previously excluded working class. Second, educational institutions were supposed to educate people according to the new social(ist) ideal. Over time, the first became more restricted, especially in terms of access to higher education, while the second expanded destructively, as Mau (2019) illustrates for the GDR. However, schools took care of children and young people for most of the day so that parents could go to work. There were free or affordable school meals, school supplies, after-school care, many sports and leisure clubs and, of course, political education in youth organisations. But education was not just a matter for children; differentiated adult education and lifelong learning functioned as an important transformational factor in and for the new system (Opelt 2019).

Furthermore, cultural centres were part of the extracurricular education system in the socialist countries. These centres for culture, education and leisure were provided by the state, trade unions or state enterprises and farms. They often formed the centre of (small) town and village life, not least because prestigious buildings were reused or newly built. There was a pronounced 'circle system' with many working groups in which everything from art and culture to sport and technology could be learned and practised. This huge empowerment to recognise and develop one's own voice and strength met the ongoing transformational demands of the time. Unfortunately, most cultural centres in the GDR did not survive the privatisation period in the aftermath of 1989–1990. Before that, however, they played a crucial role in bringing people from different backgrounds together and, as such, they functioned as community (or even commoning) places. This is essentially what is needed now – social spaces for people to come together, form and strengthen their caring relationships and co-develop key transformative skills – but in a truly autonomous and empowering way, according to their local contexts, needs and interests.

Books and reading were of great importance to people of all ages, and libraries were numerous and close by – or came on wheels to the villages. Theatres and cinemas were affordable and very popular; the resources for various cultural projects and activities seemed to be plentiful. Some of them also enabled subversive challenges to the authoritarian regime in various creative ways, even leading to the so-called Singing Revolution in the Baltic states in 1989. But, in general, published (school) books and cultural activities had to conform to the socialist mindset and reproduced one-sided political narratives. Much of the cultural programme in the multi-ethnic USSR was offered only in Russian. Nevertheless, education and culture were perceived as a collective given, not something one had to be able to afford, but something that was accessible to all, allowing for significant cultural flourishing and (ambivalent) social cohesion during the socialist era.

Discussion

This chapter introduced a degrowth-based understanding of holistic care economies. As an essential building block, collective provisioning systems can make basic services and infrastructure

accessible to all to collectively address people's basic needs. We presented recent proposals for a FE, UBS and the UAA, and discussed relevant experiences from former state-socialist provision systems of the Global East. We argued that a deeper engagement with the rich heritage of the Global East in terms of, for example, basic infrastructure design and planning, (experiential) knowledge and prefigurative practices can inform, inspire and enhance decolonial degrowth scholarship.

In our qualitative research and in many conversations, we found that people in the Global East, in retrospect, often attach great importance to the social security they experienced as a given – not having to worry about existential economic issues. Being able to live a decent life with a kind of public luxury gave them a sense of general freedom and security (despite, or in contrast to, political restrictions and repression). As such basic provisioning is something people value from the past, and new proposals could (and should) build on it. Lived experience, however, has been full of contradictions and discrepancies, of ignorance, improvisation and workarounds. And lots of complaints.

We chose five sectors relevant to the state-socialist provision system and to recent provisioning proposals – housing, food, mobility, health and childcare, education and culture – which we now briefly discuss with regard to holistic and caring degrowth economies.

The combinations of economic logics and sectors varied in the state-socialist regimes, especially over time (Melegh 2021), blurring the structural separation between different spheres of the economy as illustrated in the 'iceberg' models in Figure 20.1. Generally, the part of the 'iceberg' above the waterline can be considered larger than in the current regime in terms of general visibility, financial compensation, and societal recognition. The informal economic activities of subsistence and self-provisioning, barter, reciprocity and unpaid collective work were economically necessary, in part directly supported and even initiated by the state and public authorities. Beyond household economy, the care sector and other basic services and infrastructure were recognised as the foundation for other productive and reproductive activities and declared a political priority.

Health and childcare, provision of all kinds of daily needs, education, sport, culture and social places were important concerns of spatial planning. They were free or affordable, thanks to government subsidies and directly contributing state enterprises. Located within walking or cycling distance of settlements or served by public transport, they were accessible to all.

At the same time, caring was not related to the more-than-human world. On the contrary, large-scale, fossil-based and literally terra-forming technologies were used to provide basic services and infrastructure. There were many approaches to resource conservation and recycling, but no overarching ecological perspective. Dependent on centralised policy and planning directives, centrally controlled infrastructure, and fluctuating supply, people did not truly reflect on their personal needs and resource consumption. Without real collective and individual responsibility and ownership, ignorance often developed, leading to over-consumption and waste in the face of obvious scarcity. However, practices such as recycling, repair and sharing, as well as the search for low-tech tools and technologies, are evidence of creative and inventive ways of dealing with scarcity. The magnitude and importance of these practices and skills has been exhibited wonderfully in the collaborative project 'Washing Machine Made of Beetroot' by three museums in Estonia (see Rennit 2024). The widespread dacha culture, after all, did enable a direct and caring relationship with ecological livelihoods, contributing to a convivial and sufficient lifestyle while strengthening food sovereignty. Here, access to arable land was essential.

The socialist states relied heavily on growth to rebuild infrastructure after the devastation of World War II, to overcome resource shortages and to finance the public provision system. However, the costs of the provision systems were never fully covered, and the realities lagged behind

the aspirations. New proposals must take this into account, as people became genuinely dissatisfied and lost confidence in the viability of the system.

The illustrations here demonstrate the urgent need to find ways to learn to collectively care for commons – collective resources, property and livelihoods – using democratic deliberative processes. The diffusion or even neglect of collective and individual co-caring responsibilities by the people in the socialist era was a strong issue in all sectors and resulted in people's workarounds. This can be related to a lack of true ownership, involvement and inclusion of people's local and everyday expertise in planning. A truly intersectional normative horizon for holistic caring economies will always require considering the specific local context and power relations to understand the specific needs of different communities.

With regard to transformation processes, it seems important to build *on* and *with* what exists, gradually creating new structures, processes and routines together, and enabling each other for the new. Social places such as cultural and transformative educational centres can create spaces and opportunities for this. Language is particularly important here. While many degrowth-relevant practices are relatable and can be modelled on everyday practices in the East, language varies widely, terms have different connotations, and negative experiences with key ideas may make more radical calls for degrowth less welcome in the Global East.

We have by no means been able to explore all the issues here. Therefore, we conclude with a reminder to include (post-)socialist experiences of the Global East in further developments of degrowth-related provisioning proposals. It is exciting that a 'degrowth from the East' is emerging in post-socialist countries. Scholars, activists and practitioners are contextualising and challenging calls for degrowth in a promising and creative discourse and practice.

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