

# Countering corporate violence: Degrowth, ecosocialism and organising beyond the destructive forces of capitalism

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## Abstract

Corporate violence is a form of organised violence motivated or caused by material interest, profit-seeking or economic expansion. It is inflicted on human beings or ecosystems. Complementing a Marxist theoretical frame with literature on ecosocialism and degrowth, we examine how corporate violence is inherent to and has been consistently encouraged by the capitalist mode of production. By drawing on the concepts of primitive accumulation and social metabolism, we visualise how such violence is manifested within the productive forces of capitalism – natural resources, labour, technology and money. Corporate violence, we argue, may only be countered in a post-capitalist society where the productive forces are radically transformed. We build on degrowth principles to articulate how corporate violence may be countered and how post-growth organising of productive forces may look.

## Keywords

Corporate violence, degrowth, ecosocialism, post-capitalism, post-growth, primitive accumulation, productive forces, social metabolism

## Introduction

Since June 2019, a true catastrophe has been unfolding in Australia, with bushfires of an intensity hardly ever seen before. Over 18 million hectares of land have been burnt, around one billion animals have been killed and more have been driven to extinction, 2,800 homes have been destroyed, and people lost their lives (UN Environment, 2020). This will have long-term devastating consequences. While the bushfires have been described as violent natural disasters in the media, such

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formulations conceal violence of the economic system that is propelling the climate disaster (Paul, 2016). As of 2019, Australia's economy had been experiencing 28 consecutive years of economic growth, fuelled by coal, natural gas and oil. In fact, Australia is one of the world's largest producers of fossil fuel emissions, with its ten biggest companies responsible for 670 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> a year, equal to 75% of global air traffic (Moss and Fraser, 2019; Parra et al., 2019). At the same time, the knowledge of Aboriginal communities, including how to keep bushfires under control, has been ignored while controversial government and corporate decisions on mining have paved the way for extractivism (Banerjee, 2003; Castellino, 2020). These fires in Australia depict a violence that goes beyond severe organisational failure, managerial malpractice, or the forces of nature. Instead, they indicate violence of a more systemic kind, which goes in hand with the pursuit of economic growth and corporate profit-seeking. Such violence is not always immediately visible and its consequences may take years or even decades to unfold (Galtung, 1990; Nixon, 2011). But, it is destructive.

Violence is an ambiguous concept, yet crucial for understanding and visualising oppression, repression and exploitation. While there has been a rising interest in exploring the causes, forms and effects of violence in organisation studies (e.g. Costas and Grey, 2019; Kenny, 2016), violence in relation to the capitalist mode of production remains to be theorised. Doing so and understanding where violence occurs is also crucial for knowing how to counter it and build alternatives. This paper aims to analyse how corporate violence is inherent to the capitalist mode of production and to address how this form of violence may be countered. It brings together a Marxist reading of violence with ecosocialism and degrowth. In particular, we adopt the concept of corporate violence to analyse the destructive forces of capitalist production (see Tyner, 2016; Tyner and Inwood, 2014). To address how corporate violence may be countered, we draw on degrowth – a body of literature that has breathed new life into critique of economic growth and the capitalist system, as well as into the debate on how to alternatively organise our societies.

We understand degrowth as an umbrella term that critiques the centrality of economic growth and economies in contemporary societies, and embraces alternatives that are simultaneously ecologically sustainable and socially just (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson, 2016). Degrowth implies a reorganisation of societies so that biophysical throughput – flows of material, energy and waste – decreases whilst ensuring well-being for all (Kallis, 2018). Despite remaining challenges and tensions between the two, Andreucci and Engel-Di Mauro (2019: 177) have argued that 'an intellectual and political convergence between degrowth and ecosocialism (and eco-Marxism) is not only possible but also increasingly necessary' (see also Koch, 2019; Leonardi, 2019a). We agree, not because degrowth and ecosocialism supposedly dovetail each other, but because they have different but compatible and mutually reinforcing strengths. Whereas Marxist theory offers a strong theoretical apparatus for analysing violence in production and emphasises the problem of capital accumulation, degrowth offers a solid critique of ecological limits associated with the perpetual pursuit of economic growth. Social justice is key to both. In response to earlier critiques of degrowth from ecosocialists (e.g. Foster, 2011; see also Andreucci and Engel-Di Mauro, 2019), we articulate degrowth as a critique of not only growth, but also capital accumulation (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson, 2016; Kallis, 2019a).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the notion of corporate violence to describe organised violence associated with the pursuit of profit and growth. We ground corporate violence in the capitalist mode of production and refer to primitive accumulation and social metabolism – informed by both ecosocialism and degrowth – to theorise it. Second, we show the corporate violence associated with productive forces under capitalism – natural 'resources', labour, technology and money. Third, drawing on degrowth literature, we articulate how corporate violence can be countered and how productive forces can be organised for regeneration instead.

## **What is violence? Corporations, mode of production and social metabolism**

There has been a rising interest in analysing violence in organisation studies, with empirical and theoretical work covering broad topics from child and sexual abuse in organisations to military violence and violence of markets (Bloomfield et al., 2017; Kenny, 2016; Harris et al., 2019; Varman, 2018). Yet, these contributions are not numerous and the topic of violence has largely been omitted, despite the pervasiveness of violence in organisations. Costas and Grey (2019) characterise violence as ‘absent-presence’ and ‘present-absence’ in organisation studies, connecting this to particular takes on the work of Weber and Foucault. While we respond to their call for more studies of violence in and around organisations, our focus is different. Our aim is to visibilise violence that goes beyond harm inflicted on people, as it includes ecosystems, too. We are not interested in all violence that happens in organisations, but specifically violence connected to the capitalist mode of production and economic growth. Throughout this paper, we use the concept of corporate violence to articulate this focus.

### *Corporate violence*

Developed in the field of legal studies, corporate violence is a concept that refers to violence motivated or caused by material interest, profit-seeking and economic expansion. It is the result of ‘corporate policies and actions that expose living beings to harmful conditions, products, or substances’ (Klein, 2014: 1). Originally introduced to denote violence conducted by corporations, corporate violence may also be pursued by other organisations oriented at profit-seeking and economic growth, including nation states and supranational institutions (e.g. Andreucci and Kallis, 2017; Chowdhury, 2019; Paul, 2016).

As with other influential conceptualisations of violence (e.g. Galtung, 1969; Žižek, 2008), corporate violence goes beyond interpersonal and direct forms of violence as it is also manifested in indirect and collective – in other words, structural – forms. These forms of violence are often difficult to link to concrete organisational policies or actions as the consequences are only visible years later or further down the line (Chowdhury, 2019; Matthews, 2008). Barak (2003: 123) suggests that one of the most common forms of corporate violence ‘involves the mass polluting and poisoning of the environment’. Climate change, to take one prominent example, is a consequence of ‘slow’ corporate violence as it is exercised over a period of time, and may hit hardest with time – whether in relation to human beings or ecosystems (see Nixon, 2011). Although indirect and structural forms of corporate violence might need more elaborate explanations, evidence shows that corporate violence can also take direct forms – for example, when corporations inflict physical violence, including arranging assassinations of community organisers, unionists and environmentalists (Global Witness, 2019).

Corporate violence is made possible by an extensive ideological and institutional apparatus justifying the capitalist mode of production. With powerful economic interests influencing legislation, corporate violence may be enacted through or within the law, but also in violation of it (e.g. Boekhout van Solinge, 2014; Springer, 2013). Furthermore, corporate discourses justify, downplay or conceal violence, for example when narratives of green growth or sustainable development come with environmental destruction and human suffering (Andreucci and Kallis, 2017; Galtung, 1990; Varman, 2018). In management speak, an extensive use of euphemisms and depersonified language is common, for example when victims of corporate violence are seen as ‘units’ or ‘costs’ (Costas and Grey, 2019; Matthews 2008). Some mechanisms of corporate violence have been critically scrutinised in organisation studies earlier (see Costas and Grey, 2019), though often without

making an explicit connection to violence or only mentioning it in passing (e.g. Hargie et al., 2010; Nisar and Masood, 2019).

Violence is bound up in a kind of dialectic, where a broad, inclusive and all-encompassing use of the concept makes it possible to scandalise the destructive effects of capitalism through strong negative connotations of the term violence, but a use that is too expansive risks trivialising the term and making it less valuable for critical analysis (Winter, 2012). The merit of corporate violence, we argue, is that it points out particular powerful, collective agents of violence. This makes it more concrete than notions like structural violence, where violence is seen as present in structures and where agents of violence are hard to identify (Tyner and Inwood, 2014).

### *Capitalist mode of production and primitive accumulation*

Even though the term ‘mode of production’ has been marginalised in much Marxist and critical scholarship during the past 30 years, not least since the emergence of post-structuralism, attempts have been made to revitalise it. Graeber (2006: 62), for example, has suggested that ‘mode of production’ is not just about ‘making and struggling over some kind of material surplus, but, equally, about the mutual fashioning of human beings – the process sometimes referred to in the Marxist tradition as “social production”’. Traditionally, the term has referred to social relations of production that develop over time and exist independently of individual choice, with accumulation as the overriding purpose, enabled by a classed state, primarily safeguarding property rights (Fine and Saad-Filho, 1975/2016). In capitalism, the mode of production is characterised by the separation of workers from the means of production, separation of the spheres of production and social reproduction, private and for-profit organisational forms and enlargement of scale, as well as the centrality of the market for the allocation of resources and the pursuit of compound economic growth (Fraser, 2014; Kallis, 2019a; Koch, 2019; Sayer, 1987). To study violence in the mode of production, then, is to study the social relations of exploitation, domination and oppression within capitalism itself (Loyd, 2009).

In organisation studies, injustices in and around organisations have been exposed and criticised extensively, especially within the Marxist tradition, through themes such as the labour process, bureaucracy and control (Braverman, 1974; Goldman and Van Houten, 1977; Jermier, 1998). However, violence has rarely been explicitly mobilised and discussed in this work and Marxist scholarship more generally. So when Balibar (2009: 99) discusses Marxism’s ‘decisive contribution to understanding “the role of violence in history”’, he states that paradoxically it has been ‘fundamentally incapable of thinking (and thus confronting) the tragic connection that associates politics with violence from the inside, in a unity of opposites that is itself supremely “violent”’. Balibar explains this by outlining three reasons: first, ‘the absolute privilege that Marxist theory assigns to one form of domination (exploitation of labour)’, second, ‘anthropological optimism at the heart of the conception of “progress” defined as the development of the productive forces of humanity’ and third, ‘the metaphysics of history’ that ‘transmits to Marxism the theological and philosophical scheme of the conversion of violence into justice’ (Balibar, 2009: 99).

Nevertheless, Marx and Engels did speak about violence. They did so in a relatively expansive way that is connected to the way corporate violence is conceptualised in this paper. Already in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels (1845/1987) referred to both death from the sword or bullet (direct violence) and death from deprivation (structural violence) as *murder*, implying that ‘violence is always mediated by explicit or implicit cultural and political norms, by legal and moral norms of what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate force, by the distinction between kinds of injuries that are considered permissible and sanctioned and those that are not’ (Winter, 2012: 200). Marx is often cited saying that ‘capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every

pore, with blood and dirt' (1867/1996: 748). From a Marxist standpoint, violence is inherent to capital accumulation – a point Balibar (2009: 109) makes by referring to the German word *Gewalt* in Marx's work:

[t]he theme of force [*Gewalt*], if we look carefully, is so persistent in *Capital* (particularly in Volume I), that this whole work could be read as a treatise on the structural violence that capitalism inflicts (and as a treatise on the *excess of violence* inherent in the history of capitalism), described in its subjective and objective dimensions, of which the critique of political economy provides the red thread.

*Gewalt* is an important term for understanding how capitalism perpetuates violence. It may mean force, power, and formal and/or legal processes that enable violent action itself. In short, Marxism views capitalism as violent in at least two ways: capitalism is essentially based on violence, but it also perpetuates violence, albeit often in obscured and 'civilised' forms (Balibar, 2009; Bonefeld, 2011; Luxemburg, 1913/2003).

A key concept to describe how the capitalist mode of production is based on violence is primitive accumulation. Marx himself used the term to denote 'the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production', which 'appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and the mode of production corresponding with it' (Marx, 1867/1996: 705–706). Examples he included, however, come across as contemporary – enclosure of the common lands, expropriation of peasants from their means of subsistence, and use of the credit system to produce such expropriation. Thus, it has been argued that 'primitive accumulation is necessarily present in "mature" capitalist systems and, given the conflicting nature of capitalist relations, assumes a "continuous" character' (De Angelis, 2001: 3; see also Harvey, 2003a; Fraser, 2014). In other words, primitive accumulation is not an incidental deviation from the norm in capitalism, but is absolutely foundational to its functioning. The notion of primitive accumulation helps to detect and expose corporate violence as inherent to and continuous in capitalism, which makes it an important though underused concept for organisation studies (see Banerjee, 2008; Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016).

### *Social metabolism and ecological limits*

From the position of ecosocialist degrowth, the notion of social metabolism has the capacity to explain how violence is perpetuated in capital accumulation, complementing our earlier discussion on primitive accumulation (Clark and Foster, 2010; Kallis, 2018). By incorporating both exploitation of labour and ecological destruction, social metabolism points to how corporate violence operates at the nexus between social and natural systems. Coming from the work of natural scientists of the 19th century, such as von Liebig and Moleschott, it inspired both Marx and the work in ecological economics, the former having had more impact on ecosocialism and the latter on degrowth (Martínez-Alier, 2007; Schmidt, 1971/2014).

While research on degrowth explicitly argues for the end of exploitation (Kallis, 2018, 2019a), there are few social theories where exploitation has been theorised as thoroughly as in the Marxist theoretical tradition. In particular, ecosocialism has integrated both ecological destruction and labour exploitation into the discussion of social metabolism (e.g. Foster and Burkett, 2008; Mészáros, 1995; Schmidt, 1971/2014). Marx saw the labour process in metabolic terms, as 'the real material relation between nature and humanity formed by the labour and production process' and argued that capitalist production created a rift in this metabolism (Foster, 2018: no page number). In other words, with unequal exchange (Emmanuel, 1972) and unequal ecological exchange (Hornborg, 2011) of global trade, the social metabolism of capitalism not only leads to the

destruction of local habitats and unjust globalisation, but labour's alienation and exploitation require the exploitation and alienation of nature, too (Barca, 2019b; Foster, 1999; Mészáros, 1995). Because economic growth requires expansion of markets and new commodity frontiers (Moore, 2000), primitive accumulation always accompanies the destructive social metabolism of capitalism. It has been argued, however, that Marx understood social metabolism in endosomatic terms, as referring to processes between the human bodies and nature, and not exosomatic terms, which refer to socio-technical systems and their energy requirements (Martínez-Alier, 2007).

Exosomatic social metabolism includes, for example, heating homes, moving goods around the world and using electronic devices, and can only be explained by economics, history, politics, culture and technology (Kallis, 2018; Martínez-Alier, 2007). This understanding of social metabolism has informed degrowth scholarship and its critical position that there are absolute biophysical limits to growth. These limits are defined by the second law of thermodynamics – the law of entropy – which states the irreversibility of natural processes (Kallis, 2018; Koch, 2019). Georgescu-Roegen (1971) was early in applying it to the economic process, arguing that it is 'an irreversible process of conversion of goods and services, inevitably dissipating large quantities of high-entropy materials and waste' (Kallis, 2018: 26–27). According to this law, economic growth inevitably comes together with increased biophysical throughput. The vast body of work in ecological economics has quantified material and energy flows of economic systems, highlighting their massive contribution to ecological destruction (see González de Molina and Toledo, 2014). Drawing on this knowledge, degrowth scholars have problematised the ideology of green growth, which is based on the hypothesis that economic growth can be decoupled from biophysical throughput. However, there is no empirical evidence of decoupling at the global level and over a sustained period of time while higher levels of economic development have been found to come with increasing ecological degradation (Fritz and Koch, 2016; Hickel and Kallis, 2019; Parrique et al., 2019).

To summarise, the concept of social metabolism helps to visibilise the violence of capital accumulation. Such metabolism can be characterised by two types of unequal exchanges, the ecological and the economic. This 'boils down to two different but joined together forms of exploitation' and 'implies understanding how exploitation between social sectors prompts the exploitation of nature, and vice versa' (González de Molina and Toledo, 2014: 99). Furthermore, it shows how violence to natural systems will be perpetuated in any social system that is aimed at constant expansion of production (Kallis, 2019a), helping to avoid reproducing the optimism about the 'progress' that productive forces can bring (see Balibar, 2009).

## **Productive forces as destructive forces**

Economic growth and technological progress are central aims of economic policies in capitalist societies, while profit is the aim of companies and corporations (Kallis, 2019a; Nesterova, 2020). In mainstream economics, in economic policy and in corporate policies, there is an assumption that natural resources, labour, technology and money – often referred to as factors of production – come together to produce a supply for the market demand (e.g. Mankiw, 2016). Seen as technical terms, they are treated as 'things', and ignore the social relations that constitute them. In Sayer's words (1987: 44–45), 'the independence of "material" productive forces from social relations, their character as "things", and their supposedly inherent tendency to develop, such development being the "prime governor" of history, emerge precisely as forms of appearance, arising out of specifically capitalist production relations'. For Foster (2018), the turn of 'productive forces' into 'destructive forces' under capitalism has been one of Marx's most profound insights. So, in this section, we understand productive forces as simultaneously material and social, as well as mutually connected



in the web of production (Graham, 2015). We show their destructive side, elaborating how corporate violence is part of each of these.

### *Natural 'resources'*

Capital accumulation and the pursuit of economic growth involve continuous primitive accumulation of nature, via, for example, land-grabbing, privatising the commons and limiting people's access to life-necessary means of subsistence (e.g. Banerjee, 2008; Lyons and Westoby, 2014; Springer, 2013; Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016). The Environmental Justice (EJ) Atlas maps environmental conflicts across the world, showing that they are present everywhere, but mostly in the Global South where massive mining and extraction take place. Roy and Martínez-Alier (2019) analyse more than 200 conflicts in India – the country with the highest number of cases in the EJ Atlas – and argue that multifaceted violence is their key characteristic, including an alarming number of murders, coming together with structural and slow violence. Different actors are involved in corporate violence in relation to natural resources, including governments, international institutions, investors and mid-sized companies. However, corporations are the main agent, with Royal Dutch Shell, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, Chevron, Vale and Monsanto being the ones that feature most in the cases mapped (EJ Atlas, n/a), in stark contrast to their glossy discourses of corporate social responsibility and sustainability.

While the transition to using renewable resources is arguably the way forward, their industrial implementation comes with corporate violence, via primitive accumulation, perpetuated by slow violence to ecosystems (e.g. Del Bene et al., 2018; Guðmundsdóttir et al., 2018; Yenneti et al., 2016). For example, Del Bene et al.'s (2018) analysis of more than 200 conflicts involving dams shows that violence is a recurring feature in dam construction and operation, including repressions, criminalisation and violent targeting of activists – especially high where indigenous people are involved – coupled with structural violence including negative environmental and health impacts. They call it 'extractivism of renewables'. To take a concrete example, Charanka Solar Park in Gujarat in India, while framed as an inclusive renewable energy project, in reality came with enclosure of common land and dispossession of vulnerable communities whose subsistence depended on it (Yenneti et al., 2016). In this case, corporate violence was accomplished by a combination of legal, illegal and extra-legal mechanisms, including using the ambiguity of local law on land ownership and deceit of local people (Yenneti et al., 2016). This shows how corporate violence includes force, but also legal (see also Lyons and Westoby, 2014; Springer, 2013) and discursive mechanisms, including derealisation and positioning those who resist as enemies to sustainability and development (Andreucci and Kallis, 2017; Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016).

In an intensive industrial system, industrial disasters with devastating impacts on the environment are not uncommon. For example, McCully (2001) recorded 48 dam failures that killed more than ten people since 1860, even if statistics on industrial disasters are generally hard to find. The biggest industrial disaster was the Bhopal gas tragedy in India, caused by Union Carbide in 1984, killing 20,000 people and making 120,000 people ill (Veldman and Parker, 2012). Some of the more recent ones were the oil catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico caused by British Petroleum in 2010, the BHP Billiton/Vale dam burst in Brazil in 2015 and Nornickel's Arctic disaster in Russia in 2020. These combine different forms of corporate violence, starting from direct environmental destruction, deaths of and injuries to human beings and living organisms, to long-term devastation and 'slow' violence accompanying them (Nixon, 2011).

For example, as a result of the BHP Billiton/Vale dam burst in Brazil in 2015, a whole area (including the Bento Rodrigues village) was immediately turned into a wasteland by the toxic ore mud contaminated with arsenic, lead, chromium and a variety of other heavy metals, killing 19 and

displacing 700 people (Weis, 2015). The fact that the mud travelled down the Doce river will have long-term effects on other communities and habitats. But, in so far as BHP Billiton/Vale manage to obscure the chain between causes and effects, they will avoid substantial legal responsibility. What helps them to do this is also that ecocide is currently not recognised as a crime in international law (Higgins et al., 2013). As it has been reported, BHP Billiton – one of Australia's carbon majors (Moss and Fraser, 2019) – was reported to have known of the risk, but neglected to act (BBC, 2019a). This echoes earlier research, arguing that 'dam disasters are often not unavoidable or unforeseeable, but instead allowed to happen', with management decisions driven by profit motives and economic pressures, and 'silencing of voices that do not fit dominant success stories of progress' (Huber et al., 2017: 3). Industrial disasters like these are often positioned as one-off events, something that would not *normally* happen. However, it may be more accurate to see them as extreme manifestations of destruction inherent to industrial production and its acceleration, which is not always visible in daily business practice.

### *Labour and work*

Work has a central role in capitalist societies, through which the worth of individuals is often defined. Organisation and division of labour, however, are unjustly distributed, with the hardest and least valued work falling on the shoulders of working-class communities, women, people of colour and migrants. With slavery arguably being a predecessor of Taylorist production (Cooke, 2003), work in many of today's industries has been described as modern slavery, most present in agriculture, mining and extraction, construction, and some forms of manufacturing, as well as unregulated or poorly regulated service industries (Crane, 2013). They are characterised by forced labour and ownership/control via threat and abuse, dehumanisation and commoditisation, constraints on freedom and movement, and economic exploitation through underpayment (Crane, 2013: 51). Taylorism itself – powerfully scrutinised in Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* almost half a century ago – has not disappeared, but has entered new capitalist sites of production and new sectors of the economy.

Tedious labour-intensive production has increasingly moved to countries where labour is cheap, characterised by unequal exchange (Emmanuel, 1972). Countries in the Global South have become the entire world's factories, as well as the sites for extraction and disposal, with production often undertaken in hazardous, dangerous and unprotected conditions. It is not uncommon for wages not to be enough even to cover the very basic human needs. A notorious example is mining for minerals in Congo. People working in the cobalt, copper and other mines there risk their lives every day, while the communities living in the areas are subjected to toxic harm, and child labour is widely used (Kara, 2018; Mantz, 2008). Mining corporations are often taking advantage of a lack of oversight, using their influence in the region to force both workers and local communities to ensure that mining continues. This use of power to make the mine essential for the economic welfare of the community while exposing it to numerous health and welfare hazards, is reminiscent of slavery and can also be compared to Marx's *Gewalt*. Such conditions are nothing less than enslavement that characterises primitive accumulation, which includes direct and structural forms of corporate violence, not least since legal protection is either absent or not applied (Graeber, 2006).

Notably, the minerals mined in this violent way are the starting point of the long value chain for digital technologies. Corporate violence continues into the manufacturing of electronics, too. Foxconn, the largest industrial employer in China that employs over a million people, has been reliant on employing migrant labour using flexible contracts. Living in dormitories and working on factory sites nearby – both highly securitised – their work is characterised by extreme labour intensity, discipline and control, beatings and punishments for mistakes or disobedience, which has



resulted in a wave of employee suicides in 2010 (Pun et al., 2016). Foxconn's model is not an exception. It characterises electronics manufacturing more generally, and operates in different parts of the world, such as Europe, South America and the US (Andrijasevic and Sachetto, 2017; Lüthje and Butollo, 2017). Corporate violence – from labour in Congo's mines to assembly workers in Foxconn factories – is the base of digital commodities that are associated with successful Big Tech companies, showing how capital accumulation in one place relies on primitive accumulation and exploitation elsewhere (De Angelis, 2001).

Even with health and safety regulations in place, seemingly decent working conditions, higher salaries and shorter working hours, work remains alienating, involves deskilling and lacks meaning for the majority of people (Chertkovskaya and Stoborod, 2018). However, corporate culture and corporate social responsibility rhetoric can obscure corporate violence and alienation associated with work. For example, workers can be seduced by consumption opportunities that come with work or the company brand they can identify with (Chertkovskaya et al., 2020).

Furthermore, work under neoliberalism has become more precarious, with employability having substituted job security (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013; Standing, 2011). As the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has shown, insecure jobs that are valued least by the capitalist system – care workers, nurses, bus drivers, garbage collectors, shop attendants etc – happen to be the most essential for the daily functioning of societies. Job insecurity could be described as a form of structural corporate violence, which also tends to lead to intergroup conflicts, with people in similar situations fighting each other rather than the capitalist society that had created such conditions (e.g. Schwebel, 1997). The structural violence of job insecurity becomes particularly exposed in times of capitalist crises, with those on flexible contracts being the first to suffer. In addition, a new wave of corporate digitalisation that prefers using digital technologies and artificial intelligence poses a threat to labour, with more than 20 million jobs expected to be replaced by robots by 2030 (BBC, 2019b). While many of these jobs suffer from the problems that we have described in this section, the aim of this digitalisation is not to benefit workers by releasing their time for more creative activities, but capital. It is to material and social sides of technology under capitalism that we now turn.

## Technology

Technology is often understood as both a productive and a progressive force that is no more than applied science, with technological discoveries presented as leading to, or being a precondition for, market expansion and economic growth (see e.g. Ark et al., 2013). This is, however, technology fetishism, which conceals the social and material embeddedness of technology into the capitalist mode of production (Harvey, 2003a; Hornborg, 2014). Technology is developed in the interest of capital and there is a tendency in capitalism 'to choose those technologies that maximise the overall throughput of resources and energy in the interest of higher overall economic output', which has a destructive side, too (Magdoff and Foster, 2011: 32–33). An awareness of this was articulated by Marx (1867/1996: 507–508): '[c]apitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the labourer'. Broadening this statement to our framework, his thesis can be expanded to depletion of nature more generally, which is what we focus on in this section.

Capitalism has been promoting technologies that have been simultaneously profitable and particularly destructive of the environment – 'fossil fuel dependency, toxic synthetic chemicals (arising in particular from petrochemical production), nuclear energy, large dams', and, '[i]n its headlong rush to expand, capitalism systematically gives rise to technologies that produce waste in vast quantities – as long as the costs can be externalised on nature and society and not on corporations themselves' (Magdoff and Foster, 2011: 32; see also Barca, 2014). Thus, development of

technology as a productive force under capitalism constitutes structural corporate violence to the environment, where effects of pollution and climate change are not immediately visible (Nixon, 2011). This violence intensifies when knowledge about the devastating environmental effects of technology becomes widely available, but business as usual continues. An illustrative example of this are the aggressive attempts by petrochemical companies to expand plastic production despite its fossil-dependency and very limited recyclability.

Technology fetishism is so strong, however, that the hypothesis that a breakthrough in more efficient technologies would allow economic growth to continue without environmental degradation is key to not only corporations, but global governance institutions and frameworks, such as Sustainable Development Goals, UNEP, OECD and the World Bank (Hickel and Kallis, 2019). This assumption is often also reproduced in contemporary Marxist accounts, due to the long-term reading of technology as a progressive force in itself in orthodox Marxism (Hornborg, 2014; Sayer, 1987).

Even the most promising technologies have limits. Renewable energy is dependent on mining of minerals, requires space, and its efficiency is incomparable with that of fossil-based power (Kallis, 2018). A lot of emphasis is put on efficiency improvements of technology, but there is long-standing empirical evidence – called Jevons Paradox – that they ultimately result in higher biophysical throughput due to increased production and consumption of more efficient products (Parrique et al., 2019). Furthermore, technologies where effects are uncertain and possibly hazardous, thus containing the potential for violence, are still widely proposed or used by different companies, including fracking, geoengineering and nuclear power. In particular, despite arguments of non-viability, bio-energy with carbon capture and storage is a technology for negative emissions that the most optimistic climate scenarios rely on (Hickel and Kallis, 2019). Widespread use of this technology, however, would require a lot of land and thus comes with risks of dispossession, and also risk of violence to humans and environments due to, for example, carbon leakages as a result of seismic activity (Muraca and Neuber, 2018). Corporate violence is thus not only in continuous use of destructive technologies, but also in promoting technology to address environmental problems whilst neglecting its limitations and sidelining the argument that an absolute reduction of material and energy throughput is necessary.

## Money

Much of today's economy and its growth rely on the monetary system and its perpetual creation of debt (Graeber, 2009). Marx saw the credit system as an important lever of primitive accumulation: '[a]s with the stroke of an enchanter's wand, it [the credit system] endows barren money with the power of breeding and thus turns it into capital' (Marx, 1867/1996: 742). He was referring specifically to public debt here, but today his point extends to private banks, who also have an almost unlimited capacity to issue credit (Bjerg, 2014). Since the 1970s, financial institutions themselves can create money as currency is no longer pegged to gold. This deregulated credit has been used to expand production and consumption globally, but also intensified dispossession, exploitation of people and environmental degradation (Pettifor, 2019).

The growth and extended power of the credit system 'have made it the primary mechanism for continuous and expanded accumulation through dispossession' (Harvey, 2003b: 21). Despite the ease with which credit can be issued, money-lenders demand high rates of return from individuals and households. Debtors are morally bound by expectations to pay back their loans, while private debt and the inability to repay it are often presented as an individual, rather than a social problem (Graeber, 2011). Evictions as a result of not being able to pay one's mortgages, though often lawful, may be seen as an instance of direct and structural forms of corporate violence, where mortgage becomes a disciplinary tool (e.g. Desmond, 2016; García-Lamarca and Kaika, 2016).

Furthermore, evictions are tightly connected to new forms of profit-making by the debt recovery and enforcement industry, produced through repossession and extraction of debt from low-income people and places (Cooper and Paton, 2019).

This social obligation for people to pay back their debt and dispossession if they cannot is in stark contrast with the position enjoyed by private financial institutions, as the financial crisis of the late 2000s demonstrated. Caused by the household debt bubble, the explosion of debt and speculation for which financial institutions were hugely responsible, these organisations were bailed out by states across the globe (Foster and Magdoff, 2009). While CEOs of banks exercised apology avoidance and tried to articulate alignment with others affected by the financial crisis (Hargie et al., 2010), the burden of the crisis – austerity policies, devastating effects on employment, wages and social welfare – fell on people and the public sector, supporting the corporate violence of financial institutions and new waves of privatisation and neoliberalisation (Marazzi, 2010). Austerity measures in education, for example, resulted in a threefold increase in fees in the UK, making the younger generations even more indebted and thus more vulnerable to exploitation. In healthcare, years of austerity have made national healthcare systems less prepared to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

Financial institutions engage in corporate violence by contributing to the ongoing environmental destruction. A lot of their investment activity goes towards fossil fuels, big agribusinesses and other powerful and fossil-reliant players, whilst there is a finance gap when it comes to funding decarbonisation (Bridge et al., 2020). For example, after the Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015, global banks channeled \$1.9 trillion into fossil fuel financing, which has increased each year since then (RAN, 2019). Unfortunately governments use their funding possibilities in a similar way. Global fossil fuel subsidies are extremely high, and were \$5.3 trillion worldwide in 2015, amounting to 6.5% of global GDP (Coady et al., 2017). In Europe, €112 billion a year is spent on fossil fuel subsidies by public actors, including via public finance and state-owned enterprise investment (Gençsü et al., 2017).

Furthermore, carbon trading and biodiversity offset schemes explicitly legalise corporate violence by giving the permission to destroy biospheres and habitats, whilst supposedly contributing to their preservation elsewhere, and often dispossessing local communities. For example, a forestry plantation in Uganda operated by the Norwegian forestry and climate credit company Green Resources allowed the Swedish Energy Agency to offset their carbon emissions, but it brought destruction of food systems and farming, denial of rights and livelihoods for the local population, denial of access to sites of cultural importance, as well as environmental problems (Lyons and Westoby, 2014; The Oakland Institute, 2019).<sup>1</sup> One should be aware of the heavy emphasis on these instruments in the current discussions of reaching ‘net-zero’ emissions aimed for by many countries and companies alike.

## Countering corporate violence by organising for degrowth

Now that we have illustrated how corporate violence is operating in and through capitalist productive forces, we more fully introduce degrowth theory and research. This will contribute to our discussion of how to counter corporate violence. Whereas ecosocialist frameworks often follow Marx’s unwillingness to develop utopian visions, such visions are key to much of the debates within degrowth. Degrowth calls for the social and economic organisation to be based on ecological sustainability and social justice, instead of the dictate of the market. Autonomy, care, cooperation, conviviality, democratic decision-making, mutual aid and solidarity are some of the key principles that would help to enable this (e.g. Asara et al., 2013; Barca et al., 2019; Leonardi, 2019a).

In the rest of this section we provide a sketch of what organising in line with degrowth would look like, its implications for productive forces and building alliances.

### *Organisation beyond growth, profit and capitalism*

Research on degrowth has been emphasising the centrality of care and social reproduction for socio-ecological transformation, but has so far paid less attention to alternative organisation of productive forces (Barca et al., 2019). In other words, it is not enough to ‘escape’ from the economy (cf. Fournier, 2008) – the economy needs to be transformed. Research that has looked at this topic so far has highlighted the need of going away from growth and profit-making as key features of production and organisation under degrowth (Hinton, 2020; Nesterova, 2020). Drawing on the argument that violence is inherent to the capitalist mode of production developed in this paper, we would like to emphasise that the organisation of productive forces should also move away from capitalism. Thus, countering corporate violence is possible only in a post-capitalist society that is operating within limits – ethical and biophysical (Kallis, 2019b; Trainer, 2012).

Rethinking organisation and organisational forms is central to achieve sustainable and just economies. Organisational forms, we argue, must be designed to avoid (primitive) accumulation and ensure a regenerative social metabolism. This has implications both for ownership models and the purpose of organisations. For example, a for-profit company with an environmental profile is simply not enough as it offers only a somewhat slower contribution to injustices and environmental degradation (Hinton, 2020). Organisations need to be embedded in the communities they operate in. Collective and equitable forms of ownership and organising need to come to the forefront – cooperatives, commons and community-run organisations. These forms avoid separation of labour from the means of production, in contrast to the corporate and for-profit-forms. However, these forms of ownership do not automatically imply a regenerative social metabolism. For example, these organisational forms can also reproduce an expansionist economic logic, internal hierarchies or even oppressions. Thus, countering corporate violence is also about being open and self-critical, alert to potential closures, exclusions and even violence that may come with certain actions (Barca et al., 2019).

### *Productive forces for regenerative organisation*

In a post-capitalist society organised on degrowth principles, nature would not be understood as a resource but as an ecosystem that may be used to support a regenerative social metabolism. This means going fossil-fuel free and using renewable energy or bio-based materials to satisfy democratically decided upon material needs. Justice would be key to how ecosystems are engaged with, valuing autonomy, direct democracy and commoning, while avoiding top-down implementation of any resource-related projects (Asara et al., 2013). Bringing corporate violence inherent to extractivist practices or unjust implementations of renewable solutions to an end requires alliance building, for example, with climate and environmental justice movements around the world, such as Fridays for Future, indigenous communities and Via Campesina. The degrowth movement already has a strong connection to some of these movements, despite some important differences, with both seeking a politico-metabolic reconfiguration of economies and aspiring for other ways of being in the world (Akbulut et al., 2019; Singh, 2019).

One way to achieve this is by ending the corporate violence associated with work and labour which is a key issue in the degrowth movement. The struggle for liberation *from* and *of* work articulated by Barca (2019a) offers a compelling example. The former refers to the creation of spaces, and time set aside for regenerative activities outside work, where bonds, communities and

social action may be built. The latter refers to organising work differently itself, putting worker control and transformation from treadmill metabolism to regenerative production at the heart of it. This could be done, for example, via non-hierarchical ways of organising work and via a more equal societal division of work, where everyone contributes to work that is less pleasant but has to be done and also has spaces to engage in work that is more creative and gratifying (Chertkovskaya and Stoborod, 2018). Reduction of working time is often seen as a concrete measure that would help to transform work, releasing the time from work that is alienating and creating time for social reproduction and liberated work (Leonardi, 2019b). Worker ownership and workplace democracy, however, are key to all of this. It is important to build alliances between the degrowth movement and the labour movement for both resisting and overcoming work-related corporate violence (Barca, 2019b).

Additionally, a post-capitalist society organised on degrowth principles would not develop and use technology to serve profit-seeking, economic growth or ever-increasing productivity. The corporate violence associated with technology can be countered by repurposing technology to support a regenerative social metabolism. To achieve this, technology would be first and foremost a common tool rather than a proprietarian solution to all problems, made to be convivial – i.e. maintained and repaired with simple tools (Illich, 1973; Kerschner et al., 2018). Technology would eventually also be de-fetishised as, in a post-capitalist society, technology would no longer be equated with progress and development. Various technologies would be democratically controlled while a precautionary principle would be key for deciding on uncertain and potentially dangerous technologies (Grunwald, 2018; Muraca and Neuber, 2018). Decision-making on technology can be assisted by developing methods that help to evaluate technologies along the degrowth principles (Vetter, 2018). In order to move towards ending technology-related corporate violence, alliances need to be built with groups engaging in low-tech and convivial technologies, and who already use technology as commons (Kostakis, 2018). The approaches they engage in, such as ‘design globally, manufacture locally’ models, can help to use technology to build alternatives, even if their biophysical impacts are to be continually addressed (Kostakis et al., 2018).

When it comes to money in a post-capitalist society, there is an acknowledgement in much degrowth scholarship of the importance of ensuring public control over the creation of money, on the one hand, and supporting local and/or complementary currencies, on the other (Hornborg, 2017; Mellor, 2015). The former would mean that any investments are channeled into restoring social metabolism and avoiding or countering corporate violence in other productive forces, supporting, for example, worker-led organisations, community energy and convivial technology. The latter can be of different formats, such as local currencies, timebanks or even cryptocurrencies, but used in non-speculative ways to support local economies and alternative markets – not to be confused with market economy – built on mutualist principles (Lloveras et al., 2019). To counter the corporate violence of debt, degrowth is to create alliances with movements challenging how money is created, used and what the financial system does to people, such as anti-austerity and anti-eviction movements, or initiatives like Positive Money.

### *Building alliances*

When articulating productive forces for regenerative organisation, it becomes clear that the vision offered by degrowth is not unique, but is something that speaks to the grassroots struggles happening all over the world already. Building alliances with different movements is in itself of key importance in countering corporate violence on all fronts and in relation to all productive forces. For example, degrowth summer schools in Germany have been organised in connection to disobedient climate action against mining, being an example of such an alliance. Engagement in direct



action and disobedience, in non-violent ways, is one way to be heard (D'Alisa et al., 2013; Renou, 2015). Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, or Ende Gelände climate action are vivid examples of how climate change and environmental problems have been brought to the forefront of public discussion in Europe. On the other hand, alternative law-making and creating formal mechanisms for socio-ecological transformation are also becoming key for the political agenda of degrowth (Barca et al., 2019). This agenda manifests in degrowth policy proposals that include, for example, a carbon tax, shorter working hours and debt audit (Kallis and Research & Degrowth, 2015; Kallis, 2018) and would further limit the corporate violence of the capitalist mode of production. Degrowth scholars have also been part of the broader coalition that wrote the Green New Deal for Europe (GNDE, 2019), which contains many concrete proposals for using policy mechanisms to make a just transition to sustainable post-growth economies.

However, while building alliances for realising degrowth principles, mechanisms through which corporate violence is exercised are not to be reproduced. Integrity and responsibility for action should be put to the forefront, as well as living up to the multiplicity of degrowth as a concept (Paulson, 2017). Any group engaging with degrowth principles in practice should keep reflecting about these issues, and would need to pay even more attention to them if degrowth starts having more opportunities to be enacted and is successful in making its voice heard. Such reflection is key for building a world where multiple worlds fit, informed by different epistemic systems (Kothari et al., 2019).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have illustrated how violence is inherent to the productive forces of capitalist society, and how degrowth principles may contribute to countering this violence and organising societies that are centred on regenerative social metabolism. First, we have contributed to the discussion of violence in organisation studies by elaborating the concept of corporate violence. Second, we have contributed to the theoretical discussion of post-growth organising – the topic of this special issue. We have done this by arguing that post-growth organising needs to be post-capitalist, and by showing how organisations and productive forces built on degrowth principles may look.

Using the notion of corporate violence and grounding it in the capitalist mode of production, we contribute to the discussion of violence in organisation studies (Costas and Grey, 2019). Corporate violence explicitly connects to the pursuit of growth and profit, takes different forms, points to powerful agents responsible for it, and is not anthropocentric. The Marxist theoretical positioning of violence, complemented by ecosocialism and degrowth, helps to elaborate how corporate violence is enacted in productive forces of capitalism. Adding to the earlier studies of corporate violence that use the notion of primitive accumulation (e.g. Banerjee, 2008; Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2018), we have highlighted the less visible and 'slow' destruction brought by the social metabolism of capitalism.

While a world outside capitalism and corporate violence might come across as impossible, it is in many ways already here, and degrowth as a scholarly area and a social movement highlights this and offers a roadmap that helps to give shape and direction to socio-ecological transformation (Akbulut et al., 2019). In a degrowth-oriented society, there will be a bigger focus on social reproduction, but it is crucial not to overlook the function of production. Production is part and parcel of any society and organised in line with degrowth principles, it will put ecological sustainability and social justice at the centre. Organisations driven by communities or collectives in a participatory manner will channel their activities towards a regenerative social metabolism, instead of profit and perpetual expansion. As the pursuit of economic growth has been inequitable and violent, we

would like to stress that to mark a truly regenerative shift, post-growth organising must be equitable and not reproduce the violence of growth (Barca et al., 2019).

Even though capital has adopted the vocabulary of corporate social responsibility and sustainability, corporate violence may only be countered, we have argued, by building alternative organisational models and alliances with other social movements that seek to establish a post-capitalist society. Action for change includes organising differently, political action and alternative law-making, as well as taking responsibility for action and acting with caution to live up to the multiplicity of degrowth and the different kinds of knowledge that would make up a post-capitalist society (Paulson, 2017). This article gives a common frame for understanding the different facets of corporate violence inherent to capitalism, showing that acting upon them separately would not be enough to counter it. Building alliances and unity among progressive social movements together into a joint effort is crucial for bringing change of the scope that is necessary for socio-ecological transformation. How this unity could be achieved is an open question that remains to be addressed.

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## Note

1. The Swedish Energy Agency finally terminated the contract in March 2020.

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