

# It's the (Bio)Economy, Stupid! The Future of Growth and the Promise of the Bioeconomy

**Veranstalter** NWG flumen. Mentalitäten im Fluss

**Veranstaltungsort** Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena

**Termin** 07.10.2020 - 08.10.2020 ganztags

## Workshop at University Jena, October 7-8, 2020

The dominant narrative of the ongoing debates on the bioeconomy paints the picture of a future economy based on renewable energies and biological resources that will both deliver 'green' economic growth and enable modern societies to phase out fossil fuels and build a sustainable future. But are these promises of a 'bio-based' renewed cycle of accumulation and growth warranted? Can growth-based economies really be made sustainable and globally just based on bioeconomic materials and resources? Does the bioeconomy enable a defossilization of economic activity and a decoupling of environmental throughput and GDP? Or would the transformation of modern societies toward post-fossil, bio-based economic activities involve an overcoming of unlimited economic growth? Finally, what can critical debates about the bioeconomy and discussions on sustainable growth, green growth and degrowth learn from each other?

While fossil-fuelled economies run on a constantly accelerating linear throughput of extracted fossil resources, bio-based economies rely on materials whose availability is subject to biophysical limits and cyclical regenerative processes that cannot be expanded and accelerated at will. It is uncertain whether the accumulation of ever-increasing amounts of energy and goods can continue in an economy based on renewable resources. Any break with the logics of accumulation, extraction and expansion is likely to entail new distributional conflicts, but it may also be a starting point for a fundamental transformation of modern societies: The social organization of work and care activities, consumption patterns and people's mindsets might change, or it might become clear that they *need* to change. In a

similar vein, political actors and strategies often claim that the bioeconomy will bring far-reaching change – the EU’s bioeconomy strategy anticipates ‘rapid, concerted and sustained changes in lifestyle and resource use that cut across all levels of society and the economy’. At the same time, the concrete actions of key players in politics, science and industry seem to assume that the bioeconomy will allow them to continue with business as usual and avoid a turn away from the growth paradigm.

The aim of our workshop is to discuss the relationships between the bioeconomy and economic growth from a multidisciplinary and global perspective. We want to foster an exchange between debates on the ecological and social implications of the bioeconomy and critical debates on sustainable growth, green growth and degrowth. We thus invite empirical and/or conceptual contributions focusing on the broad range of issues and debates in research, including but not limited to the following questions:

- Can future economic growth in capitalist, dynamically self-stabilizing economies continue when the supply of goods and energy no longer rests on linear flows of fossil, but on variable and cyclical flows of biological/renewable resources? Or does the bioeconomy offer opportunities for overcoming the growth imperative?
- Will transitions to a bioeconomy strengthen, transform or undermine the growth paradigm? Is overcoming the growth paradigm a precondition for a socially viable ‘bio-based society’, or will growth be necessary to enable the transition?
- How would a transition to post-fossil economies – economies entirely based on renewable energies and bio-based resources – transform capitalist social relations? What can we learn from history, political economy and the social sciences about this?
- How can attitudes, values, collective imaginaries and everyday practices be expected to change in the process of transitions towards a bio-based economy? Will bio-based economies bring shifts in mentalities, social structures and society-nature relations, just as the change from agrarian to industrialized societies gave rise to fossil mentalities and carbon cultures?
- Can bio-based economies be a pathway toward decoupling GDP growth from resource throughput?
- What biophysical patterns and flows of matter and energy are characteristic of production and consumption within the bio-based sectors of the economy? How are they linked to social dynamics? And what can their analysis reveal about the possibility and the socio-metabolic contours of future bio-based societies?
- To what extent do the current assumptions about the feasibility of a bioeconomy rely on double-counting the available land/water/forest areas?
- What is the potential for growth and degrowth following from bioeconomic transformations?
- What might an international political economy of bioeconomic growth or degrowth look like?
- Who will be the ‘winners’ and the ‘losers’ of such a transition towards a circular bio-based economy? What conflicts will arise?

- How does a transformation towards the use of bio-based resources and energy alter existing social inequalities at the local, national, and global level? Will it lead to new dependencies between the global South and the global North and a resurgence of colonial patterns? What conflicts around land and ocean use are looming?

The workshop is organized by the Junior Research Group Mentalities in Flux (flumen) at the Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena, Germany, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research within the program “Bioeconomy as Societal Change” ([www.flumen.uni-jena.de](http://www.flumen.uni-jena.de)).

CfA (PDF)

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