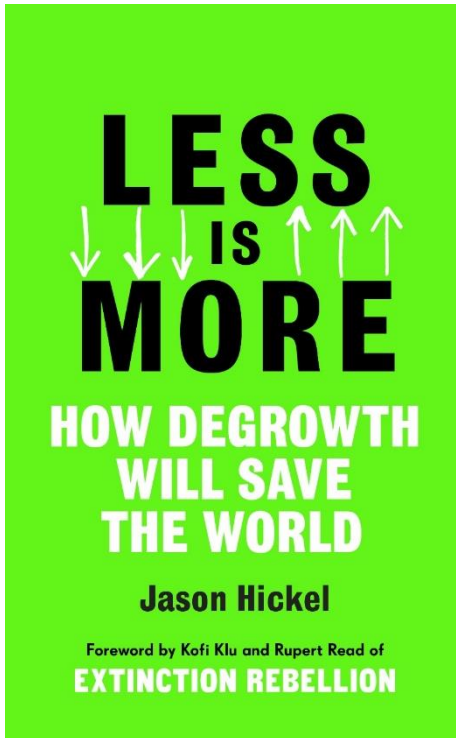


LESS IS MORE: HOW DEGROWTH WILL SAVE THE WORLD

Stephen McCloskey

Hickel, J (2020) *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, London: Penguin.



Jason Hickel is an economic anthropologist who lectures in Goldsmiths University of London. He is one of the most articulate, progressive and imaginative contributors to the question of development and sustainability who regularly and persuasively challenges economic orthodoxy, inequality and the official narrative of poverty in the global South. He is a valuable presence on social media (@jasonhickel) where he shares insights, resources and analysis on the global economic system and its disastrous impact on our relationship with the natural world. His last book, *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and Its Solutions* (2017) is an excellent

introduction to, and analysis of, poverty and inequality in the global South, reflecting on a 500-year history that includes colonialism, indigenous genocide, extractivism, indentured slavery and neoliberalism imposed by countries in the global North and their proxies. He traces a history of oppression and expropriation by Northern countries in the global South from the first expeditions of Columbus to today's neo-colonial forms of economic

control through debt and structural adjustment programmes which continue to debilitate southern economies. He doesn't hold back when he suggests that the 'development industry has repeatedly failed on its grand promises to End World Hunger or Make Poverty History – so why give them any more money? Why let them encourage false hope?' (2017: 14-15).

This kind of critical voice is rare in the development sphere where too many academic commentators, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society movements are content to remain within the policy comfort zone of overseas development aid which is unequal to the economic challenges confronted by southern countries. One of the commendable qualities of *The Divide* is that it debunks the traditional narrative attached to the development sector that it is the global North which is developing the South. A recent report by Philip Alston, the United Nations Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, found that in 2019 thirty OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries provided \$152 billion in grants or loans to the global South. However, low and middle-income countries paid principal payments and interest of \$969 billion to the global North based on a total external debt of \$7.8 trillion (2020: 16). As Hickel suggests in *The Divide*: 'the discourse of aid distracts us from seeing the broader picture. It hides the patterns of extraction that are actively causing the impoverishment of the global South today and actively impeding meaningful development' (2017: 29). *The Divide* makes for an insightful starting point for investigations into the history of inequality between the global North and South, and the author's latest book, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (2020) is an excellent companion text.

The Anthropocene

Less is More probes the origins of the relationship between capitalism, inequality and the relentless exploitation of the natural environment for growth 'for its own sake' (2020: 20). It frames the climate emergency in the context of Anthropocene-driven global warming; systemic and unsustainable demands made of the natural environment by human economic activity. The book ultimately aims to provide us with a clear-eyed solution to the climate

emergency and the grotesque levels of inequality that have attended the post-Second World War obsession with exponential growth as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The book considers and dismisses fanciful, left-field solutions to the climate emergency in the form of new technologies which might save us at the eleventh hour from ecological disaster and allow us to continue operating the same failed economic system. The author embraces technology where it can mitigate global warming and accelerate renewable energy sources but argues that keeping global warming at 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels, as recommended by the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, demands a scaling down of economic growth (IPCC, 2018). Degrowth is defined as ‘a planned downscaling of energy and resource use to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just and equitable way’ (Hickel, 2020: 29). The author adds that:

“Reducing resource use removes pressure from ecosystems and gives the web of life a chance to knit itself back together, while reducing energy use makes it much easier to accomplish a rapid transition to renewables before dangerous tipping points begin to cascade” (Ibid.).

What makes degrowth necessary is capitalism’s addiction to fossil fuels and its fetishisation of growth at all costs. Capitalism demands that GDP grow by 2 or 3 per cent a year, which means doubling the size of the global economy every 23 years (Ibid.: 20). This, in turn, has resulted in an endless cycle of production and consumption, quite often of commodities without any social value, with the ‘prime directive’ of sustaining growth and profit (Ibid.). The ecological breakdown has resulted from where the global economy churns ‘through more resources and waste each year, to the point where it is now dramatically overshooting what scientists have defined as safe planetary boundaries’ (Ibid.). A chilling introduction to the book starkly conveys the extent of the crisis: a projected rise in sea levels between 30 and 90 cm by the end of the century will cause much of Bangladesh to disappear; the Middle-East will experience ‘extreme droughts and desertification’ and will be ‘inhospitable to agriculture’; ‘coral eco-systems are being bleached into dead, colourless skeletons’; bush fires in Australia in 2020 killed ‘as many as one billion wild animals’ (Ibid: 8-12). In short, ‘We are sleepwalking into a mass

extinction event – the sixth in our planet’s history and the first to be caused by human economic activity’ (Ibid.: 8).

From feudalism to capitalism

The book has a simple structure of two sections; the first titled ‘More is Less’ traces the collapse of feudalism into capitalism but not in the way we expect. The struggle of labour against landed tithes and taxes imposed by nobles and the church eventually led to lower rents and higher wages ‘with free access to commons’ (Ibid.: 44). The period from 1350 to 1500 is described as ‘the golden age of the European proletariat’ when they enjoyed greater economic independence, shorter working hours, grassroots democracy and improved living conditions in tandem with nature. This period of relative worker autonomy was brutally eradicated by a gentrified system of enclosure which forced commoners off their land, destroyed rural communities and severed a sustainable relationship with nature. Common land was fenced off and a nascent capitalist system now had the plentiful wage labour supply it needed to sustain new cotton mills. ‘The period from 1500 to the 1800s’, argues Hickel, ‘was among the bloodiest, most tumultuous in world history’ (Ibid.: 48) with the colonisation of the global South providing the cotton and other raw materials needed to fuel the industrial revolution. The labour needed to extract resources from the global South mostly took the form of indentured slaves from Africa and the Americas, most of whom perished from a pitiless colonial system. The enclosure system in Europe created what Hickel describes as ‘artificial scarcity’ whereby a decent standard of living was denied commoners to force them into subsistence labour without security or tenure. In the industrial powerhouse of Manchester, life expectancy collapsed to 25 years as a race to the bottom in wages and appalling living conditions decimated the ranks of new urban workers (Ibid.: 50). Similar conditions were endured across Europe and the imposition of artificial scarcity to advance economic goals in the global South created a famine in India that claimed thirty million lives at the end of the nineteenth century (Ibid.: 59). These appalling injustices are rarely discussed in contemporary development narratives which insist that the global North is developing the South when what underpins Northern economic ascendancy is a colonial history of coerced extraction.

Animism v dualism

One of the consequences of enclosure was the severing of humans' relationship with the living environment and their intimate knowledge of 'plants, insects, animals, rivers, mountains and soils' (Ibid.: 62). This 'spiritual interchangeability' between humans and non-humans is described by anthropologists as animism – 'the idea that all living beings are interconnected and share in the same spirit of essence' (Ibid.: 63). This was a relationship based on reciprocity rather than extraction, ensuring that eco-systems could regenerate. During the Enlightenment, our relationship with nature was fundamentally altered by the concept of dualism which asserted the dominance of humans over nature with the relationship 'sliced into a clear, unbridgeable dichotomy' (Ibid.: 69). Propagated by philosophers, René Descartes and Francis Bacon, and seized upon by the church and capital, dualism became the philosophical grist to the mill of capitalism. For the church, dualism suppressed animism's 'notion that spirit suffused the material world' and for capitalism, the extraction of the earth's resources demanded that they be regarded as separate from, and the property of, humans. Dualism supported the objectification of nature as a commodity to be exploited and converted into growth and profit. The process of colonisation, therefore, went further than the subordination of nature for the accumulation of profit but sought to eradicate animism as a philosophy for our relationship with the living world. To that extent dualism was a vital cog in the 'civilising mission' of colonialism in the global South.

Section one of the book traces the trajectory of capitalism from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of fossil fuel-based growth in the global North and exploitation in the global South to the post-Second World War obsession with GDP and *growthism*. It explores the absurdity, waste and ecological fallout of endlessly pursuing the 'fix' of growth 'indefinitely, for its own sake' (Ibid.: 93). We are collectively bombarded by ever more sophisticated and insidious forms of advertising to purchase commodities that we don't need and create growth that has no social value. Besides, all of which, 'beyond a certain point, more GDP isn't necessary for improving human welfare at all' (Ibid.: 168). And, this is the critical point about degrowth,

scaling back growth doesn't have to mean a lower quality of life or reduced life expectancy, quite the opposite. Portugal has 65 per cent less income than the United States (US) and has a life expectancy of 81.1 years compared to 78.7 in the US. Or take an even bigger contrast, with Costa Rica having a better life expectancy than the US with 80 per cent less income. There is a similar story with education; Austria, Spain, Italy and Hong Kong perform better on United Nations education rankings than the US on considerably less income (Ibid.: 175). The achievements of countries in the global South, including Cuba, Costa Rica, Sri Lanka and Thailand tell us that universal healthcare and education can be achieved for as little as \$9,000 per capita which is less than the world average GDP per capita of \$11,000 (Ibid.: 176).

A better world is possible

The problem with our endless obsession with growth is that beyond a certain point it has a negative impact on society. The artificial scarcity created by the enclosure system continues to be imposed today through austerity, wage freezes, welfare 'reform' and cuts to public services. The inequality created by these measures is bad for society. As Hickel suggests:

“Inequality creates a sense of unfairness: it erodes public trust, cohesion and solidarity. It's also linked to poorer health, higher levels of crime and less social mobility. People who live in unequal societies tend to be more frustrated, anxious, insecure and discontent with their lives” (Ibid.: 179).

Using Portugal as a rule of thumb with its capacity to achieve higher levels of welfare than the US with \$38,000 less GDP per capita, suggests Hickel, means that \$13 trillion generated by the US economy every year is effectively wasted (Ibid.: 178).

So, what's to be done? Section two – titled 'Less is More' - offers 'pathways to a post-capitalist world' which include the following steps. We should end the 'planned obsolescence' of products which are designed to fail after a short period of use in order to create a market for replacements. We need to end the intrusion of advertising into our public spaces in order to create

a market for products we neither need or want. Neighbourhood workshops could create greater shared public access to services and equipment that would change ‘ownership to usership’ (Ibid.: 215). Ending food waste (a staggering 50 per cent of all food produced) and scaling down ecologically destructive industries (beef, fossil fuels) are other common-sense measures proposed. There are also sound proposals for reducing inequalities between the global North and South, including debt cancellation, closing down tax havens that support illicit financial flows and democratising multilateral bodies such as the IMF and World Bank. Countries in the global South need to be given an equal voice in the decision-making processes of bodies like the World Trade Organisation, which are dominated by the largest economies rather than the size of the populations of member states.

Sometimes more is better

Less is More is a terrific book, brimful of ideas that are rooted in practice and common sense rather than concepts like ‘green growth’ which suggest supplanting new technologies into the same economic system with a view to sustaining growth with cleaner forms of production. The problem is that some green technologies are not guaranteed to work – or work fast enough - and, in any event, don’t address broader concerns about how wealth is accumulated and distributed. *Less is More* is not a refuge for untested methods of decarbonisation or phoney concepts designed to maintain the existing economic order that is underpinning inequality and the climate emergency. And yet, I thought the book could have offered more, particularly to social movements and activists who have done so much to force climate change into popular consciousness. In September 2019, 7.6 million people participated in more than 6,000 climate strike events in 185 countries in one of the largest popular mobilisations in recent history (Global Climate Strike, 2019) and, yet, the climate strike movement is a throwaway line in *Less is More*. The book’s preface is written by two activists from Extinction Rebellion, but the book itself says nothing about how degrowth could and should be hardwired into the campaigning activities of XR and other climate movements.

History is littered with social movements that are unable to translate popular protest into policy change and this is likely to happen to the climate movement unless it puts practical proposals into advocacy and campaigning. ‘I am not a political strategist’, says Hickel, but since when could we leave political strategy to politicians? (2020: 242). We all need to be political strategists and activists if the commendable ideas in this book are to be put into practice. In a similar fashion, these ideas need to become integrated into mainstream education and a strategy implemented to challenge the popular narrative that growth is progress and a necessity. The growth narrative is a powerful one to challenge given the powerful political and economic forces arraigned behind it and yet it must be done.

I was surprised that *Less is More* didn’t confront the weaknesses of the Sustainable Development Goals as a policy antidote to the climate emergency. Hickel has previously highlighted the contradiction at the heart of the Goals between those that call for harmony with nature and those that urge sustained global economic growth (Hickel, 2019). It was important to confront the SDGs in the context of degrowth because many development actors use the Goals as a shield to deflect criticism for a lack of urgent action on global warming. Philip Alston has said that the Goals are ‘failing in key respects’ and ‘patently inadequate to actually end poverty’ (2020: 10). They needed attention in the book.

Less is More was clearly written before the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused so much of the global economy to degrow! So we are denied the tantalising prospect of the author suggesting how the post-COVID-19 context is likely to impact on the case for degrowth. The world’s leading economies are clearly desperate to restore growth to ‘normal’ levels and have spent considerable sums of previously withheld public money to prop up the old order. Will the world’s enforced lockdown, no matter now temporary, change our attitudes to the public good and our economic priorities? If yes, degrowth offers a valuable template for bringing our economy back into balance with nature and improving our lives and wellbeing at the same time.

References

Alston, P (2020) ‘The Parlous State of Poverty Eradication: Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights’, 2 July, available: <https://chrgj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Alston-Poverty-Report-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 7 September 2020).

Climate Strike Movement (2019) ‘7.6 million people demand action after week of climate strikes’, available: <https://globalclimatestrike.net/7-million-people-demand-action-after-week-of-climate-strikes/> (accessed 9 September 2020).

Hickel, J (2019) ‘The contradiction of the sustainable development goals: Growth versus ecology on a finite planet’, *Sustainable Development*, Vol. 27, Issue 5, Sept/Oct, pp. 873-884.

Hickel, J (2017) *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and Its Solutions*, London: Windmill Books.

Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2018) ‘Global Warming of 1.5 °C’, available: <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/> (accessed 7 September 2020).

Stephen McCloskey is Director of the Centre for Global Education and Editor of *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*.