

Book Review

Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World, by Jason Hickel, New York: Penguin Books, 2020, 336pp. ISBN: 9781473581739

Economic growth is a consistent metric used by the rest of the world to assess a country's performance. A country with a high economic growth rate is always portrayed as prosperous, with its people presumably happier and wealthier than others. But what is the actual outcome of economic growth? Is it true that everyone benefits from it?

To highlight the potential drawbacks of relying too heavily on continuous growth to propel a country forward, Jason Hickel's *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* exposes the flaws in the current economic system (capitalism) and the harm it causes to the environment. The book also contradicts the widely held belief that economic growth is the way forward for a country. It strongly argues that it is degrowth, not growth, that is the solution to sustainability. Degrowth refers to a planned downscaling of energy and resources used to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just and equitable way.

Hickel divides the core concept into two parts, with the first focusing on the argument 'More Is Less' and the second on 'Less Is More', which I thought was a clever way to present his arguments. The first section covers three important aspects that explain 'more is less'. The narrative begins by reminding us that capitalism did not emerge naturally, but rather as a result of a revolt against the feudal system in the 1300s. The text argues that the end of feudalism was heralded as a watershed moment in terms of commoners' welfare and environmental preservation and led to the rise of capitalism. To address "chronic disaccumulation," elites imposed an "enclosure" in which they evicted peasant communities from their land and fenced off or privatised forests and rivers for their use. Karl Marx refers to the process as "primitive accumulation" to emphasise the barbaric nature of the violence involved. Hickel also argues that capitalism arose from organised violence, mass impoverishment, and the systematic destruction of self-sufficient subsistence economies; that colonisation was a reaction to the crisis of elite disaccumulation; and that while enclosure did not result in

slavery, it forced people to work in exchange for a minimum wage in order to avoid starvation.

Hickel also highlights capitalism's flaw of focusing on capital accumulation as the root cause of environmental collapse. The text explains that in capitalism, simply maintaining a consistent profit is insufficient; it must also be reinvested in order to produce more capital. This process is referred to as "an ever-accelerating treadmill," which is the leading cause of the development of growthism – the pursuit of growth for the sake of capital accumulation rather than to meet concrete human needs and social objectives. As a result, raw material consumption, fossil fuel use, and carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions have increased dramatically, in tandem with gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Raw material consumption of biomass, fossil fuels, metals, and construction materials, for example, peaked at 35 billion tonnes in 1980, but skyrocketed to 92 billion tonnes by 2017, far exceeding the planet's capacity (50 billion tonnes per year). Annual CO₂ emissions increased from 2 billion to 5 billion tonnes per year in the first half of the 20th century, to 25 billion tonnes in the year 2000.

Many of us presume or believe that technology – such as bio-energy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) – innovation, recycling and shifting to renewable energy/electric vehicles will result in "negative emissions." Hickel argues that while it is possible to transition to 100% renewable energy, doing so would not prevent global temperatures from rising by more than 2°C if countries continue to pursue more growth. The reason is simple: increased growth is associated with greater energy demand, making it almost impossible to generate enough renewable energy to meet this demand.

Forward from the issues and challenges raised in the first part of the book, the narrative of the second part of the book, 'Less is More', offers some enticing arguments and ideas on how a country can thrive in the absence of economic growth. Hickel begins by questioning the truth that countries must continue growing to improve people's lives. Given that global income inequality remains significant, I found myself agreeing with the test argument that it is not growth itself that matters, but how income is distributed, and the extent to which it is invested in public services. The narrative explains that while economic growth is necessary for improving human welfare, a high GDP level is not. For example, the United States has a GDP per capita of USD59,500 and a life expectancy of 78.7 years, while

Portugal, with a 65% smaller GDP, has a life expectancy of 81.1 years. The text cites political scientist Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn, who discovered that countries with strong welfare systems have the highest levels of human happiness, not countries with the highest GDP. According to the Hickel, countries in the global south can achieve strong results on every human development indicator (life expectancy, well-being, sanitation, income, education, etc.), while remaining within close planetary boundaries.

Agreeing with Greta Thunberg that “we can never save the world by playing by the rules, because the rules must be changed,” the book reinforces that degrowth, or reducing material and energy use, is an ecologically coherent solution to a multi-faceted crisis. Hickel presents some creative ideas for achieving degrowth that are worth considering, such as ending planned obsolescence (a technique developed in the 1920s to shorten the lifespan of a product in order to increase sales), cutting advertising, shifting from ownership to usership, ending food waste, and scaling down environmentally destructive industries.

The final chapter of *Less Is More* delves into the human-nature connection. The chapter’s case studies are inspiring – for example, the persistence of Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgados in restoring land to the Amazon rainforest; why the Achuar classify most plants and animals that populate the jungle as human; and the Chewang, who believe that their community extends beyond humans to include foreign plants, animals, and rivers. The chapter concludes by noting that understanding interdependencies like the Achuar and Chewang will force us to consider what we can give back to our ecosystems. Finally, Hickel asserts that capitalism is based on a single, overarching principle of taking more than you give back, that uncompensated value extraction from nature and bodies should be opposed, and that the ecological crisis necessitates radical policy responses.

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