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Ecological Economics

Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save The World, Jason Hickel, William Heinemann
(2020)

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Title:

Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save The World, Jason Hickel,
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1 The central thesis of Jason Hickel’s latest book ‘Less is More: How
2 Degrowth Will Save The World’ is that growthism, or an ideology of
3 growth for its own sake, must be abandoned in order to avert
4 environmental and social breakdown. That is the basic premise of
5 ‘degrowth’, a project that in 2020 gained a prominent space in
6 environmental debates. ‘Less is More’, however, goes further than
7 answering the question of why we need to degrow energy and
8 material use. It offers the first systematic historicization of degrowth
9 and broadens nascent debates regarding the cultural direction of
10 degrowth processes. Hickel regards urgently needed changes to our
11 relationship with, and attitude to, nature as fundamental
12 prerequisites to socioecological transformation. In comparison to its
13 many fellow 2020 degrowth book publications, Hickel’s book stands
14 out, perhaps not in brevity – its in-depth historical and policy
15 analyses are anything but cursory – but in intellectual rigour and the
16 type of transdisciplinary depth required to think through and act on
17 the multiple crises we face. ‘Less is More’ is written for the general
18 public but is of interest to any scholar wanting to gain a holistic
19 understanding of degrowth.

20 Hickel advances an understanding of capitalism that is inherently
21 tied to the gut-wrenching “eco-facts” he enumerates throughout
22 the book, most of which environmentalist readers will be familiar
23 with. Rather than foregrounding modes of production or property
24 arrangements, Hickel identifies “growth for its own sake” (p. 20,
25 italics in original) as the prime driver of capitalism and by extension,
26 the ecological crises. More precisely, excess growth in high-income

27 countries and excess accumulation among the wealthy
28 disproportionately use energy and resources. In highlighting
29 questions of social and environmental justice at the outset, Hickel
30 sets the stage for his overarching argument that a post-growth
31 economy must necessarily be a post-capitalist one. Part I offers a
32 grassroots retelling of the history of capitalism, emphasising its dire
33 social and environmental costs. Hickel starts with the peasant
34 revolts in Europe and enclosure as an organised, violent backlash to
35 post-feudalist, but pre-capitalist forms of common resource
36 management. In addition to enclosure, colonisation is introduced as
37 a capitalist “fix” to crises of elite accumulation. The appropriation of
38 tropical nature and labour from enslaved indigenous Americans and
39 Africans that fuelled the Industrial Revolution is considered an effect
40 of capitalist growth. At the same time, European peasants and wage
41 labourers were forced to work under newly created conditions of
42 artificial scarcity. Slavery and mass impoverishment were a socially
43 accepted price for growth. During this process, capitalist forces and
44 the power of the Church combined to eradicate widespread animist
45 ontologies, or beliefs in the living agency of the earth. Together with
46 the rise of Cartesian science, dualism provided a cultural sanction to
47 the resource plunder enabled by new technologies. Part I continues
48 with an exploration of how growth is driven by the ‘iron law of
49 capital’ in 20th and 21st century social, political and economic
50 systems, from GDP, Structural Adjustment Programmes and
51 neoliberalism to ‘atmospheric colonisation’. It concludes with a

52 diligent review of ethical, technical and ecological issues of various
53 green technologies and an empathic refutation of green growth.

54 Part II displaces the centrality of economic growth in the human
55 development story. Instead, it points to the role of public
56 investment, sanitation, union organising, health care, education and
57 income redistribution in securing life expectancy gains and
58 wellbeing. The Global North doesn't need growth to sustain welfare.
59 Similarly, the South could forge its own development path without
60 the growth imperative. Chapter 5 discusses degrowth and a
61 potential policy roadmap. Building on Part I's history of ideas, the
62 last chapter discusses the role of culture and our relationship with
63 nature in degrowth transitions. Hickel translates analytical insights
64 from reviewing the animism in various indigenous cosmologies and
65 modern scientific and philosophical challenges to Cartesian dualism
66 into policy proposals: regenerative agroecology and Rights of
67 Nature.

68 The strength of 'Less is More' lies in accessibly weaving together a
69 history of ideas and science, environmental history, ecological
70 economics and anthropology into a compelling argument.

71 Furthermore, the book systematically, methodically, and
72 persuasively lays to rest some of the most pervasive and pernicious
73 environmental myths, for example those of green growth and large-
74 scale negative emissions technologies. Additionally, Hickel implicitly
75 introduces a relational understanding of limits, adding to recent
76 debates on physical boundaries versus morally constructed, internal

77 limits to growth. Hickel argues we should focus on the
78 interconnectedness of life on earth, rather than limits per se. This
79 might avoid the criticism that a more overtly constructivist
80 understanding of limits invites.

81 The link between capitalism and colonial conquest has been well
82 established. The postcolonial scholars Hickel engages with also point
83 to the colonisation of the mind and ideas as a powerful inhibitor to
84 human development based on justice and wellbeing. Historical and
85 postcolonial scholarship, however, may offer slightly more nuanced
86 arguments than the book's overly economic analysis of
87 colonisation. In using growth as a de facto explanation for
88 colonisation, we must be careful not to map a single history onto
89 the world. Yet, the fact that colonisation is given such a central place
90 in an analysis of the modern world is commendable. With regards to
91 feminisms, Hickel traces the gendered effects of growth surprisingly
92 sparingly. Gender justice is reduced to reproductive rights. While
93 population stabilisation certainly plays a role in addressing the
94 ecological breakdown and women's rights, restricting the book's
95 gender analysis to that particularly thorny issue is disappointing.

96 Finally, 'Less is More', juxtaposes 'Cartesian dualism' with 'animism'
97 in a manner that, perhaps inevitably, flattens their respective
98 complexities and subtleties. Nevertheless, the book provides
99 impetus to the search for a relational understanding of limits and
100 nature in the degrowth literature and elsewhere.

101 The book comes at a time when the pillars of growthism are being
102 shaken by social movements and ordinary people no longer
103 accepting the status quo. It also arrived on the back of a global
104 pandemic that pitted growth against health outcomes. 'Less is More'
105 could therefore not have been published at a more opportune
106 moment. Hickel introduces radical ideas that were once exclusive to
107 academic debates. He tacitly answers how we might arrive at
108 popular support for postgrowth policies: by changing the way we
109 think about the natural world. A relational ontology would prefigure
110 an economy based on reciprocity with the natural world. But the
111 economic system itself profoundly shapes the way we see the world.
112 So how do we link cultural change and policy implementation? The
113 strategy question has become central to degrowth. It's therefore
114 surprising that 'Less is More' doesn't offer a theory of political
115 change, much less advice on what readers could do to exit the twin
116 juggernauts of growth and capitalism. Yet, while Hickel isn't
117 detailing the 'how', he gives us an important direction of change. His
118 thoughts on reciprocity and relationality with the natural world call
119 for more serious engagement with Rights of Nature and indigenous
120 cosmologies in political strategy, activism and scholarship. Economic
121 growth is projected to rebound in the near future. We might,
122 however, still be nearing a collective eureka moment in which we
123 recognise, and ultimately abandon, the destructive ideology of
124 growth. When it comes, 'Less is More' will have made a substantial
125 contribution to that moment.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: