

## Don't Believe The Hype - Less Really Is More

**Ross:** Welcome to Renegade Inc. Before COP26, Prince Charles revealed his eco credentials, stating that his Aston Martin is fine because it runs on cheese and wine - surely a climate Marie Antoinette moment. Suspiciously absent from the COP26 talking shop was the word de-growth. But unless you're actively talking about degrowth, you're just peddling corporate, political and billionaire propaganda.

**Ross:** Jason Hickel, welcome to Kakonomics - degrowth. When Roman Krznaric was here he said something to us that we should say to you - quite why he wouldn't say it directly but here goes. He said, when you speak to Jason about degrowth, can you please get him to stop using the word degrowth? Now I'm sure you've heard this argument several times. Noam Chomsky has also said it, as has Naomi Klein. What does that word do to people? It sort of has a Pavlovian effect. People go what, degrowth? Hang on, because all we hear all the time, and what you're fighting, is growth, growth, growth, growth, growth, quarter on quarter growth. And you come along and suddenly say, degrowth. This is the way forward. Less is more. Why does that word have such a connotation?

**Jason Hickel:** It's interesting. I like Roman, although you're right, he should have said this to me personally.

**Ross:** I'm sorry to hijack you with it.

**Jason Hickel:** Look, I didn't invent the term. It has a deep grounding in social movements, actually. And so we should acknowledge that and it's very clearly defined in the academic literature, which is simply that it's a planned reduction of resource and energy throughput in high income nations conducted in a safe, just and equitable way that improves social outcomes. And so it's distinct from, say, a recession. We have different words because of different things. Now it's also intended to be a challenging word in the sense that it goes to the very core of our deepest assumptions about how the economy should work, namely, growth, and forces us into a reckoning, right? And you know, this creates antagonism, but it also creates difficult conversations that need to be had. And we learn through that process, we learn through being challenged. That being said, you know, I definitely don't advocate that the term should always be used in every context. I think that people can make their own decisions about when to use the term. You know, a politician at the podium might choose to not use the term, intersectionality because that's not known by most people and may be confusing. Similarly, you might choose not to use the term degrowth and take a different kind of framing like George Monbiot's Public Luxury or Doughnut Economics or something like that, although we would want to insist that there's also a reckoning with the growth dependency with whatever path you take. The crucial thing is that the policies are enacted and those policies are policies to scale down destructive parts of the economy, while at the same time ensuring robust, high quality public provisioning for all. So taking key social goods out of the market, effectively. That does not mean that you close down the market entirely. I mean, commodity production can, and should, continue. There are plenty of realms of provisioning that should be provided by the markets in a non-capitalist way - markets without capitalism. But we want to reverse that core feature of capitalism, which is to de-enclose the commons and ensure that everyone has access to the means of survival. When

people hear the word capitalism, they often think, Oh, that's just markets and trade and businesses and so on. Which is not true given that markets and trade were around for thousands of years before capitalism. Capitalism is a new system only 500 years old. And what distinguishes it from all other economic systems in history is that it's organised around the enclosure of the means of survival, right?, be that originally through the enclosure movement, you know the lands, but also now, you know, energy, water, healthcare, education, transportation, etc., etc. There's perpetual enclosure of what we need to survive.

**Ross:** Under the banner of privatisation?

**Jason Hickel:** That's right. Privatisation is the form that enclosure takes in the modern economy.

**Ross:** And what happens with the word privatisation, it comes with a little friend, which is called TINA, because there is no alternative, and these things both arrive at the same time, mysteriously?

**Jason Hickel:** Yeah. And so the consequence of this basically is that people don't have any way of surviving except for selling themselves to be exploited by capital in return for wages. So human existence, the human enterprise itself, is subordinated to the interests of capital, and therefore we end up with a system that you know where production is organised, not around meeting human needs. In fact, human needs are quite often sabotaged. The object in capitalism is to facilitate capital accumulation and elite appropriation of labour and resources. So that's what we need to reverse, and we reverse that with the social guarantee that effectively de-encloses the Commons. This is not again, you know, as you say, not a vision of austerity. In fact, let's recognise that austerity is a child of capitalism. Austerity is a child of growth-ism, right? When you have a growth addicted capitalist economy that must perpetuate capital accumulation, then you have to sabotage and privatise and enclose, which is the misery that is induced in the US and Britain and Western Europe increasingly today. So de-growth calls for the opposite. It calls for a kind of radical abundance where we all have access to what's necessary for a flourishing life.

**Ross:** And that is based on a natural law principle, isn't it, insofar as there is abundance out there that nature provides? Once you start to enclose the Commons, once you start to privatise, once you start to enact land monopoly, once you start to extract the rents, ultimately you end up with the situation that we've got now, which is apparent progress. But on the flip side, all this poverty, all the environmental degradation and of course, the mass inequality, inequity, you could go as far as saying, that comes with it.

**Jason Hickel:** Well, yeah. And when it comes to the question of progress, we should be clear about where progress actually comes from, right? There's a strange narrative out there that says that social progress, improvements in social outcomes, are sort of the spontaneous gift of capital accumulation, right? as though it's kind of handed down to us by capitalism. But no, this is not true. If you look historically, progress has always been won through progressive social movements, anti-colonial struggles, you know, labour unions, et cetera, et cetera. The empirical record is very clear that these are the drivers of progress, quite often against the interests of the capitalist class who don't want to give those concessions, right? So yes, I

mean, we can have social progress without capitalism. In fact, it's easier to have social progress without capitalism because we're not fighting a constant uphill battle, right? You don't have to constantly fight capital, you know, through the media, through the political system at every turn. So that's, I think, crucial to this vision.

**Ross:** Ultimately, there will be a fight, but picking your battles and fighting strategically. Because let's face it, whether it's the capture of the political system, capture of the media, capture of the think tanks, capitalists have been excellent, well organised and they often agree on an awful lot. And you can't say that about the left if we're going to take that example. How do you strategically pick those battles? How do you appeal to hearts and minds? And how do you get that constituency behind you who've understood your argument and realise that if we don't change course now, this supertanker is going to crash?

**Jason Hickel:** Yeah. So yes, you're absolutely right. This requires a struggle.

**Ross:** Excuse me because we can't shy away from it and be Panglossian about it and say, well, you know what, they're all going to wake up one morning and just see our logic.

**Jason Hickel:** That's right, yes.

**Ross:** Well, good luck.

**Jason Hickel:** Well, for example, take, you know, take degrowth, for example, right? I mean, it's so well researched in the academic literature. You know, thousands of scientists have been at work for several decades, you know, demonstrating the imperative of this. And so the logic is there. It's not like we lack evidence, you know.

**Ross:** The logic's there. Now the strategic battle.

**Jason Hickel:** That's right. And so, you know, you're absolutely right. It's not like, you know, the powers that be are going to just agree to this voluntarily because they have very significant material interests at stake, let's put it that way. And so you have to have a strategy.

**Ross:** That was very diplomatically put.

**Jason Hickel:** And right now, there's no strategy. The best we have is the environmentalist movements, which I support, and they do an excellent job to the extent that they're able. But they're limited in several respects. First of all, they tend not to have a sufficiently robust critique of the fact that it is capitalist growth that is ultimately driving this problem, right? They think of it in terms of individual consumption and behaviour change, et cetera, which is not going to fly. We have to understand that ultimately the crisis we face is being driven by the production system, which is organised around perpetual expansion. Overconsumption in the West in rich countries is an effect of the production system. You know capitalism is constantly over-producing and then has to find a way to absorb all of that overproduction to maintain value, basically. So I think we have to recognise here that growth is a deeply ideological term, right? I mean, you know, think about it, if you were a capitalist - maybe you are secretly...

**Ross:** That's my side hustle.

**Jason Hickel:** If you wanted to sell your system to the people, then you would sell it on the grounds of it's going to generate growth. Growth is a phenomenally positive, powerful term. Children grow, plants grow. Everything good grows, it would seem, obviously to a limit. So, as Timothy Mitchell has put it, it is the alibi of capital, right? So if capitalism, you know, entails processes of exploitation and extraction, which we might actually not agree with, it can sort of get us to buy into the broader product by saying, Oh no, it's giving us growth and growth is equivalent to progress, which is of course, not true. What's interesting is, you know, there's talk about expanding the pie. What pie is being expanded here? The pie that's being expanded is the pie of commodity production, not the pie of use value or provisioning. So what really matters to us is access to the resources we need to live well, which which may entail, for example, a public health service. Now, if you were to nationalise the US health service, taking that public good out of the market, GDP would decline. And yet our access to this use value that is essential to all of our lives would improve. Our health outcomes would improve. Our sense of well-being and happiness would improve. And so there's you know, quite often a disjuncture between GDP growth and provisioning and well-being, and that should be an empowering realisation for us. You know, we can improve provisioning and use value without additional growth.

**Ross:** What's the problem with GDP as a metric because now - and I'm sure this wasn't the case 30, 40 years ago - whenever we hear that, we think actually, we don't need more growth, this GDP thing, it's sending us down the wrong track? What's the problem with it?

**Jason Hickel:** Well, the problem with GDP is that, first of all, we should be clear what it is. It's not a measure of use value or provisioning or well-being, which is the way it's often used as a proxy, basically. It is a metric of commodity production as measured in terms of prices. And it does not count the social or ecological costs of commodity production. So if you tear down a forest and sell the timber to IKEA, then GDP goes up, but it doesn't account for the ecological cost of that. This is not to say that commodity production is not useful and in some cases it may even need to grow. But we should be rational and say, as Kuznets himself warns, like, let's always ask growth for what end and for what purpose and for whose benefits?

**Ross:** Now he devised the system didn't he?

**Jason Hickel:** He is the one who devised GDP in the 1930s.

**Ross:** And then spent the rest of his career saying, Oh no, I've created a monster.

**Jason Hickel:** He spent the rest of his career warning about it.

**Ross:** What have I done?

**Jason Hickel:** We should always be asking, look, what is being produced? Who has access to it? And how is the income from that being distributed? These are the questions we need to be asking. And so let's focus on producing things that we actually need. Let's make sure that

people who need them have access to them rather than in enclosing and privatising them and let's ensure that the income generated from commodity production is shared fairly.

**Ross:** Jason Hickel, welcome back to Renegade Inc. Always great to have you. Less is More is our book of the week this week. We want you to pitch it to us. Less is More: How DeGrowth Will Save the World. That's the tagline. Go.

**Jason Hickel:** Thanks Ross. What I'm trying to do in this book is to situate the arguments for a post-growth and degrowth economy in the context of the broader history of capitalism and really unite consciousness about the environmental crisis with consciousness about how our capitalist system works. So, in the end, I offer sort of a pathway with solutions toward a kind of post-capitalist economy and I also consider questions of ontology like the deeper philosophical questions that underpin our relationship with nature and how capitalism has affected that and where that came from in the history of capitalism. So that's it.

**Ross:** Happy ending? Tragic ending?

**Jason Hickel:** I tried to make it hopeful. But let me put it this way...

**Ross:** Go.

**Jason Hickel:** Hope is important. So people always want to ask me, like, do we have hope? And we do have hope and hope it sustains us. But I also want to say that our hope can only ever be as strong as our struggle. We can't be naive about what is required of us in the face of ecological breakdown and accelerating capitalist crisis. So we need a movement that's commensurate to the task, and that's not easy to build.

**Ross:** Books change authors. What did you think about or what assumptions did you hold at the beginning of writing Less is More? And what changed your mind or what did you change, transition, through the book when you finished writing it, if I can put it like that?

**Jason Hickel:** Oh yeah, that's an interesting question. I think that I have learnt a lot from my critics, actually. And so I'm on social media, which is a terrible idea. But what has been useful for me is that it's given me a chance to field all of the best arguments of those who are sceptical of this position.

**Ross:** Give us the top three that you hear with monotonous regularity. Give us the top three about degrowth.

**Jason Hickel:** Well, there are several. So, first of all, people will say, Oh, that sounds like you're preventing poor countries from growing. This is definitely not true. Degrowth is very explicit that this is a demand for reducing resource use and energy use in rich countries. In fact, what's important to note here is that growth-ism in rich countries relies on forms of imperialist appropriation from the global south.

**Ross:** Explain that because people will hear that, and go but what, what?

**Jason Hickel:** So, historically, we all know that the industrial revolution in Western Europe and Europe's economic rise depended, fundamentally, on the appropriation of resources and labour from the global south. Think of several hundred years of mass enslavements. Think of where the cotton and sugar that fuelled the industrial evolution came from - not from England, let's put it that way.

**Ross:** You can't argue it.

**Jason Hickel:** It emerged from the colonial process. Colonialism and capitalism have always been united together. Their histories are coterminous. Now, political decolonisation was accomplished in most of the world in the middle of the 20th century. But scholars argue that these basic relations of appropriation continue to operate in the world economy through various forms of unequal exchange, whereby we can trace, empirically, a net flow of resources and embodied labour in traded goods from south to north - a large net flow. We're talking about a significant portion of global south productive activity is organised around capital accumulation in the global north. And so growth has this imperial dimension to it. Growth in the north has this imperial dimension to it, which causes immense ecological and social harm in the global south, undermining struggles for improvements in social outcomes in development, etc., etc.. And so if we are going to be anti-imperialist, we have to start questioning growth-ism in the global north. And I would say that progressives must be anti-imperialism otherwise our progressivism is worth nothing.

**Ross:** Two. What's the second argument that you hear to try and defeat degrowth?

**Jason Hickel:** So another one people will say is, well, that sounds like austerity or voluntary impoverishment, etc. So, no, I mean, this assumption that degrowth somehow will lead to like a regression in social improvements is premised on the assumption that growth and social improvements are linked, which we know for a fact they are not. There's no reason that an expansion in commodity production should have any causal relationship with social outcomes, certainly not beyond a certain point. And we know for a fact that we can achieve very high levels of social well-being with moderate levels of GDP.

**Ross:** Done. Recognised. Second one, recognised. Third one?

**Jason Hickel:** The third one is that some people will say, Well, OK, maybe we do need degrowth, a planned reduction of resource and energy use, but it's not politically feasible.

**Ross:** Sorry, the helplessness, you can hear it - oh well.

**Jason Hickel:** Look, I agree that the politics of this are hard. But this is not about the masses, you know, resisting it. Once we get past the ideology of growth, that is not a problem. Once we all recognise that what we're proposing here in an eco social economy is we'll actively improve the lives of most people - certainly the working class - by ensuring, you know, better wages, better real welfare purchasing power of wages, universal basic services, a shorter working week, etc., etc. I mean, life will be better in every respect. But there will be less commodity production and consumption and less elite accumulation. And so who are we really fighting here? Who is really the political obstacle? It's the elite class that stands to lose



so much from this critique. And that's an obstacle we have to take seriously. And we need the political movements that are commensurate to that task. And for that, we need more than just the environmentalist movements. We need environmentalists in alliance with working class formations and, importantly, in alliance with global south social movements who've been demanding this for a very long time.

**Ugo Vallauri (Video clip):** Big Tech has a big problem. Manufacturers are used to just selling us products every couple of years, and they come with a business model which relies on selling more and more tech and creating more and more waste. This is simply unsustainable. It's always been unsustainable. But at this point, in the middle of a climate crisis, it's just completely unsustainable and needs to stop. We are concerned that regulators are acting too late and too slowly. And this is why we came up with a 10 year fund campaign to ask for a real step change in the way regulators are treating this issue. The ten year phone campaign is one of the initiatives of the European Right to Repair Campaign. We are asking the European Union to commit to ambitious regulations when it comes to smartphones and other products. What does that mean? We need devices to last for much longer than they do at the moment. So why is it that manufacturers stop supporting software in the smartphones in our pockets after two or three years? What about 10 years? What about spare parts? Shouldn't they be available to everyone and not just through authorised repairers for 10 years again? And shouldn't they be a lot more affordable so that devices can last longer and when people stop using them, someone else can continue using them safely, securely for much longer period of time? E-waste is one of the fastest growing stream of waste across the world, and it keeps growing at three to five percent per year. Most people are not aware that the vast majority of the environmental impact of a product happens before we've ever switched it on. Up to 80 percent of the greenhouse emissions related to our smartphones are produced during the manufacturing. So, to slow our impact on the planet, we need to significantly slow our speed of consumption. And the only way to do this is to use the products that we have for much longer. And that's why they need to be more repairable and supported for much longer by manufacturers.

**Jason Hickel:** Right now, the existing plan, such as it is, is to grow the entire economy, all sectors of the economy all the time, regardless of whether or not we actually need them, indefinitely.

**Ross:** People will look back on us as a race and think, what were they thinking?

**Jason Hickel:** It's too much. It's irrational, especially in an era of ecological breakdown. So we need to be more rational. And what does that look like? Let's think about what we actually want to improve. Let's think about, you know, if we need better public health care, better public transportation, you know, whatever it might be, renewable energy, education, you know, wind power, etc. Clearly, we need to expand these sectors and improve that kind of provisioning. But obviously, there are also clearly sectors that are destructive and socially unnecessary or less necessary, and need to be actively scaled down - SEV production, private jet production, the commercial airline industry, more broadly, industrial beef, fast fashion, advertising, planned obsolescence, the military industrial complex. There are clearly huge chunks of our economy that are organised around elite power, elite accumulation and the interests of capital, not around human needs. So we should be able to distinguish, please. This

shouldn't be so difficult. You know, my hope is that this call sort of enlivens the left to recognise the role that it can play in the 21st century building a society that is more just but also more ecological. And the justice side and the ecology side come hand-in-hand. There's no ecology without justice, and there is no justice without ecology. So we must be clear on that and that is, I think, the direction for progressive movements in the 21st century.

**Ross:** If the left did that now, what does Europe look like in 10 or 15 years?

**Jason Hickel:** So what does a post-capitalist society look like?

**Ross:** I didn't say that but you did.

**Jason Hickel:** So, it's a society where we have high quality universal public services, not just health care and education, which are the standard ones, but you know, public transit's energy, water, internet, housing, the things that people need to live flourishing lives are available to everyone. We have a shorter working week because we need to produce less on the economy, right? Like, think about it, if we're scaling down sections of the economy that we don't actually need, our economy needs less labour. We should consider this to be liberatory, right? Why be worried about that?

**Ross:** Because there's been a drip drip of right wing propaganda for an awfully long time to say that is the road to serfdom.

**Jason Hickel:** So shorten the working week, distribute necessary labour more evenly, introduce a public job guarantee so that everybody who wants to work has access to the training necessary to contribute to the most important collective projects of our generation - renewable energy, housing refits, ecological regeneration, regenerative farming, whatever it might be - the things that we know we need to accomplish this decade that requires a tremendous amount of labour - let us direct our labour towards that, rather than towards producing trinkets that are designed ultimately to enhance the accumulation of the capitalist class. So, it looks like that. It looks like more free time, more meaningful work, less insecurity of unemployment, less poverty, less misery, less homelessness. In fact, those are eradicated. It's a society, however, that is also significantly less unequal because you've gotten rid of the engines of capital accumulation at this point, right? through this process of disclosure, as I call it. And so you have a lot less inequality and a lot less, ultimately, unnecessary commodity production. OK. So it's slimmed down in terms of our resource and energy use. And yet we live better lives. We've delinked our well-being and our welfare from the imperative of perpetual expansion under capitalism. We have a more rational approach to our social objectives. What do we want to improve? That's what our policy is targeted towards. What we want to reduce in terms of ecology - ecological impacts? Those are our policy objectives, not this abstract GDP growth. And so our politics are more focused, our system is more efficient, our technology is liberated from the constraints of capitalist growthism. That's the vision that we fight for.

**Ross:** And that's the vision and the demarcation, if you like, that you've made in the book. Congratulations on the book, *Less is More*. And insofar as your timing, not bad because there's an urgency now, right, and we have to act? Jason, thanks for your time.



**Jason Hickel:** My pleasure.