

# Ecological Economics

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

--Manuscript Draft--

<b>Manuscript Number:</b>	
<b>Article Type:</b>	Book review
<b>Corresponding Author:</b>	Katharina Richter Goldsmiths University of London London, UNITED KINGDOM
<b>First Author:</b>	Katharina Richter
<b>Order of Authors:</b>	Katharina Richter
<b>Abstract:</b>	

**Title:**

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

**Author name and affiliation:**

Katharina Richter <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Politics and International Relations

Goldsmiths University of London

London SE14 6NW

United Kingdom

[k.richter@gold.ac.uk](mailto:k.richter@gold.ac.uk)

**Corresponding author:**

Katharina Richter

[k.richter@gold.ac.uk](mailto:k.richter@gold.ac.uk)

**Funding:**

This work was supported by a Foundation Main Grant (2020-21)  
from Funds for Women Graduates.

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 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 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: