

Planet S.O.S.: Climate Change and Global Poverty

Jason Hickel

I want to use my time this evening to talk about hegemony -the hegemony of economic growth. This single idea governs our world and guides the decisions of our leaders more forcefully than almost any other. It is accepted by the right and left alike -or at least by the traditional left- to the point where it is so taken for granted that we tend not to even recognize it. It is a background assumption of our social imaginary, outside the field of political contestation, beyond the boundaries of our debates. Our politicians rise and fall on their ability to generate growth. We are told that growth is necessary for progress, necessary to improve human well-being and eradicate poverty -and we accept these claims without questioning them. If you challenge the growth narrative, people look at you like you're crazy, like you've literally lost the plot -that's how powerful its hegemony is.

The idea is so powerful that reasonable people rally around it even when it is clear that it makes no sense at all -even when simple math shows it to be contradictory and even absurd.

Here is an example. Two years ago, in 2015, the world's governments gathered together in New York to ratify the Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs set out to accomplish an incredible feat -the eradication of global poverty by 2030, as measured at \$1.25 per day. This sounds like a wonderful goal, and indeed it's about time that we got around to doing it. But if you look at the text of the SDGS, you'll see that the plan is to accomplish this specifically through high rates of GDP growth.

Now, there are a number of reasons to be skeptical about this

approach. The first is that there is no direct correlation between GDP growth and poverty reduction.

It all depends on how the growth is distributed. And right now it is incredibly skewed in favor of the rich. Here is a potent fact to keep in mind. Even during the most equitable period over the past few decades, the poorest 60% of humanity received only 5% of all new income generated by global growth, while the richest 1% received more than 90% of the gains. Suddenly it becomes clear why we've been sold this story about how growth is the only option.

Now, here's some math for you. Because of this horribly skewed distribution, the pace of trickle-down is so slow that it will take approximately 100 years to eliminate global poverty through economic growth, according to recent research published in the *World Economic Review*. And note that this at the standard poverty line of \$1.25/day. Most scholars say that this line is far too low for even basic human subsistence, and that a more accurate poverty line is about \$5/day. At this level, it will take 207 years to eradicate poverty through growth. And to get there, we will have to grow the global economy to 175 times its present size. Think about it. That's 175 times more extraction, more production, and more consumption than we're already doing. And of course this is absurd, because even if such immense growth were possible, it would drive climate change and resource depletion to catastrophic levels and, in the process, rapidly reverse any gains against poverty.

So it's not just that growth is an inadequate solution to the problem of poverty. It also makes little sense given what we know about our planet's ecological limits. Indeed, even at *existing* levels of economic activity, scientists tell us that we're already overshooting our planet's biocapacity by about 60% per year, due to excess greenhouse gas emissions and resource overuse. And, crucially, it's important to recognize

that the vast majority of this is caused by overconsumption by people in a small handful of rich countries. For example, people in Europe consume on average 2.6 times more than their share of the earth's biocapacity, while people in the US and Britain consume as much as 4 times more. Their excess growth is driving us all to catastrophe.

Rapid climate change is the most obvious symptom of this overshoot, of course; but we can also see it in a number of other registers. Half of our tropical forests have been destroyed in the last 60 years. 90% of fish stocks have collapsed. Agricultural soil is depleting to the point where food yields will begin to decline within our lifetime. And species are dying off so fast that scientists have classed this as the sixth mass extinction in the planet's history, with the last one having occurred 66 million years ago. And all of this has crushing consequences for human beings - particularly in poorer countries.

And remember, all of this is only at our *existing* levels of economic activity. When we start to factor in *growth*, things start to look very bleak indeed.

Right now, the world is united around the goal of maintaining global growth at around 3% per year. Anything less, and the economy crashes into crisis.

3% may sound like a small increment, but keep in mind that this is an exponential curve, so growing at that rate means *doubling* the size of the global economy in 20 years, and then over the next 20 years doubling it again from its already doubled state, and so on until infinity. It is almost too absurd to imagine.

Now, when faced with projections about the dangers of continued growth, most economists brush them aside. They insist that technological innovations and efficiency improvements will help us "decouple" growth from material

throughput, enabling us to grow GDP indefinitely. But unfortunately there is exactly zero evidence for this view. Annual global material throughput has more than *doubled* since 1980, and over the past decade the rate of throughput has *accelerated*, not slowed down. Right now we're consuming around 70 billion tonnes of stuff per year, and by 2030 that figure is expected to breach 100 billion.

Similar false promises are wheeled out in the face of global warming projections. Some insist that we can continue to grow the economy indefinitely without causing catastrophic climate change. All we need is to shift as fast as we can to renewable energy, and rely on negative-emissions technology. This bit about negative emissions technology is important to understand. The dominant proposal out there is called BECCS: "bio-energy carbon capture and storage". According to this proposal, all we have to do is plant enormous tree plantations to suck carbon out of the atmosphere. Then we harvest them, turn them into wood pellets and ship them around the world to power stations where we will burn them for energy. Then we capture the carbon emissions that they produce and store the gases deep under the ground. Voila -an energy system that sucks carbon out of the air. What's not to love?

In fact, this plan is at the very center of the Paris Agreement on climate change. When the world's government signed the Paris Agreement, promising to keep global warming under 2 degrees, everyone heaved a huge sigh of relief. But if you look closely at the agreement, you'll see that the emissions reductions it promises don't actually get us there. Even if all the world's countries meet their targets -which is very unlikely, since the targets are non-binding- we'll still be hurtling toward about 3.7 to 4 degrees of global warming - way over the threshold.

What might our planet look like if it warms by 4°C?

Projections show that it is likely to bring about heatwaves

not seen on Earth for 5 million years. Southern Europe will turn into a desert. Sea levels will rise by 1.2 metres, drowning cities like Amsterdam and New York. 40% of species will be at risk of extinction. Our rainforests will wither away. Crop yields will collapse by 35%, triggering famine in the global South. So why is nobody sounding the alarm about this? Why is nobody freaking out? Because the Paris Agreement assumes that BECCS will work to pull carbon down out of the atmosphere. Instead of committing to the emissions reductions we need, it presupposes that technology will save us.

There's only one small problem. Engineers and ecologists are very clear that BECCS won't work. The technology has never been proven at scale. And even if it did work, it would require that we create plantations equivalent to three times the size of India, without taking away from the agricultural land that we need to feed the world's population -and that's just not physically possible. In other words, BECCS is a myth, the Paris Agreement has sold us a lie, and yet we're hanging our future on it.

If we can't rely on BECCS to save us, that means we have to commit to much more demanding emissions reductions. Kevin Anderson, one of Britain's leading climate scientists, argues that to have a decent shot at keeping below 2 degrees, industrialized countries will have to cut emissions by 10% per year until net zero in 2050. And here's the problem: even if we throw everything we have into efficiency improvements and renewable technologies, they will help us reduce emissions by *at most* 4% per year. That means that in order to bridge the rest of the gap, rich countries will have no choice but to downscale their economic activity by 6% per year.

In other words, climate science itself recognizes a clear de-growth imperative. It's time for us to face up to this reality -yet our leaders are doing everything they can to avoid this uncomfortable fact.

Now, I want to say a few things about de-growth. First of all, degrowth is not the same as austerity. Austerity means cutting social spending in order to -supposedly- keep the economy growing. De-growth is exactly the opposite. It is a process of investing in social goods in order to render growth unnecessary. Let me explain. Right now, our politicians see growth as a substitute for equality. They don't want to redistribute resources, so instead their plan is to grow the size of the economy, while hoping that a little bit trickles down to keep the masses acquiescent. But we can turn this equation around. If growth is a substitute for equality, then equality can be a substitute for growth. In other words, instead of growing the economy and intensifying our exploitation of the earth, we can share what we already have more fairly.

The good news is that there is plenty of data showing that it's possible to downscale production and consumption at the same time as increasing human development indicators like happiness, well-being, education, health, and longevity.

All it takes is investing in things like universal education, healthcare, and public housing. In other words, the commons are an antidote to growth. Consider the fact that Costa Rica has better human development indicators than the United States, but with only one-fifth of its GDP per capita and one third of its ecological footprint per capita. That's real ecological efficiency. How do they do it? With universal social policy and strong protections for the commons that have been in place for nearly 70 years.

There are other important steps that would enable de-growth. We could stop measuring progress with GDP, and focus on human well-being instead, and indeed this is the first step we should take. We could ban advertising in public spaces, which would reduce pressures for needless consumption. A universal basic income, by allowing us to walk away from bullshit jobs,

would reduce pressures for unnecessary production.

But there are a few deep challenges we need to confront. One of the reasons that the economy *has* to grow is because our system is completely shot through with debt. And debt comes with interest. If we don't grow the economy fast enough to meet interest payments, then we have a financial crisis.

Because of debt, we are slaves to growth -we are all forced to churn our planet and our bodies into money and feed it to our creditors. Greece knows this fact better than anyone else. One solution, of course, is to cancel the debt -or to refuse to pay it. Yes, creditors will lose out, and some of them will collapse, but this is a small price to pay to liberate our system from the growth imperative.

As Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary president of Burkina Faso put it, "If we don't pay the debts, no one will die. If we do pay the debts, people will surely die." And we could add that the ecosystem on which we depend will surely die as well.

But the problem goes even deeper than this, since our money system itself is based on debt. This is often surprising for people to hear. Most of us think that it is central banks that create money. But in fact more than 90% of money is created by private commercial banks. When commercial banks make loans, they are not lending money out of their reserves in the vault. Rather, they simply invent the money out of thin air. In other words, nearly every dollar or Euro that is circulating in our economy represents debt. And because debt necessitates growth, we might say that every new dollar that is created is effectively heating up the planet.

If we want to embark on a de-growth trajectory, then, we need more than debt resistance -we need to abolish debt-based currency and invent a new money system altogether. There are lots of ways we can do this. We could have the state retake

control over the creation of money, so it would be free of debt, and restrict commercial banks so they can only lend out of their own reserves. This is known as a positive money system, or a full-reserve banking system. Or instead of relying on the state we could invent our own complementary currencies. The rise of blockchain technology and the Bancor protocol make this more feasible than ever, and thousands of new currencies are springing up, allowing people to partially opt out of the dominant money system.

But confronting the de-growth imperative is more than just evolving our way toward a different economic system. It is also about radically changing the way that we think about ourselves as humans and our relationship to the rest of the world. We have to get past the mad notion that came from so-called Enlightenment thinkers like Descartes and Bacon, who convinced us that humans are separate from and superior to nature. Real enlightenment resides instead in the realization -preserved today by mystics and many indigenous peoples- that we are a *part* of nature... that the fish and the soils and the forests are our sisters and our brothers, that we share the same substance, or the same spirit. We must realize that the imperative of de-growth is not about bending to obey the laws of some abstract, externally-imposed ecological limits... it is about cultivating a new ontology, one that shifts us from an ethic of domination and extraction to an ethic of interdependence, unity and care.

We're all familiar with the phrase "socialism or barbarism". But I think Janet Biehl is correct when she says that the left's slogan for the 21st century needs to be "ecology or catastrophe."

*The present text is the speech of Jason Hickel at **B-FEST** (International Antiauthoritarian Festival of Babylonia Journal) that was held on 26/05/17 in Athens with the title

“Planet S.O.S.: Climate Change and Global Poverty”.

Jason Hickel is an anthropologist at the London School of Economics and author of *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions*.