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Jason Hickel is apparently one of the most popular of the "degrowthers" in Europe. He is a good speaker and can give a smooth, fact-filled presentation.

But his book *Less is More* is very frustrating. Like a lot of degrowthers he flip flops back and forth between saying the problem of environmental devastation is due to an ideology that he calls "growthism" versus the actual dynamics of capitalism. He says capitalism is organized around "perpetual growth." In this analysis labor exploitation drops out of the picture. He says capitalism is based on "artificial scarcity." In this case he's referring to the way a large part of the population do not have their own means to a livelihood — such as a farm they could grow food on. In the development of capitalism a large class of property-less people were created through land enclosures, not only in England. Hickel documents how similar programs were carried out in South Africa and India under British colonialism.

And thus the social arrangement forces workers to seek a job to obtain wage income, used to buy various commodities to maintain their lives. But he suggests this arrangement was necessary to propel "growth." In reality, of course, the subordination of the working class that results from this setup enables the owners of the firms to make a profit. That is what the game is all about. The individual capitalists are pursuing profits through the production of goods and services sold on markets. But the individual capitalists are not especially concerned with overall economic growth — just their own profits.

To ensure they do make a profit, the firms continuously seek ways to lower expenses. They do this by speedup, or technological change that enables them to produce the same output with fewer worker hours. They also avoid expenses by externalizing costs onto others — as with air and water pollution. For example, a power firm may generate electricity by burning coal. This damages respiratory systems downwind of the plant and contributes to global warming. But the firm pays nothing for those damages. These are examples of "negative externalities" — a term coined a century ago by Arhur Pigou. Negative externalities are pervasive in capitalism. And this dynamic is key to the worsening ecological crisis.

But Hickel doesn't recognize this cost-shifting dynamic of capitalist production.

Like a lot of "degrowthers" Hickel uses the Jevons Paradox to argue that "green growth" isn't possible. He argues that renewable energy is not a solution because growth in energy demand has "swamped" the increase in renewable energy production. The argument is as follows: If you increase energy efficiency, that lowers the price per unit of energy. But that will merely promote increased demand for energy. Even within the present capitalist economy, this doesn't always hold, as economist Robert Pollin points out in *Greening the Global Economy.* If you buy a more energy efficient dishwasher, why would you be running it more often? You only have so many dishes to wash in the course of the day or week.

nalized onto the balance sheets of production organizations, they have an incentive to reduce the ecological damage per unit of human benefit they provide. This would allow growth to occur without increasing ecological damage.

Moreover, Hickel's argument against "green growth" assumes a capitalist economy. Within a non-profit, self-managed ecosocialist economy, production organizations would be unable to externalize costs. Thus they would have an incentive to reduce the materials and emissions per unit of output, if they are charged a proper cost for those materials and emissions, and can't simply externalize emissions costs onto the society. This means there would be a tendency towards reductions in throughput — materials and damaging emissions — per unit of human benefit. This would allow for growth in output that does not increase material throughput and damaging emissions. Hence green growth would be possible in an ecosocialist economy where production organizations must include the costs of real materials and damaging emissions on their balance sheets.

Hence, green growth is possible.

A frustrating aspect of the book is his elaboration of his "program" — a long wish list of outcomes without realistic ideas about how it is to be brought about. So this is his program:

1. End planned obsolescence.

He mistakenly believes it is "the growth imperative" that is the problem, not the search for profit. He seems to think this reform could be accomplished by laws like mandatory extended warranties. In reality you'd need a different economy that would generate a change in the actual engineering of products. If planned obsolescence enables greater profits over time through more sales, capitalist firms will tend to figure out ways to do it.

2. Cut advertising.

He concedes that CEOs say they can't sell anything without advertising. So we can anticipate fierce capitalist opposition. Besides, people want to know about available products. He says nothing about this. You could in theory replace advertising with independent evaluators of products like Consumer Reports. But firms would lose control over the "sales effort" on that model.

3. Shift from ownership to usership.
Actually this is a real trend by capitalists. John Deere has been encouraging farms to rent equipment. According to Bloomberg, company filings show that rental is three to six times more profitable for the company. There is a similar trend in the software industry, with Adobe Systems making the full version of Photoshop only available for rental nowadays. Hickel is thinking of situations like a non-profit car-sharing organization, for example. But using rather than owning can also be a profitable move for firms.

4. End food waste.
Hickel never comes up with a realistic idea about how that might be done. He does mention requiring markets to donate unsold food. But he offers no general solution.

5. He wants to ramp down industries such as fossil fuel.
Here he is on same side as the Green New Dealers. But other industries are in his gun sights: He wants to eliminate the beef industry. He's not here looking at the ways cattle might be raised for sale to meat packers with less environmentally destructive effects — such as cattle integrated with other forms of agriculture, feeding them crop debris after harvests and so on.

He also wants an end the building of big houses. Okay, how to do that? He doesn't propose socialization of the construction industry. In practice builders in USA build new housing only for the affluent — professionals, managers etc. That's because those are the people who can afford high prices and that's where the big profits are made. And builders compete to provide them bigger and bigger houses. The only exception is subsidized social housing, which is a very small part of the industry in the USA. You could propose legal limits on house size but

there would be fierce attacks on that from the banks, builders, and construction unions.

What about workers who displaced from industries that are down-sized, such as the fossil fuel industry? Hickel's solution is a shorter workweek and retaining programs. Is he proposing that the workweek is shorter but with same pay level? He doesn't say but that's pretty crucial. To force that through on a society-wide basis would require a huge labor insurgency. Hickel is sort of clueless about that. What will the wages and conditions be on new the new green infrastructure and social service projects that he proposes? He doesn't say. But the American labor concept of the "Just Transition" was directed at exactly this issue. The Just Transition would mean that displaced workers would get income maintainance, moving expenses, retraining, and there would be union efforts to ensure appropriate wages and conditions on "green" projects. Hickel never uses the term "Just Transition."

Hickel seems to think the strategy must be to just elect new politicians or influencing existing ones. A rather naive approach to these problems.

Hickel fails to examine the cost-shifting dynamics of capitalism that lead to persistent negative externalities like air and water pollution.

Thus Hickel's program is unclear and he fails to offer a plausible strategy for fighting global warming. Moreover, vast growth in production of green technology is going to be necessary to shift away from a fossil fuel based economy — heat pumps, solar panels, wind turbines, electrify delivery trucks and other vehicles, and so on. His argument against green growth is based on the ecologically destructive dynamics of capitalism. In addition to regulatory initiatives to contain these damaging tendencies as we fight for a different economy, green growth is a possibility within a self-managed eco-socialist economy where production organizations cannot externalize their costs onto others. If ecological costs are inter-