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By **Jennifer Szalai**

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A rising tide and a bigger pie: Economic growth has long been considered such an obvious boon that it's pursued by governments across the world as a matter of course. But in 2016, when a London professor warned an audience in Newcastle that Brexit would lead to a precipitous drop in Britain's gross domestic product, that well-worn measure of economic activity, one woman's heckling caught him by surprise. "That's your bloody G.D.P.," she shouted, "not ours!"

The eruption tapped into a suspicion supported by reality: Gains in economic growth have too often buoyed the fortunes of the richest instead of lifting all boats. Prosperity even in the most prosperous countries hasn't been shared. But [all the attention to inequality](#) is just a crack in the edifice of economic orthodoxy. Now a much more radical proposition has emerged, looming like a wrecking ball: Is economic growth desirable at all?

Less than two decades ago, an economist like [Herman Daly](#), who argued for a "steady-state economy," was such an outlier that his fellow economist Benjamin Friedman could declare that "practically nobody opposes economic growth per se." Yet today there is a burgeoning "post-growth" and "degrowth"

movement doing exactly that — in [journals](#), on podcasts, at conferences. Consider some of the books published in the last several years: Tim Jackson's "[Post-Growth: Life After Capitalism](#)," Kate Soper's "[Post-Growth Living](#)," Giorgos Kallis's "[In Defense of Degrowth](#)," Vincent Liegey and Anitra Nelson's "[Exploring Degrowth](#)," Jason Hickel's "[Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World](#)." The proliferation of the term is as good an indicator as any: The literature of degrowth is growing.

In 1972, the French theorist André Gorz coined the word *décroissance* to ask whether “no-growth — or even degrowth” in material production was necessary for “the earth’s balance,” even if it ran counter to “the survival of the capitalist system.” Gorz was writing the same year that “[The Limits to Growth](#)” was published, a report by a group of scientists warning that surges in population and economic activity would eventually outstrip the carrying capacity of the planet. “The Limits to Growth” was initially met with skepticism and even ridicule. Critics pointed to humanity’s undeniably impressive record of technological innovation. As one representative economist put it, “Our predictions are firmly based on a study of the way these problems have been overcome in the past.”

And so degrowth remained on the fringes of the fringe for decades, until increasing awareness about global warming percolated into public debates in the early aughts. The realization that we hadn’t innovated our way out of our ecological predicament, along with inequalities laid bare by the 2008 financial crisis, fueled a more widespread distrust of the conventional capitalist wisdom. Maybe relentless economic growth was more poison than panacea.

An Ideology of ‘Growthism’

This doubt has taken varied forms, from cautious agnosticism to categorical doomsaying, with degrowth occupying the furthest end of the spectrum. For advocates of degrowth, it’s a core tenet that in high-income countries the constant expansion demanded by capitalism isn’t required to improve people’s lives; instead, the ensuing inequality and environmental havoc have frequently undermined them.

Take Hickel, an anthropologist who teaches in London and Barcelona and is one of the movement’s [most spirited exponents](#). Like other contemporary critics of unfettered growth, he emphasizes the climate crisis. His book begins with scenes of ecological devastation: dying earthworms, declining crop yields,

collapsing fish stocks. He points to the connection between growing G.D.P. and energy use, identifying an ideology of “growthism” that he equates with “a kind of madness.” He says that he is not promoting a deliberate reduction in G.D.P. But if G.D.P. stagnates or declines because we conserve energy instead of consuming it, so be it.

In what could be a mission statement for the movement, Hickel writes: “Degrowth is about reducing the material and energy throughput of the economy to bring it back into balance with the living world, while distributing income and resources more fairly, liberating people from needless work, and investing in the public goods that people need to thrive.”

This program amounts to an overhaul of the capitalist system, not just some reformist tinkering around the edges. Nor do its advocates place much hope in technological fixes. “‘Green growth’ is not a thing,” Hickel asserts, citing [research he conducted with Kallis](#). “It has no empirical support.”

Of course, such a sweeping pronouncement is far from uncontested. Economists like [Paul Krugman](#) and data scientists like [Hannah Ritchie](#) have [maintained](#) that technological advances mean that economic prosperity doesn’t have to lead to ecological degradation. But for all the debates over [carbon pricing](#) and [parts per million](#) and [degrees of warming](#), the distinctive argument that Hickel and other degrowthers make is ultimately a moral one: “We have ceded our political agency to the lazy calculus of growth.”

In other words, we have plundered the planet instead of figuring out more egalitarian ways to live with one another. “The problem with growthism is that for decades it has distracted us from the difficult politics of redistribution,” Hickel writes. This initially looked like the opposite of a problem. Growth’s seemingly magical ability to allow us to sidestep the toughest moral disputes was, for generations of politicians, the very thing that commended it.

Yet this pattern of avoidance has compounded not only our ecological troubles but our moral ones, too. An illusory consensus held together by economic growth has dissolved. As the economist Daniel Susskind notes in his new book, [“Growth: A History and a Reckoning,”](#) big questions that were pushed to the margins — about clashing notions of freedom, equality and justice — have roared back with a vengeance. Still, he sees this as cause for ambivalence, not despair. After all, growth has also emancipated much of the world from “an unforgiving struggle for subsistence,” Susskind points out. “Growth has an

irresistible promise and an unacceptable price; it is miraculous and devastating; we need a lot more and vastly less.”

Although he denounces the blithe optimism of the economic establishment, Susskind is also highly critical of degrowthers, who are too dismissive of capitalism for his liking. He recommends “adopting a weak degrowth mind-set” — one that holds “less regard for growth” while also preserving a “serious endorsement of growth’s merits.” Only a “more balanced position,” he says, would “recognize the reality of a difficult trade-off between growth and the climate.”



The philosopher and champion of degrowth Kohei Saito, at a farm where he volunteers in Kanagawa, Japan, in 2023. Credit...Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

Abundance Without Growth?

Yet for the vocal proponents of degrowth, the timorousness of a “more balanced position” is what allowed capitalist growth to run roughshod over the earth in the first place. This is the resolute message promulgated by Kohei Saito, a 37-year-old Japanese Marxist philosopher who [has emerged as the movement’s public face](#). “Any attempt to blend degrowth with capitalism is doomed to fail,” he proclaims in “[Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto](#).” Capitalism doesn’t just tend toward growth, he says, but requires it. “To demand the cessation of all these things — to demand deceleration — is in fact to demand capitalism’s end.”

This idea might sound extreme, but it has found a considerable audience: “Slow Down,” which was released in the United States in January, has [sold half a million copies](#) since it was first published in Japan in 2020. In it, Saito quotes the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, who denounced an older generation for only being “interested in solutions that would enable you to

carry on like before.” Saito himself was born in 1987, and suggests that because he did not live through the Cold War, he was able to study Marxism without “reflexively” imposing the reality of the Soviet Union onto Marx’s work. By demanding “capitalism’s end,” Saito is just getting started; what he calls for is not just degrowth, but “degrowth communism.”

Mind you, Saito maintains that the communism he’s proposing isn’t the top-down, coercive, undemocratic statism of the Soviet Union, but something that looks a lot more like communitarianism, with an emphasis on more local measures like mutual aid, citizens’ assemblies and “face-to-face community building.” This redefinition, he says, isn’t a repudiation of Marx — who emphasized the necessity of state-led economic growth in “The Communist Manifesto” — but is based on “research notes Marx kept at the end of his life,” as he became increasingly willing to take the dangers of environmental degradation into account.

It’s certainly an unusual rhetorical strategy: insist on repurposing Marx and resuscitating a loaded (and arguably inaccurate) term like “communism” by trying to purge (or ignore) its historical baggage. But Saito’s book is written largely for a generation that has been saddled with the ecological consequences of economic growth and therefore has little reason to respect the likes and dislikes of its elders. He repeatedly derides the faintest hint of moderation with a dismissive “amounts to nothing more”; his uncompromising provocations are undoubtedly part of the appeal.

Eventually, though, Saito admits that there is “some truth” to the argument that capitalism produces material wealth, and so he champions degrowth communism only for rich countries, not for poor ones. “Those in the Global North enjoy rich lifestyles enabled by the sacrifices of those in the Global South,” he writes. Degrowth would halt this injustice and offer a form of “reparations”: Reducing the resources and energy used by the Global North would allow the Global South to pursue its own economic growth instead.

Just don’t call this a sacrifice on our part. Even Saito is forced to contend with our stubborn attraction to bounty, edging away from the austere vocabulary of degrowth by resorting to the language of plenitude. Like Hickel, he promises a new kind of “radical abundance,” in which a genuine commitment to “the commons” will allow us to savor “public wealth” instead of endlessly chasing stuff we don’t need.

‘A Poverty of Imagination’

Given how keenly the degrowth movement disavows coercion, how is this wholesale transformation supposed to happen? “Seeds of degrowth communism are sprouting all over the world,” Saito writes, pointing to experiments in local governance in cities like Barcelona, which has pledged to be [carbon neutral by 2050](#), and farming cooperatives in South Africa.

Even degrowth’s skeptics may find that Saito’s examples of grass-roots organizing sound agreeably democratic and improvisational. But the prospect of global apocalypse that degrowthers keep emphasizing also has the perverse effect of making local measures sound acutely inadequate. Still, Saito says that such experiments do offer something crucial: an enlarged sense of what’s possible. Degrowth’s critics, he writes, suffer from “a poverty of imagination that simply accepts the status quo as unchangeable.”

As it happens, Susskind says precisely the same thing but in the reverse: that it’s degrowth’s advocates who suffer from a “lack of imagination.” The mirrored accusations are striking. Maybe it isn’t a matter so much of imagination scarcity as of where that imagination is directed. Techno-optimists place their faith in innovation; degrowthers place theirs in social movements. Both sides lay claim to being the genuine realists. Each insists that we simply don’t have enough time to do what the other side wants.

The intransigence of such zero-sum disputes is a reminder of why win-win fantasies are so attractive in the first place. Whatever the profound differences between degrowth’s proponents and their critics, the scale of the climate crisis suggests one point of convergence: We need all the imaginative help we can get.

This “degrowth” way of living, however worthy, seems impossible, preposterous. Yet it is how we lived for the vast bulk of our time on this planet. The deprivations of those times, however, are cast as illustrating the need for “growth” and capitalism—as the Indigenous-deniers ignorantly say to the (perhaps naively) Indigenous-minded “Do you really want to trade your car for a horse or yak, or worse, your own two feet?”—while the depravity of societies ravaged on the margins of the capitalist order are used to further illustrate the need for more capitalists. Dismantling capitalism would be devastating—the capitalists would make sure of it, fighting it all along the way salvaging their place and wealth—which shows also how “human nature” has been remade. Or seems to have been: We have little capacity to reimagine ourselves differently. The forces and powers that have taken over the “human project” are insidious. Too late to destroy the Tower of Babel and confound the tongues of the pernicious, presumptuous presumers to power they can’t be trusted with? TJB