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Interview with anthropologist Jason Hickel

***"Solving the ecological crisis and ensuring a good life for all requires getting out of capitalism"***



**Sources:** The climate tide [Photo: DeVolkskrant]

*The anthropologist calls for production to be organized around human well-being and ecological stability, and not around capital accumulation.*

**Jason Hickel** appears in the Screen with British punctuality. "Wow, you're not the only one looking like you're being cold," I joke, "for he wears a woolen hat and I a scarf, to Despite the fact that none of them speak from the street. "In my office there is no sun" –he he laughs, while clarifying how much he likes Barcelona. Here he has lived for a few years months, when he was hired as a professor at the Institute of Science and Environmental Technology of the Autonomous University (ICTA-UAB), where, among

other things, it is dedicated to the scientific work with a millionaire grant from the European Research Council, body of the European Union.

Before lived in London, where he still maintains his affiliation as a researcher of the London School of Economics. Originally from the small Kingdom of Eswatini (the former Swaziland), Hickel is an anthropologist, expert on social inequality, ecological and political economics, and one of the most acclaimed voices at the level International **on degrowth**, theory which promotes "a planned reduction in the use of energy and resources for restore the balance of the economy with living beings in a safe manner, fair and equitable," according to his latest book, *Less is More. How Degrowth Will Save the World* (Penguin, 2020). A few months after publish the translation in Spain, under the title of *Menos in addition. How Degrowth Will Save the World* (Captain Swing), we talked about this work and its public intervention in the debates around the climate crisis.

### **How did the idea of writing this book?**

Well, it came about of the frustration I had with the general discourse of environmentalism, which tends to see the ecological crisis as an effect of individual behavior, or a few very bad companies, or the lack of appropriate technology. To me, this is deeply ahistorical, apolitical, and demobilizing. Leads to environmental regulations based on fault or solutions prosecutors, which we've had for decades and don't work, and ignore the Deep structural crisis that we are going through. So I wanted to tell a story that builds on the current academic and scientific work, and demonstrates that the crisis Ecological is an effect of capitalism, which is a system organized around to the continuous increase in industrial production. This is the main cause of climate change and ecological collapse, and until we start, As a civilization, we will continue to face this problem and difficulties.

It's weird, because everyone understands more or less what is happening, and knows more or more. less how to fix it, but nothing changes. And the reason is the structure underlying the economy; until we take charge of that fact, We will continue to fail. The economic system is a problem in two ways: A)- because it gives rise to the ecological crisis, and B) - because, despite abusive use of resources and energy, it fails to meet human needs.

In countries like the US, or the UK, or even Spain, we have social problems like inability to access good health care, housing, etc. Therefore, what I propose is that we solve the ecological crisis and Let's ensure a good life for all, but that requires a transition abroad. of capitalism, where production is organized around human well-being and ecological stability, and not around capital accumulation.

**This book came out in August 2020. ¿Think that the social and climate policies you propose in it have moved to a second ground with the war in Ukraine? Has the war displaced the Climate priorities of governments?**

The war has highlighted the contradictions at stake, and revealed that Europe's dependence on growth is causing real problems. Because we know that Europe wants to avoid depending on Russian fossil fuels, but at the same time it wants to keep growing, and growth requires energy... That makes achieving energy independence difficult. There is another dimension to the crisis: the gap between energy supply and demand, which causes inflation, as we are seeing. So we have this multiple crisis that is affecting Europe, and I believe that degrowth offers a way out of all this, in the sense that Europe needs to reduce the forms of production that are less priority; That will allow them, at the same time, to reduce energy use, control inflation, reduce [greenhouse gas] emissions, and achieve energy independence. So degrowth unveils new possibilities.

*«El capitalismo es un sistema donde las decisiones sobre qué producir y cómo usar los recursos las toma el 1 %»*

**This book contains, above all, a question politics. You talk about "the totalitarian logic of industrial profit," and even You go so far as to say that today's democracies are undemocratic. It's funny; the other day *El País* published a Poll that said *millennials* don't believe in democracy as much like previous generations. On the one hand, this gives me hope – if you don't believe it. In democracy, it will be for the better—but it can also be scary—if not They believe in democracy, some kind of (eco)fascism will replace it. What do you think?**

Encounter So absurd that our elites are surprised that people are giving it the back to democracy. Show me... If you corrupt and invalidate it, repeat and systematically, and then you expect people to somehow support it, because It's a bit absurd. I think people are disillusioned with the democracy *of the world. The way it is practiced today*, but this is because it is no longer a democracy. We have a system where the rich and corporations They determine political outcomes, and that has been demonstrated several times empirically. It's a system where the media is owned by millionaires, so they control public debate; But, more importantly, and despite the fact that we have an electoral political democracy (although quite a corrupt), is that there is no democracy at all in economic terms. This is Important to understand, right?

There is the strange belief that capitalism is democratic and, while it is true that It often occurs in political democracies, the economic system itself is not democratic. It is a

system where decisions about what to produce, and how to use the resources are taken by the 1% that controls the majority of stock market assets, And we have nothing to add there. We have to spend the Life working to create the world that the ruling class wants to see, right? So it's deeply cynical to suggest that we have a democracy when the Most of our working lives are spent in institutions where we do not We have a voice and no vote, which function according to extremely hierarchical principles. and authoritarian.

What it is essential is a transition to economic democracy; Need Democratize control over finance and industrial production. One thing Fascinating is that we have a multitude of studies that show that, when People control decisions about production and resources, prioritize welfare and ecology over the accumulation of elites. So there's something Intrinsically ecological in democracy when applied to the sphere economic, and that is what we urgently need to do.

**I sense then that you are not worried about the ecofascism...**

Oh, no! Let me answer that. I see it this way: the lack of democracy is what leads to this perverse result... And the reason is that production is not organized around human needs, but around corporate profit. We have a lot of SUVs [Sports Utility Vehicle] and fast fashion, but we don't have public transportation, or nutritious food, or good health care or affordable housing... So, on fascism, I think we're in a very dangerous moment, no doubt. The problems of democracy can lead to the emergence of fascist movements, as is already happening, and liberalism has no answers for that. Are we going to trust the Democratic Party, the Bidens of the world? Obviously not. It has been their failures in managing crises that have led us to this feeling of disenchantment. It is essential that we develop alternative narratives, one that breaks with liberalism and fuses a political vision of true economic democracy, and a system that is capable of ensuring a good life for all, and ecological stability at the same time. That requires getting out of capitalism.

*"What a disappointment to see how the left becomes obsessed with GDP!"*

**You criticize GDP quite a bit for reasons Obvious, and yet the (progressive) Spanish government has Recently celebrated the growth figures last year: 5.5%. ¿What that other indicators of social progress can we use to replace GDP? Talk of happiness, but there are studies that suggest that it is an indicator easily Manipulated...**

The Happiness rates may be useful for some purposes, but they are not a substitute for GDP. We need solid alternatives. One approach is the Index Real progress, which basically starts with GDP and then subtracts some ecological and social consequences, resulting in a more coherent number. But I think the problem is having only one index. We

need a kind of Board focused on specific social and ecological outcomes. We know that We want to improve education, health, wages, etc. Well, let's measure the progress towards those goals, rather than assuming that if we increase a single number We're going to magically achieve all that. And then the ecological indicators, such as emissions, biodiversity, soil health, etc. That must be paramount.

Then it's your question about the government... It's depressing! What a disappointment to see how the Left becomes obsessed with GDP! They really have to think about it, because it's Of course, GDP is an indicator of the market value of total production of wares. It is designed to measure what is of interest to capital, not to measure use value or social welfare. And it's particularly absurd. When you realize that the main intervention that socialists They want to do is de-modify essential goods and services, right? Things like Transport or housing, when decomodified, have lower prices. Obviously, public housing is cheaper than housing that allows speculation, and GDP is a measure of market prices, so if you take out the housing on the market and you turn it into public, GDP goes down, although the value of use and well-being go up. So the left has to move on from GDP. We need indicators that focus on what the left wants to achieve, that they are better lives and a better ecology, let's be clear.

**It's a trap, Jason. I think it was Mark Fisher the one who affirmed the paradox of the left, which he tried to foment Anti-neoliberal policies in a political and economic context that is no other than neoliberalism. Maybe that's why there are people so disappointed.**

Okay, but It is a very risky strategy for the left. Because if you're going to measure your success according to GDP growth, and prepares the nation to look at the GDP as the arbiter of the value of your policies, what happens if you introduce measures that are good for people or for ecology but that reduce GDP? What You lose, even according to your own criteria. And then the right comes along and you says: "Well, we can do better with the rise in GDP, cutting social services and wages, forcing people to work harder and worse conditions'. And if they succeed, then they have won, following your criteria! Really the left must adopt another strategy to displace GDP as Target indicator. If not, they will continue to lose. Capitalists always They do better.

**Or at least they are more coherent.**

Exactly! [laughs]

**I really like that, in the book, you have devoted so much effort to untangling the history of capitalism and saying, mind you, it did not increase life expectancy during**

**the first 400 years, it was based on creating a false shortage for the benefit of a few, etc. What kind of reactions have you encountered to this story?**

Many people are surprised at this, but it is something that is well understood among economic historians, there is a lot of empirical evidence. I think it's surprising among the general public because we've been bombarded with propaganda claiming that capitalism is magically responsible for everything good that has happened to us, and it's never responsible for the bad... But it is clear that the most important advances in human progress were achieved by progressive social movements. The evidence of the last 500 years shows us that capitalism is associated with a decline in wages, in human health, with an increase in mortality. This should come as no surprise, because capitalism is a system that for centuries was based on systematic dispossession and appropriation of resources and labor for the benefit of elite accumulation. It was a disastrous system for welfare. It was not until the late nineteenth century in Europe and the mid-twentieth century in the Global South that we began to see real progress, and this coincides exactly with the rise of progressive, democratic, socialist movements, which struggled to organize production around human needs. Like the labor movement, which demanded fair wages, labor regulation, decent housing... Moreover, European countries were not democracies until the nineteenth century. Only with popular movements can we achieve such brutal changes.

*"The unity of trade unions and environmentalists is crucial"*

**The climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis, etc. are very serious. In the book you offer recipes to tackle them, but I think A fundamental issue here is time. We don't have time. We know what It has to be done, but ... How can we accelerate the public understanding of these crisis and implementation of solutions?**

Is that clear that this requires totally transformative structural change, and that kind of Change needs an organized political movement to materialize. The The environmental movement as it stands now is not capable of doing that. *Extinction Rebellion* or *Fridays for Future*, etc., They can attract a lot of people and block bridges, and they have been very efficient to the Time to stir up the debate around climate change, but they don't have the kind of political power necessary to instigate structural changes.

Stop that Alliances with working-class organizations are needed, that's where there is the impulse; The power of a strike is critical when confronted to capital, and has been at the centre of the most successful political struggles of the history. I think building those alliances is going to require coming to the fore. The kind of social policies I outline... Policies that will remove the economic insecurity, which will guarantee universal public

services, salaries fair, a fair distribution of wealth, etc. These policies are essential for the ecological transition, and putting them in place is vital to the Time to shift to a post-growth economy, an economy where Growth is not a requirement to ensure a good life for all. [...]

So no I see trade union movements succeeding in their social objectives in a Regime focused on growth, and neither that environmentalists succeed in their climate goals without working-class groups. Unity of both is crucial, and my advice to anyone who is organizing those Space is to work to build those alliances as soon as possible.

**Finally, you say that, in the face of the mass extinction of species, "we do not cry". Disagree. I do. cry. Other people cry. I recently published a Article on the emotional and psychological exhaustion of the crisis climate and how we should politicize pain. Do you agree?**

Yes, I am According to politicizing pain, there is a lot of potential there. But I think We must go beyond despair and sadness, which are emotions Important... But we must channel them towards more active ones, such as the outrage and rage, and acknowledging that the world is not dying passively, but they are killing him. And responding to that means mobilizing to overthrow the system that is causing this, and the class that benefits And it's perpetuating the problem.

Source: <https://www.climatica.lamarea.com/entrevista-jason-hickel-capitalismo/>

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