

Beyond the Growth Imperative

Article by Olaf Bruns

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For 30 years, environmental economist Tim Jackson has been at the fore of international debates on sustainability. Over a decade since his hugely influential *Prosperity Without Growth*, the world is both much changed – reeling from a pandemic and with unprecedented prominence for environmental issues – and maddeningly the same, still locked in a growth-driven destructive spiral. What does Jackson’s latest contribution, *Post Growth*, have to say about the way out of the dilemma?

Tim Jackson’s new book, *Post Growth: Life after Capitalism* (Polity Press, 2021), follows his ground-breaking *Prosperity without Growth* (2009, updated in 2017). Whilst the previous work reflected, partly, the austerity-driven answers to the Great Recession, *Post Growth* falls into a different world. It is a world where the recognition of climate change as the greatest challenge facing humankind is moving towards consensus. In the United States, even the Republican Party’s younger members are looking for ways out of the corner into which the party has manoeuvred itself. It is also a world where the Covid-19 pandemic has not only taken many lives and destroyed many livelihoods, but – via the need for state intervention – has also dealt a blow to the gung-ho neoliberalism that is one of the main culprits of financial chaos and the looming breakdown of planetary life-support systems.

US President Joe Biden’s rescue plan as well as the EU’s Next Generation pandemic recovery fund are questioning the free-market paradigm that has held sway since the Reagan-Thatcher era, and that had trickled down into centre-left politics as well. In parallel, from the Paris Agreement to the European Commission’s European Green Deal, environmental concerns that were condescendingly smiled upon until recently have now moved centre stage. The newly discovered role for the state and the emerging environmental consciousness might not be discussed at length in Jackson’s new book, but they are the backdrop against which it is to be read.

The good life

True to the idea of “post growth”, Jackson does not author a completely new book to join others in trapping dust on overburdened shelves. Rather, he deepens, fleshes out, and extends thoughts that were already present in his previous works. *Post Growth* is a next step, not away from the economy, but certainly closer to a host of other disciplines: from medical science, psychology, sociology, and anthropology to philosophy.

In that light, the subtitle of the book, *Life after Capitalism*, is chosen carefully: it is a book about life, about the good life, and how the “myth of growth” – the title of the first chapter – has led us astray from what actually matters in life.

Much of the book is dedicated to untangling the anthropological lunacy of an economy that serves profit rather than the people, their subsistence, and, ultimately, their purpose in life.

But are philosophers the ones to turn to when the wounds of an economic crisis are still raw, when a health crisis has just struck with unknown vehemence, and another crisis, unimaginable in all its consequences, looms on the horizon?

Well, following Jackson, the figures we have turned to for the past decades – mainstream economists – are the very ones who brought us to the current conjuncture of multi-layered crises. In the early pages, he quotes the standard bearer of neoliberalism – and, let us not forget, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics – Milton Friedman’s infamous *bon mot*, “the business of business is business”. Much of the book is dedicated to untangling the anthropological lunacy of an economy that serves profit rather than the people, their subsistence, and, ultimately, their purpose in life.

Limits to growth

Capitalism, to get the other word in the subtitle out of the way, bumps into another problem: the limits of what planet Earth can take, what the Club of Rome already called “the limits to growth” back in 1972. It relies on growth and, to keep the wheel turning, on constant expansion into new territories, commodifying whatever lies in its path. Jackson trails, with a pinch of scepticism, Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Karl Marx here. Capitalism’s claim to social progress depends on high growth rates to finance the redistribution of wealth. The wheel must turn ever faster. However, as Jackson writes, “the peak growth rates of the 1960s were only possible at all on the back of a huge and deeply destructive exploitation of dirty fossil fuels, something that can be ill afforded [...] in the era of dangerous climate change”. Hence the dilemma: growth either stops fulfilling its meagre promise of prosperity for all, or it destroys the planet. Or both.

Jackson, for one, is doubtful that economists can shepherd us out of the impasse. He only slightly caricatures when he writes, “their message is that only growth can deliver us from the mess growth itself has brought us in” – but, this time, a “green growth”, where technological innovation will allow us to “decouple” from environmental destruction.

Green growth hubris

While Jackson does not deny that the destructive intensity of a given economic output can be lowered, he reminds us that the planet does not care about relative efficiency: what matters is humanity’s overall footprint. The equation is simple: if GDP grows faster than emissions per given output decline, then the emissions keep spiralling higher regardless. Hoping for a technological miracle to solve the problem means betting on technological “efficiency” outrunning scale faster than it has ever done in the past, and doing so indefinitely into the foreseeable (and unforeseeable) future.

There is a call for “ecological investment”, but altogether, *Post Growth* is a little light on the question of whether another growth is possible – one driven by health, education, culture, and community work rather than the increasing production of stuff. Notwithstanding, Jackson’s equation is the yardstick against which the EU’s Green Deal – sold as a “growth strategy”, and essentially one reliant on green tech – needs to be examined.

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Rather unsurprisingly, fresh data concedes the point to Jackson. Recent research has shown that meeting the Paris Agreement’s goals requires that carbon emissions fall every two years by an amount equivalent to the shrinkage caused by recent lockdowns. However, the world seems to be heading in precisely the opposite direction. The International Energy Agency has shown that as soon as the first lockdowns were lifted, emissions returned to their upward trajectory. In December 2020, carbon emissions were already higher than in December 2019. For Jackson, green growth is more hubris, comparable to former US President Ronald Reagan’s principled refusal to even envisage such a thing as limits to growth.

Dead and kicking

Perhaps prematurely, the chapter analysing the overarching economic system asks, “who killed capitalism?”. Jackson’s straightforward answer is capitalism itself. Its downfall is “the result of its own obsession with growth”. Unbound neoliberalism, untethered from rules, unbothered by purpose, oblivious to limits, has driven us to the verge of social and ecological disaster. Here Jackson follows economist Wolfgang Streeck, arguing that capitalism, to the extent that it is still around, is a dead man walking. The point, however, is that even in intensive care, it continues to give a severe kicking to the planet and humans alike.

This reflection takes us to where *Post Growth* is at its very best: if capitalism and its growth addiction were only trashing the planet, it would be bad enough. But it gets truly vertiginous upon realising that capitalism also fails to achieve its original purpose: generating happiness.

Chasing unhappiness

In times of shortage, more is generally good. But when there is too much, more becomes a recipe for disaster. States pursue GDP growth based on the “assumption that money is a good proxy for happiness”. Yet sociology and psychology tend to corroborate the popular wisdom that “money cannot buy happiness”. Only in a few well-defined circumstances does GDP growth trigger an increase in happiness.

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creates unhappiness.

However, the evidence that happiness increases and decreases with equality in societies is solid. Closing the equality gap should therefore be what societies pursue, precisely for utilitarian reasons. With a host of scientific disciplines and data, Jackson exposes how capitalism structurally creates unhappiness. How, for example, the food industry has gamed our in-built dopamine response to sugar and fat, resulting in a world where “more people die of obesity than they do of undernutrition”.

But capitalism not only makes us fat, sleepless, burned-out, addicted to consumerism, lonely, unhealthy, and unable to concentrate. It also hits precisely what links most of us to the economy: work and our connection to what is produced.

Bullshit jobs

Over a long stretch, Jackson follows Hannah Arendt, who wrote in *The Human Condition* that “there is no lasting happiness outside the prescribed cycle of painful exhaustion and pleasurable regeneration. Whatever throws this cycle out of balance (misery as well as great fortune!) ruins the elementary happiness that comes from being alive.” Arendt’s distinction between “labour” (roughly, the continuous activity necessary to secure our biological maintenance), “work” (the creation of durable human artifice), and “activity” (our social role) speaks to the anthropological need for physical work, for an impact on the world of things and people.

Capitalism, however, denigrates labour, undermines craft and creativity, and trashes the intrinsic anthropological worth of objects that last. It needs to sell, always more, and is therefore inimical to values like durability. As Jackson points out, “the enormous success of the advertising industry has been to persuade us that physiological needs are the very least of the functions delivered by clothing.”

Despite all the clapping in the early lockdowns, we still have precarious, underpaid, and disregarded labour on the one hand, and on the other what the late anthropologist David Graeber called “bullshit jobs” that provide neither satisfaction to the individual, nor benefit to society.

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Automation will not save us either: instead of being a way to realise the economist John Maynard Keynes’s dream of a 15-hour working week, it is, as Graeber argued, the very reason for the existence of bullshit jobs. Automation could scarcely replace the labour-intensive activities that were recognised as the backbone of society in the early Covid period. Care work does not generate enough profit to attract investment – certainly not courtesy of the markets – or pay decent wages. Returning to Hannah Arendt, Jackson

reminds us how excessive automation has deprived us of the deeply human need for grasping and changing the world with our own hands.

Turning Kant downside-up

Immanuel Kant's philosophical concept of the categorical imperative asked people to act only according to principles they can reasonably want to become "universal law". Today, as sociologist Stephan Lessenich has reasoned, capitalism has turned this imperative on its head. Industrialised societies live and consume in such a way that they cannot hope to become universal: if it did, the breakdown of Earth's life-support systems would become all but certain.

Post Growth can be read as a playbook of how to turn the categorical imperative back on its feet again, how to build a world where equal rights to production and consumption do not ruin the planet, and how to subordinate the economy to a broader reflection on its purpose.

"State intervention" may no longer be a swearword, but economic stimulus to boost growth and redistribute wealth will not achieve social progress unless paired with a deeper reflection on work, labour, and their place in society. Society is beginning to understand the environmental challenge, but greening the economy will not be enough if current consumption patterns persist. On this point, *Post Growth* shows the way, by placing Keynesian economics within the limits of what the planet can take.

Neoliberalism might have taken a hit, but it is still standing. Environmentalism might have made some inroads, but it is still only budding. Radical questions, radical answers, and radical policies are a historical responsibility towards the people and the planet. It is categorical imperative against growth imperative.



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