

## How Degrowth Can Win Political Favour and the Masses

Article by Sébastien Hendrickx

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In recent years, the concept of degrowth has broken out of academic circles to speak to a wider audience alarmed by the harms of a growth-driven economy. Despite its growing visibility, degrowth remains a political non-starter for many. Campaigner Sébastien Hendrickx explores what degrowthers can learn from Friedrich Hayek and Edward Bernays to broaden the appeal of their ideas and win political support.

“There is no alternative.” This infamous Thatcherite slogan has been used for decades to discredit resistance to the dominant economic system. Opposing capitalism for its colonial roots and its contributions to deepening social inequality and the climate crisis often provokes this reaction. As many of us benefit from this destructive system, confronting it can be uncomfortable and describing a viable alternative proves challenging.

Jason Hickel’s bestselling *Less is More* partly frees us from this sense of discomfort. In it, the anthropologist at the London School of Economics and the University of Barcelona shows that capitalism – driven by the creation of profit and the reinvestment of that profit, and thus by the idea of seemingly infinite growth – is an impossible path for the future. In purely material terms, the planet on which and off which we live has put up several hard ecological boundaries. Evidently, crossing those boundaries has extremely destructive consequences. Drawing on strong data, Hickel shows that, as a new way forward, “green growth” – growth decoupled from an excessive energy and material footprint – is just as likely to lead to a dead end and that technological innovation is not going to magically solve all our problems. We are going to have to choose; do we want to save capitalism or do we want to save life?

For those who prefer the second option, Hickel outlines a credible alternative: an economy that revolves around ecological stability and human well-being rather than focusing blindly on shareholder profit and GDP growth. Hickel is not the first to put degrowth ideas on the agenda, but the clarity of his argument, the timing of its publication and the skill with which the author translates big ideas into concrete, achievable policy proposals means that *Less is More* is a real breath of fresh air; something to hold onto in times of despair and panic.

Despite all its qualities, however, the book only partially delivers on the promise its subtitle suggests, *How Degrowth Will Save the World*. There may be an alternative – one which also has the potential to be popular among large sections of the population – but how do you convert the ideas into actual degrowth policy? Besides good books and a group of convinced readers, a politics of habitability needs actual state power to “save the world”. How do you acquire that power? And how do you do that within the specific context of the 21st century Western political system, a system we could describe as a parliamentary democracy with strong oligarchic traits and illiberal tendencies?

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## **Change politics requires power**

The question of how to acquire power is explored by [Bruno Latour](#) and Nikolaj Schultz in their short political tract, *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique*. In it, they list the groups of people who would benefit from a policy that takes habitability seriously; it's pretty much everyone, of course, apart from the 1 per cent. According to Latour and Schultz, this motley group needs to come together and assert itself as the majority. In this way, necessary state power can be legitimised in a convincing, democratic manner. Anyone who has any experience with the complicated process of activist coalition-building may wonder, as they read this, how useful it is to gather workers, women, indigenous peoples, postcolonial activists, farmers, gardeners, scientists, inventors, environmentally conscious entrepreneurs and more under a single terminological umbrella. Nevertheless, this readable little book includes a number of relevant questions and insights.

Latour and Schultz often refer to the works of Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). This should come as no surprise. The Italian Marxist's ideas are crucial when looking for answers to this question of how to acquire power. Gramsci defined politics, in essence, as a struggle for hegemony; the dominance of a coherent set of social views, values and norms that becomes institutionally entrenched and thus excludes other possible perspectives. Hegemony demarcates the horizon of what is considered politically possible, realistic, necessary, and desirable, and what is not. Such a dominant framework doesn't simply establish and maintain itself spontaneously. Rather, it requires a constant struggle – an active, strategic interference in the course of history. According to Gramsci, this struggle is largely cultural in nature: through the domains of education, science, the media, the arts, and the culture of everyday life, it is possible to influence the ideas, values and even emotional structures and identities that dominate a society.

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## **How neo-liberalism won favour**

For four decades since the Thatcher years, we ourselves have been living under the hegemony of neoliberalism, which now seems to be on its last legs – although its demise has been announced many times before, always prematurely. Within the neoliberal model, the main task of government is to drive economic growth through deregulation and privatisation. Citizens are primarily self-sufficient individuals who can pursue their “self-interest” in “free” competition with one another. Incidentally, one of the alternatives that helped to make neoliberal hegemony invisible was degrowth thinking precisely. After the Club of Rome published its report *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, degrowth ideas briefly began to spread politically until the energy crisis of the 1970s put the brakes on them prematurely.

Political thinkers Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams argue that we can learn a lot from the highly strategic way in which the neoliberal hegemony was prepared and installed. In their manifesto *Inventing the Future*, they reconstruct the history and methods of the Mont Pelerin Society, the club of neoliberal economists that ultimately succeeded in transforming the entire world. [Friedrich Hayek](#) (1899–1992) and his peers patiently expanded their influence over decades thanks to the establishment of an international

network of think tanks, the securing of key institutional positions at major universities, the lobbying of various governments, and the popularisation of their ideas in the form of articles in widely read dailies and magazines. By actively shaping the views of both the wider public and the elites, the Mont Pelerin Society unleashed a dynamic that eventually led to a new common sense.

Today, degrowth thinking is largely absent from the existing ideological landscape: there are hardly any politicians promoting it openly, and despite its steadily growing visibility, the vast majority of the population does not yet recognise it as a valid option, if it recognises it at all. The breakneck pace at which the ecological and social crises are now unfolding is putting up both obstacles and opportunities for counter-hegemonic strategies. On the one hand, we don't have the decades it took the Mont Pelerin Society to achieve the change they were aiming for; on the other hand, the growing sense of urgency may well accelerate the maturing of minds for a fundamentally different social model – although, of course, there is no guarantee that that model will necessarily be more just and sustainable than the current one.

An important field where degrowth thinkers need to fight the hegemony battle is economics. University lectures, expert commentaries on TV news and in newspapers, analyses in authoritative economic journals, and advice to governments and corporations still bear the stamp of the *pensée unique* that sees growth as the basic condition for a healthy economy. Moreover, attempts to change elite opinions will necessarily have to take place on an international scale. Indeed, within the current context of a highly globalised economy, the freedom of individual countries to chart a radically different course is relatively limited.

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## **Speaking to the masses**

That Hickel's *Less is More* is not an impenetrable academic piece of work but a bestselling, highly readable book is a very good thing, especially from a Gramscian point of view. Its accessibility means it can convince many non-specialist readers of the absolutely destructive nature of the dominant economic views and practices as well as of the advantages of the alternative model.

There is a word for influencing the broader public opinion on a large scale, a word that we almost automatically shy away from: propaganda. And yet, it is an important part of an effective counter-hegemonic strategy. While rational arguments like Hickel's, based on sound scientific or journalistic research, are crucial for a fruitful public debate, they often prove inadequate as a means of political communication. Building on Gramsci, the political scientist Chantal Mouffe assumes in *On the Political* that politics is not about reaching a reasonable consensus but is a hegemonic struggle between clashing alternatives. This view helps us to understand why scientific reports on climate change and the environment often have a frustratingly limited impact on public opinion and policy.

Similarly, political propaganda that is mainly concerned with the moral register is doomed to fail. As Mouffe explains, when you portray your political "opponent" as morally reprehensible – think "good" democrats versus "bad" right-wing populists, or of the demonisation of the ecologically unsustainable consumer – you turn them into an "enemy". That is, you no longer respect them as an equal political

opponent with whom, despite profound differences, you can engage in a debate. Such a moralising approach is usually counterproductive: it strengthens the opponent instead of weakening them, and in the worst case, leads to resentment and violence.

Mouffe herself emphasises the mobilising potential of emotions and passions. In a representative democracy, political parties and civil-society organisations should develop – besides well-thought-out programmes – inspiring collective identities with which citizens can identify emotionally.

This raises the question of what degrowth thinkers could learn from the infamous communications strategist Edward Bernays (1891–1995). His ideas on advertising and propaganda fundamentally changed the ways in which consumer products as well as politicians, ideologies and programs are showcased. Inspired by the theories of his uncle Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Bernays argued that many of people’s thoughts and actions are rooted in desires they feel compelled to repress. Most of the choices they make, as both consumers and voters, are based less on rational considerations than on these deeper emotional urges; urges which are highly individual yet which they simultaneously share with countless others. In *Propaganda*, Bernays summarised this view particularly concisely: “Human desires are the steam which make the social machine work.” A salesperson won’t sell a car by enumerating the engine’s technical qualities, but by presenting the machine as something that appeals to masculinity and the desire for freedom and adventure.

## **Leveraging emotions**

If you want to make effective propaganda for the politics of habitability, what emotions and identities can you mobilise for that purpose? Clearly, the dominant fiction of unlimited individual freedom of choice is difficult to reconcile with the idea of planetary boundaries and degrowth policies. The apparently endless diversity of consumer offerings is a particularly powerful magnet for the desires of the masses – even if, in reality, the destructive monocultures of Big Oil, Big Agriculture, Big Fashion and such are lurking behind them.

However, people are more than just consumers. We are also anxious beings who yearn for security, stability, good health, and a sense of belonging. There is still great untapped communication potential in confronting the general public with the true scale and circumstances of the environmental catastrophe; not by providing them with more information, but by turning the information into something tangible and emotionally relatable. What if we could imagine, more concretely, the potential impact of the catastrophe on our own day-to-day lives, our local environment, our own bodies and those of our loved ones? Those who have become apathetic from all the doom-scrolling are so, in the first place, because the shocking information hasn’t led to the radical policy changes we need.

We are also, therefore, furious creatures. Political inertia, our own powerlessness, the vengeful sense of injustice: how is it possible that big polluters can continue to make big profits and sometimes even receive subsidies while, at the bottom of the social ladder, more and more people are finding it harder to make ends meet? We want to take matters back into our own hands – or at least to feel that our political representatives can do so on our behalf. That is what we voted them into city councils, parliaments and governments for, right?

Besides negative emotional incentives, there are also many positive ones. How can we once more get history moving in a meaningful way? The idea of repairing and regenerating damaged ecosystems and communities could generate a lot of enthusiasm, as could freeing technological innovation from the restrictive logic of the market, profit and growth. Hickel mentions the potential appeal of “radical

abundance”: when we put an end to the artificial scarcity generated by capitalism, we can all have more access to the goods we need to live well. A politics of habitability also offers the prospect of various forms of human emancipation. For instance, we could finally do away with the inane value hierarchies between practical workers and the theoretically educated, and at last rid the practice of care of its age-old gendered character (care as something supposedly “feminine”).

Work can fully become a source of meaning, self-esteem, and pride. At the same time, we yearn for a better balance between work and leisure, for peace of mind, the opportunity to develop ourselves in many different areas, or to just spend time together. After all, we are also social beings; we like belonging to a community. How many local social ties have supermarkets and shopping centres cut? Long live our small businesses and down with the chains and anonymous multinationals. We want to be able to have a chat with the baker around the corner, the fruit and vegetable farmer, the woodworker, the tailor, and the bicycle repairer. We want to discuss the price of the products we buy, to know where they come from, and so on.

This wide range of emotions is rooted in a more sustainable conception of “the good life” than the consumerism and productivism that dominate our collective imagination today. How can we translate these emotions into effective propaganda materials? Which audiences should we address with them, through which channels and in which way? What are the party-political players and civil-society organisations we need to convince to help build a new common sense?

One collective grappling with these questions is the Brussels-based Degrowth Propaganda Squad (DGPS). The collective aims to present degrowth policy as an answer to both the cost of living crisis as well as environmental breakdown. With their campaigns and network of activists, academic researchers, and artists, they are demonstrating one approach to win over labour unions, political parties and other crucial decision-makers.



Sébastien Hendrickx is part of the Degrowth Propaganda Squad (DGPS) and works in the field of the performing arts. He is an active member of Extinction Rebellion and initiated The Citizens' Parliament, a campaign for democratic renewal in times of ecological breakdown. You can reach DGPS at [rydrawong@protonmail.com](mailto:rydrawong@protonmail.com).

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