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How to Kick the Growth Addiction

An Interview with Tim Jackson

Ecological economist Tim Jackson, author of Prosperity Without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow, explores the need to envision a post-growth economy with Allen White, Senior Fellow at the Tellus Institute.

You are widely recognized as a leader in the field of post-growth economics, yet you started your career in mathematics and philosophy. What drew you to your current focus?

Physics in the mid-1980s in the UK was a difficult and unfulfilling place. I found no joy in the academy, which was not interested in the ideas to which I was drawn. At that time, I also had a passion for playwriting, and the BBC picked up some of my work. After completing my PhD, I moved to London to make a living as a playwright.

It seemed like a good idea, at least until I received my first few paychecks. I was doing odd jobs to supplement my meager income when, in April 1986, the fourth reactor in Chernobyl melted down. That event galvanized my interest in the nexus of economics, technology, and the environment, and inspired me to make a visit to Greenpeace, where I expressed my skepticism of nuclear technologies and my desire to help develop and promote alternatives. I started working as a volunteer and then as a freelancer, analyzing the economics of renewable energy technologies. Before I knew it, without intention or design, I was an ecological economist. The world told me what *it* wanted me to do. And I haven't looked back. After thirty years, I still write plays. But the visit to Greenpeace remains pivotal to my trajectory.

Has your playwriting affected your ecological ethos, and vice versa?

Yes, it has, and in interesting ways. In 1999, I wrote a 30-episode series that the BBC marketed as an environmental thriller. It explored the tension between economic development and ecological resilience. I used playwriting partly to give voice to the unspoken dimensions of my internal dialogue. In academia, evidence and rationality are paramount in drawing conclusions

and advancing new theses about how the world works. It is a logical but heartless process, leaving no voice for emotion or instinct. Playwriting gave me a wonderful outlet for that.

One of my plays featured a hard-nosed, survival-of-the-fittest advocate of development at all costs. She was probably one of my most vivid characters, and served as my alter ego in an environmental drama informed by my academic training. This and other plays allowed me to use different characters to explore both sides of the economy-ecology nexus as well as issues such as the social psychology of consumption and the tension between altruism and selfishness. My plays and my professional endeavors have been mutually enriching and therapeutic, a marriage of heart and mind.

In your acclaimed book *Prosperity Without Growth*, you debunk the widely held belief that prosperity and economic growth are inseparable. Why is the conventional wisdom so wrong and so widespread?

When the UK Sustainable Development Commission, on which I served, first launched an inquiry into the relationship between prosperity and growth, we pitched it as “redefining prosperity.” I talked about how the potential conflict between a growth-based economy and a finite planet was a timely, indeed essential, issue for the government to address. This, however, was not warmly received. A Treasury official at one of the early meetings responded, “Now I see what sustainability means. It means going back to live in caves. And that’s what you’re all about, isn’t it?”

This exchange, coming early in the inquiry, exposed an almost visceral fear underlying the political response to any questioning of growth. In the course of our deliberations, I learned to accept the legitimacy of such fears. The economy as currently organized relies on growth to produce jobs and ensure financial stability. At the same time, our financial system, coupled with government spending and control of money, collectively serves as a lubricant to help achieve these goals.

The hegemony of the growth-based model often prevents people from questioning its core assumptions. In a very simplistic sense, the conventional wisdom argues that all we have depends on this growth-based system, so why would we want to rock the boat and set ourselves on a path back to cave-dwelling? However, as I argued early in the Commission’s inquiry, we need to openly acknowledge the dilemma in which we are trapped: If endless growth is essential to prosperity and, at the same time, leads to ecological destruction, what should we do? Working with the Commission reminded me of playwriting in some ways, like a drama in which the protagonists were basically saying, “Don’t touch growth; it’s sacrosanct. Keep your dirty mitts off it.”

The structural, possibly psychological, maybe even religious affinity for growth impedes our ability to think clearly about our situation. Throughout the inquiry, I sought to open a space—

creative, intellectual, and political—to explore this dilemma whereby growth both drives prosperity and erodes the very preconditions for its sustainability. Revealing the contradiction between relentless expansion of income and throughput, on one hand, and ecological survival, on the other, lay at the center of my work.

Do you attribute the growth imperative to the global capitalist system?

Up to a point, yes. Take the example of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the work of countless individuals and meetings that concluded with the adoption of 17 goals and 169 specific targets. The eighth SDG links “decent work” and “economic growth,” a mirror of the conventional wisdom that dominates political discourse. Of course, the logic is understandable, as is the fear of a post-growth economy. Without growth, the argument goes, job creation will falter, leading to high unemployment and social instability, a recipe for ending the career of any politician.

Still, the durability of the argument is puzzling. The complex relationship between growth and jobs is mediated by labor productivity and technological advances. Nonetheless, politicians are mentally locked into a growth-jobs-prosperity trifecta, a mindset which itself is hostage to the dynamics of modern capitalism.

In order to get beyond this trap, we need to question the fundamental assumptions guiding modern capitalist societies. Addressing the inequalities that capitalism produces, the common argument goes, requires more of the very thing that gives rise to inequality in the first place. Let unbridled growth continue in order to raise all boats. Without it, the poor will not be lifted, and the government will have no money to spend. Capitalism is sacrosanct; it is the best way to achieve growth. This logic resides at the center of learned journals as well as mainstream policy solutions to avoid economic stagnation as measured by conventional metrics. It is a sociological phenomenon as much as an economic one.

You have criticized technological optimists who believe that we can achieve sustainability via deep cuts in emissions and resource use without rethinking economics. Why are such technical solutions insufficient?

I am fascinated by technological optimism in part because, thirty years ago, I myself was somewhat of a technological optimist. I was looking at the damage of nuclear fission and saying, “Actually, we have better options than that. We have renewable technologies, there are efficiencies that we can create, and we have more resource-productive avenues for technological development. Why not pursue those?”

For my students, it is a very tempting perspective. In a recent cross-faculty undergraduate course, I paraphrased Ronald Reagan’s response to the classic *Limits to Growth*: “There are no limits to growth, because there are no limits to human ingenuity and creativity.” The students found this idea of the boundlessness of human creativity very attractive. I showed them a graph depicting the relationship between carbon intensity and economic growth and what it will take to achieve

major strides in decarbonization. Their response? “Surely we have the technologies to meet our targets within a few short decades.” Indeed, this response was the same as mine many decades ago. But the difficulty then, as it is now, is that such a dramatic transition, even if economically and technologically plausible, cannot occur in a society in which the entrenched forces of free market capitalism and the inertia of dominant institutions are committed to obstructing the change required.

In my work on the Sustainable Development Commission, I came to realize that the relentless appetite of human beings for consumption coupled with the relentless appetite of capitalists for accumulation is fueling the planetary emergency. Despite technological progress, the unholy alliance between human nature and institutional structure creates a dangerous lock-in that diminishes prospects for a livable future.

In your book, you identify four pillars of a post-growth economy—enterprise as service, work as participation, investment as commitment, and money as a social good. Explain what you mean by these factors and how they can help us envision a new economy.

These pillars flow in part from the so-called impossibility theorem, which posits that structures in the existing system coupled with certain aspects of human nature make a post-growth world implausible. So we are compelled to ask, where is the solution space? Can we imagine an economy in which enterprise provides outputs that enable people to flourish without destroying ecosystems; where work offers respect, motivation, and fulfillment to all; where investment is prudential in terms of securing long-term prosperity for all humanity; and where systems of borrowing, lending, and creating money are firmly rooted in long-term social value creation rather than in trading and speculation?

Two of those pillars have been present in responses to the environmental crisis for more than two decades, namely enterprise as service and the concept of green or clean investment. In the first case, “servicization” is the idea that the value of materials—chemicals, energy, forests—is not intrinsic to the materials themselves, but rather arises from the services they offer, e.g., cleaning, heating/lighting, and packaging/shelter. Reframing value in this way opens a broad array of pathways toward dematerialization. I was exposed to this concept very early on through the concept of energy services when I was working for the Stockholm Environment Institute and Friends of the Earth. I have always found it profoundly transformational, and the deeper I got into it, the more I realized that you could apply that concept to all sorts of things, including nutrition, health, and housing. I have watched the idea appear in product responsibility legislation, including take-back and product leasing. I use servicization to illustrate how a seemingly intractable lock-in (limitless growth in material throughput to satisfy consumption demands) can be overcome by reimagining fundamental assumptions about the economy and human behavior.

In the case of investment, clean technology is an obvious and urgent example. Here the core concept is that finance capital must be a servant to a higher purpose than maximizing returns on investment. During the financial crisis, when I was writing the original Sustainable Development Commission report, the concept of a Green New Deal emerged. The UK Prime Minister at the time, Gordon Brown, took the idea to Davos with the centerpiece being a massive investment in a low-carbon transition.

These two examples demonstrate ways to overcome seemingly intractable environmental problems associated with a growth-driven economics. They open new possibilities for developing alternative forms of enterprise, based on novel ownership structures and work practices, and for dismantling the notion that money is an end itself instead of a means of exchange for building prosperous societies. And from there, new forms of economic activity can be conceptualized in ways that refashion human activities to operate in harmony, rather than in conflict, with nature.

The building blocks of a new economy are within reach. While current trends may well be cause for despair, history is replete with structural changes that redefine economic relations—for better or for worse. My goal for the Commission and my work since has been to bring new thinking to the fore, to illuminate possibilities for decoupling growth and prosperity. This kind of re-envisioning can point to a coherent whole, thereby opening doors to structural change.

You have noted the alignment of the Andean concept of “Buen Vivir” with the tenets of post-growth economics. What is “Buen Vivir,” and what can we learn from it?

Rooted in indigenous beliefs, the concept of “Buen Vivir” promotes a way of living based on a mutually respectful, interdependent coexistence between humans and nature. It speaks to the key question of how we define well-being, a question I explored as part of my Commission work under the aegis of the Whitehall Well-Being Working Group. The premise of that group was that if you had a different goal, such as well-being rather than growth per se, you would see prosperity measurement and policies in a different light. This concept emerged in the UK about at the same time as Buen Vivir became a national political project in Ecuador, although I was not aware of this concurrence.

Years of well-being research have provided important insights into the web of relationships between income and factors like well-being, education, and life expectancy. This body of work has identified a kind of “sweet spot” which is almost exclusively occupied by Latin American nations, where countries have achieved high levels of well-being at relatively low income levels. Some mix of cultural, social, and political conditions has enabled these countries—many of them small- and middle-income—to decouple prosperity from growth. Chile, Costa Rica, and Cuba in particular come to mind. At this point, I see these examples as a fascinating experiment, but not necessarily replicable in larger countries and in different regions.

You have written that “the moment it stops being permissible to question the fundamental assumptions of an economic system that is patently dysfunctional is the moment political freedom ends and cultural repression begins.” Do you see signs of such repression in today’s political climate?

Yes, I do. What is going on today is largely attributable to the failure of growth-based capitalism. It is perverse to think that we can rescue ourselves from it by a return to a turbo-charged version of the same system, with a little bit of misogyny, racism, and populism added to the mix. I see this as deriving from a systems failure, the same failure I sought to articulate almost a decade ago.

There was a left-wing manifestation of populism in movements such as Occupy that emerged in response to the blatant reward of the architects of the financial crisis with bailout packages while social investments benefitting the poor were cut. Austerity was gradually ripping away the social infrastructure essential to the basic well-being of the poor and middle class, who had been economically and socially left behind. Health care, education, and job security all suffered, and people were forced to look for answers to their dispossession. Unfortunately, some of these people have turned to a right-wing manifestation of populism. In the US, such disillusioned individuals turned to a disingenuous, elitist billionaire. It is paradoxical in the extreme, but culpability lies in a failure to address the structural deficiencies in the existing system. We still struggle to open up debates and minds to the nature of the system, to question the political influences seeking to turbo-charge a failed capitalism that continues to spawn growing inequality. That, to me, is cultural repression—and we should fight against it. In some ways, it comes back to my primary purpose in fostering a post-growth dialogue: to create the political space for this conversation which I believe is one of the most important of our time.

How do you see the link between post-growth economics and what we call a Great Transition, a societal transformation rooted in well-being, solidarity, and ecological resilience?

I see the two as closely connected and mutually enriching. The Great Transition Initiative was created to provide a safe space for exploring global futures, an increasingly important exercise that needs protection during a period wherein hope and imagination are in short supply. As I have watched the evolution of Great Transition writing and dialogue, I am full of admiration for the safe space it has created. However, we must recognize that while this enclave of clear thinking might be very comforting and essential to us as a community, we must avoid too much comfort. We must explore unsafe spaces as well as convene within safe ones. We must bring our conversation well beyond the boundaries of our comfort zone, a challenge that takes hard work and commitment. But without such expansiveness, we will fail to deliver to the world what it most needs—a narrative of change that is powerful, persuasive, and plausible.

About the Interviewee



Tim Jackson is Professor of Sustainable Development at the University of Surrey and Director of the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP). He has been at the forefront of international research and discourse on sustainable development for almost three decades, including work with the United Nations, the European Commission, and numerous private companies and NGOs. From 2004 to 2011, he served on the UK Sustainable Development Commission, an advisory body to the UK Government, his work culminating in the seminal book *Prosperity without Growth*, the second edition of which was published in 2016. Additionally, he is an award-winning playwright with numerous radio writing credits for the BBC. In 2016, he was awarded the Hillary Laureate for outstanding international leadership in sustainability.

About the Publication

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