

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critique of Capitalism from Consumer Society to Destruction of Nature: Introduction to Degrowth Debates

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ABSTRACT One of the main claims of capitalism is that society will be liberated through consumption. The belief that individuals will become happier as they consume forms the basis of today's consumer society. On the other hand, the sustainability of the consumer society is directly proportional to the continuous growth of the economy. The demand for continuous growth of the economy eliminates the limits of growth. Unlimited growth, on the other hand, seems to increase individuals' consumption demands and their happiness based on consumption. However, loss of control over the growth brings about the destruction of nature. It has initiated a debate on the destruction of nature caused by economic growth. One of these debates is the views advocating degrowth as an alternative to growth economies. This view, which argues that economies must degrowth to prevent the destruction of nature, claims that people's happiness does not depend on more consumption, but on a contented abundance distributed equally to everyone.

Keywords

capitalism • ecological crisis • sustainability • degrowth debate • destruction of nature

Tüketim Toplumundan Doğanın Yıkımına Kapitalizmin Eleştirisi: Küçülme Tartışmalarına Giriş

ÖZ Kapitalizmin temel iddialarından birisi toplumun tüketim yoluyla özgürleşeceğidir. Bireylerin tükettikçe mutlu olacaklarına dair inanç bugünkü tüketim toplumunun temellerini oluşturmaktadır. Öte yandan tüketim toplumunun sürdürülebilirliği ekonominin sürekli büyümesi ile doğru orantılıdır. Ekonominin sürekli büyümesine yönelik talep büyümenin sınırlarını ortadan kaldırmaktadır. Sınırsız bir büyüme ise bireylerin tüketim taleplerini ve onların tüketime dayalı mutluluğunu artırıyor gibi görünmektedir. Ancak büyüme üzerinde kontrolün kaybedilmesi doğanın yıkımını beraberinde getirmektedir. Ekonomik büyümenin doğanın yıkımı üzerine bir tartışmanın başlamasını sağlamıştır. Bu tartışmalardan bir tanesi büyüme ekonomilerine alternatif olarak küçülmeyi savunan görüşlerdir. Doğanın yıkımının engellenebilmesi için ekonomilerin küçülmesi gerektiğini savunan bu görüş insanların mutluluğunun daha çok tüketimden değil herkese eşit dağılacak kanaatkâr bir bolluktan geçtiğini iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

kapitalizm • ekolojik kriz • sürdürülebilirlik • küçülme tartışması • doğanın tahribi

To site this article: Yılmaz, E., & Atagenc, İ. Ö.(2024). Critique of capitalism from consumer society to destruction of nature: introduction to degrowth debates. *EnergyTR*, 1(2), 137-147.

<https://doi.org/10.65552/energytr.2024.1.2.003>

Submitted: 13.03.2024 **Accepted:** 16.08.2024

Capitalism wanted to be a sustainable system through the concept of “consumer society”. The most important condition for becoming a consumer society is to convince society that the more they consume, the happier they will be. The idea of being happy as you consume is one of the most important reasons why capitalism is still strong today. On the other hand, consumption culture and the artificial happiness it creates cannot solve the problems in the world. On the contrary, consumer culture demands constant growth of economies. Although the continuous growth of economies seems like positive data, it brings with it many crises, especially ecological destruction. Since the 1970s, views that have brought the limits of growth into question have been trying to find an alternative to the idea of economic growth. Because the idea of economic growth does not have any limits, the world has entered the ecological destruction phase. To prevent this, new searches have emerged other than the idea of growth. One of these debates is the “degrowth” debate. The degrowth debate, which is the most radical criticism against the idea of economic growth, sees people’s happiness not in consumption but in a sharing economy that focuses on basic needs.

Capitalism: An Unsustainable System

Although there are different views in the literature regarding the beginning of capitalism, it is generally stated as the 15th and 16th centuries. However, before this date, “merchant capitalism” in the form of “long-distance trade” (e.g. the “Silk Road”) can be mentioned (Kocka & Reimer, 2016, p. 36). Between the 15th and 19th centuries in Europe great progress took place in terms of capitalism. Undoubtedly, the most significant reason for this progress was the *geographical discoveries* during this period.

Because European nation-states gained access to new continents (such as the “New World”, Asia and Africa), new resources (e.g. gold, silver, sugar and spice) and fueled the “capitalist world system”, a system of commercial competition and hierarchy among colonial powers (Foster, 1999, p. 14). Thus, a favorable environment was provided for the Industrial Revolution that would follow. Additionally, it should be noted that this era was also identified with subjugation and violence performed by the European powers against both the nature (exploitation of the natural resources such as mining and allocation of agricultural products) and the empires conquered such as the “Aztec, Incan and Mayan” (Kocka & Reimer, 2016, p. 66). The African slave trade during this period is also an indicator of this situation.

Meanwhile, the capitalists of the imperialist European states such as Britain and Netherlands, with the wealth they gained from huge profits and their developing commercial power, continued to export in response to the ever-increasing demand and in this regard, the Atlantic became the most important transportation route (Kocka & Reimer, 2016, p. 66).

Following the agricultural revolution, the *Industrial Revolution*, which started in Europe at the end of the 18th century with the influence of both geographical discoveries and the enlightenment, enabled large-scale industrial production with the scientific and technological development. The foundations of today’s modern world were built on the dualities of that era: “economy and nature, capital and labor, center and periphery” (Foster, 1999, p. 15).

Historically, in this period, capitalism significantly draws attention with its destructive power. In parallel with the Industrial Revolution, *urbanization* increased, people began to disconnect from nature, and fossil fuels were used to compensate the energy needs of both urban life and industrial areas. As a reflection of this, environmental problems started to occur such as air pollution.

It was not only production that increased in those years, but also consumption. If we take a closer look at the living standards of people during the Industrial Revolution, we see that *consumerism* also emerged in Western Europe in this era (Steams, 2006, p. 17). One reason for this was, of course, the increasing population. However, there was a proliferation in capitalist enterprises in the late 18th century (Kocka & Reimer, 2016, p. 69). This means diversifying the products and services offered. In other words, stores were opened during this period and consumption began to be encouraged with effective marketing methods (Steams, 2006, p. 18). Nevertheless, it should be noted here that it was the same era, where the wage labor force suffered poverty for the profit of the capitalist system. Simply put, this situation indicates the *social inequality*- a capitalist hierarchy within the fabric of society. Karl Marx explains it with “social class theory” and touches upon the difference between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (Foster, 1999, p. 74). Different classes had different world. Wealth, luxury and consumerism on one side, and poverty, hunger and unfavorable living conditions on the other. The words of the novelist, *Charles Dickens, in A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) describes the spirit of that era in the best way possible:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair (Dickens, 2008, p. 7).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, capitalism reinvented itself and went beyond industry into financial capitalism (Kocka & Reimer, 2016, p. 107). Subsequently, *globalization*, which emerged with the advancement of science and technology, brought the capitalist system into a new era that transcended beyond national borders. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union during the Cold War was the victory of capitalism. With its ups and downs, the capitalist system has survived to the present day. It's important to comprehend that capitalism has been altered and succeeded in reinventing itself through centuries (Lippit, 2005, p. 71).

Although the positive features of capitalism such as economic growth, new job opportunities, material opulence and higher living standards are emphasized, the fact that social injustice, poverty, exploitation and the cost of ecological damage to the planet is huge cannot be ignored.

Consumerism and the Expectation of Happiness

As a term, *consumerism* refers to a “social and economic system” that focuses on the acquisition of consumer goods and services beyond need and encourages more consumption for a “lavish” lifestyle and a higher social status (Lawrence, 2015, p. 20). Although it became evident in the modern sense in Western Europe in the 18th century, consumerism had emerged historically earlier. As I mentioned before,

geographical discoveries brought wealth and abundance to Europe, and therefore, the diversity of consumer products increased. Stores mushroomed. Even though it did not have the facilities of today, advertising developed. Moreover, “International trade and urbanism” accelerated the consumerist lifestyle, and thus, “a consumerist society” was already present in Europe in the mid-18th century in countries such as Britain and France (Stearns, 2006, p. 17). The hierarchical social structure shaped by capitalism at that time paved the way for a search for status. As a result of this, society tried to imitate the higher classes, to live like the aristocracy (Stearns, 2006, p. 29). On the other hand, for the wage labor class, “work and leisure life” were clearly separated from each other, the capitalist system has found a way to make profit even from this development and has commercialized leisure time (Fulcher, 2004, p. 21).

As explained in the *Capitalism* section, capitalist production continued to expand using science, technology and innovation. Mechanization, new transportation and communication techniques during the Industrial Revolution period transformed and advanced the capitalist system. In addition, this profit mechanism, supported by financial institutions, encouraged all classes of society to consume more. Globalization has also opened the door to more profitable production, low-priced labor, cheap raw materials and potential new markets. Capitalism has somehow managed to survive wars and financial crises and continues unabated in its quest for greater profits.

Today’s excessive consumption in developed countries (Dobson, 2007, p. 13) proves how successful the capitalist system is in inventing new consumer goods and services. These fabricated desires, which are beyond humanity’s basic needs, and the ever-changing “new idea of comfort” they create are the basis of consumerism (Stearns, 2006, p. 24). Additionally, the internet and social media which has become a part of our daily lives, has a significant impact on general consumption habits. Nowadays, people build their identities and define their social status via consumerism (Boström et al., 2019, p. 1), and in this regard, material prosperity becomes more important than ever. Contemporary consumer culture influence people to go after material goods and services that capitalist system offers, seek ephemeral pleasures to attain “the goal of human life”, happiness (Kaufman, 2023, p. 6). However, how happy can a life based on materialism be? While constantly striving to have those fabricated needs in the capitalist cycle and becoming increasingly alienated from both nature and society, knowing that whatever is achieved will be short-lived - this doesn’t sound like the formula of happiness.

As recent research on happiness has indicated, wealth cannot be the answer to the search for happiness, and the fact that Western developed countries are not “happier” no matter how rich they become proves this situation (Dobson, 2007, p. 14). The reason behind this is that *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP), which states use as an indicator of their economic activities, is an inadequate criterion when it comes to evaluate their happiness and prosperity (Kaufman, 2023, p. 9). This situation may be better understood with the instance of the United States, whose GDP is 76 291 USD per capita, according to the 2022 OECD data (OECD, 2024). While the size of houses is increasing in the US, the fact that “more than half a million people” are homeless points to a

situation that economic indicators alone cannot explain. So, the determining factor here is the *income distribution*. If we consider that there is income inequality not only in the US but worldwide, we see that *economic growth* does not represent a solution to poverty (Kaufman, 2023, p. 11). Capitalist growth means more production, more sales and marketing activities, and as a result, more aspirations pump into people's lives that need to be satisfied (Lippit, 2005, p. 134). Simply put, economic growth doesn't bring prosperity and stability as expected. In this respect, income equality is essential. Only with income equality can "social cohesion" be achieved among people (Kaufman, 2023, p. 10).

The conclusion that can be drawn from this section is that the world of excess-consumerism, created and shaped both politically and economically by the capitalist system, so to speak has opened the Pandora's box releasing "a crisis of unhappiness, a crisis of poverty and a crisis of environmental sustainability" (Kaufman, 2023, p. 3). In the next section, I will explain what impact the capitalist system and consumerism have on the biosphere, and I will also refer to the relation between nature and happiness.

Ecological Cost of Excessive Consumption in the Search for Happiness

Have mentioned before that the sole purpose of capitalism is always to make more *profit*. Although the material prosperity promised to humanity by capitalists seems to have positive effects, the magnitude of the cost that humanity and the planet pay for this cause is quite disappointing. "The pursuit of individual benefit" (Smith, 2012) which was encouraged by the free-market capitalism has caused not only "inequality, injustice and the crassness of commercial culture" (Lippit, 2005, p. 4), but also the deterioration of the planet. Currently, we are facing many urgent problems such as "overpopulation, destruction of the ozone layer, global warming, extinction of species, loss of genetic diversity, acid rain, nuclear contamination, tropical deforestation, the elimination of climax forests, wetland destruction, soil erosion, desertification, floods, famine, the despoliation of lakes, streams, and rivers, the drawing down and contamination of ground water, the pollution of coastal waters and estuaries, the destruction of coral reefs, oil spills, overfishing, expanding landfills, toxic wastes, the poisonous effects of insecticides and herbicides, exposure to hazards on the job" (Foster, 1999, p. 12). At the core of these problems lies the fact that the capitalist system severs humanity's ties with nature and turns nature into a resource that can only be exploited. In this regard, as mentioned previously, the growth of the population, the continuous increase in energy use, and the rapid acceleration of industrialization and urbanization have been important historical developments (Foster, 1999, p. 15). For centuries, the capitalist system has been exploiting resources, causing detrimental human activities and creating a huge waste problem (Boggs, 2012, p. 1). Considering that the biosphere consists of complex and interdependent systems, it cannot be ignored that environmental problems and challenges can trigger a wide range of consequences.

In a world where pollution absorption capacity is limited, and resources are depleted for the sake of "never-ending economic expansion" this unsustainable way of life only leads humanity to disaster (Lippit, 2005, p. 20). So, when did this painful truth

come to be understood by humanity? In fact, historically, the problem of ecological sustainability had already begun to be understood before it reached dangerous levels. For example, the negative impact of the industrial revolution on the environment became more observable in the 19th century, and therefore, a “conservation movement” to protect the environment and living species emerged in this period (Foster, 1999, p. 72). Following that, no matter how fruitful the 20th century was for capitalism, whose “raison d’être is economic growth”, it was not as bright as the previous century. Because in the United States of the 1960s, an “activist generation” emerged with movements opposing all kinds of inequality, war, and environmental destruction (Lippit, 2005, p. 129). However, in the 1970s, the environmental issues came to the fore and the “birth of ecologism” took place (Dobson, 2007, p. 25). In particular, the *Limits to Growth* (1972) report published by the *Club of Rome* is important because it drew attention to the impossibility of worldwide unlimited economic growth on a finite planet. This study, which examined the factors of “*population growth, agricultural production, depletion of non-renewable resources, industrial production and pollution production*”, became a cornerstone in terms of sustainability (Club of Rome, 2024). As the Limits of Growth report indicates, there is a danger that economic growth encouraged by the capitalist system may cause an ecological catastrophe (Foster, 1999, p. 130). In the same year in Stockholm, Switzerland, the first world conference on the environment, the *1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* was held and as one of the results of this conference, the *United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)* was created (UN, 1972).

Another important development *Our Common Future or Brundtland Report*, which offers “guiding principles for sustainable development”, was published by the *World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)* in 1987 (United Nations Brundtland Report, 1987). In this report, the relationship between the global north and global south was discussed in the context of environmental problems and the definition of *sustainable development* was made as: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations Brundtland Report, 2024). The Brundtland Report has been criticized for implicitly focusing on economic growth and the exploitation of the global south (Foster, 1999, p. 150).

Nowadays, “economic development” can also be implied under the name of “sustainability” (Lawrence, 2015, p. 7). The reason behind this is that the capitalist system does not give up the profit it provides from global growth, that is, from more consumption. More consumption means a larger *ecological footprint* on nature. The lifestyle of the rich minority of the first world has a large share in this. Given the social inequality I mentioned earlier, the cost of pollution and degradation falls not on those who consume more, but on the poor and weak. It is now necessary to limit both growth and consumption (Dobson, 2007, p. 71). So, why do states and political decision-makers still not act accordingly? Because the “perpetuation of capitalism” requires this cycle, stopping growth means consequences such as unemployment and economic collapse, but above all “less profit” (Lippit, 2005, p. 132).

The greed of capitalism continues to pollute the atmosphere and oceans, which are open to the common use of humanity (in other words, “*global commons*”). In this respect, global environmental problems threaten the common fate of all humanity and even future generations (Castro, 2019, p. 29). The biosphere, which is on the verge of disaster, can only be saved through global joint efforts, that is, global cooperation (Baylis et al., 2014, p. 341). Of course, what is important here is to take the necessary regulatory political steps by ensuring both public and academic knowledge production and sharing of “common scientific understanding” (Baylis et al., 2014, p. 354). Management of the use of areas and resources available for international access is a sensitive issue due to their limited nature and their vulnerability to exploitation, and it is crucial to prevent the damage given for the sake of short-term gains, in other words the “*tragedy of the commons*” (Baylis et al., 2014, p. 357). In this context, a global solution in the form of “collective action through international treaties” could bring about the change that the capitalist system strongly opposes (Lippit, 2005, p. 90).

. To achieve this, it is necessary to give up the lavish life dream, “bigger homes, fancier cars, and the latest thing” that consumer culture imposes on us (Kaufman, 2023, p. 20). In fact, as well as income equality and social harmony, happiness requires a “healthy and prosperous environment” (Rauschmayer & Omann, 2015, p. 112). Contrary to current culture, a good life for humans, who are social beings, can be lived with spiritual wealth, not material prosperity (Kaufman, 2023, p. 7).

The Degrowth Debate as an Alternative to Growth Economics

The “growth” and “development” oriented development of nation-states since the Industrial Revolution has been targeted with the escalation of ecological destruction. Especially since the 1960s, the questioning of the destruction caused by capitalism in every field has led to the emergence of new searches on the subject. It should be noted that anarchist, eco-socialist and communalist approaches were at the forefront of the rising debates on the concepts of growth and development. The most radical discourse of this process of criticism, in which ecology is the main subject of debate, is the “degrowth” debate. “Degrowth” essentially claims that current production and consumption habits no longer bring prosperity and abundance to the world, and that the unlimited and uncontrolled consumption of universal resources is dragging the world towards rapid extinction. It should be underlined that the main point that the discussions that started over the ecological crisis have reached on the axis of the downsizing debate is the criticism of the current economic order.

The concept of “downsizing” (*décroissance*), first used in France in the mid-1970s, emerged in the heated public debates of the period. The growth paradigm started to be questioned under the shadow of the economic crisis (. Published in 1972, the report titled Limits to Growth is the first text in which the concept of economic growth was discussed. In the context of the debate initiated by the report, the concept of downsizing was also included in the economic literature. Used for the first time by Andre Gorz, one of the world’s leading ecological economists, “degrowth” emerged in the questions he asked while trying to find the economic balance of the world (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 1).

Despite the rise of downsizing debates in the 1970s, they lost their influence to a great extent in the 1980s. The most important reason for this is the end of the oil crisis in the 1980s and the construction of the neoliberal world order. However, it is seen that the downsizing debate has been on the agenda again since the 1990s. The downsizing debate, which had an agenda related to the limits of resources in the 1970s, has had a different agenda since the 1990s. The main point of these discussions, which continues today, is the criticism of the concept of “sustainable development” (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 3).

Downsizing brings a radical criticism to the growth paradigm. Because economic growth does not make the world a more livable place. On the contrary, an economy that constantly tries to grow causes destruction rather than production. In other words, growth leads to the destruction of nature. To prevent this, economies need to downsize. However, downsizing of the economy is not only possible if the governments take a decision on this issue. Downsizing economies are possible through the construction of a society of abundance (Boonstra & Joose, 2013, p. 175).

Serge Latouche takes care to conduct the discussion on downsizing through the criticisms against the concept. In this context, he divides the concept into two. The first of these is the shrinkage that has a much wider scope but is a false perception. This perception is based on the idea of negative growth and refers to impoverishment. However, the downsizing that Latouche really means is a form of voluntary downsizing that expresses the opposite of the consumer society. In fact, while he defines downsizing as a diet that can end in death, he defines voluntary downsizing as a kind of culture of being content with less. These details written by the author in the first pages of the book clearly express that the idea of downsizing is above all a change of mentality (Latouche, 2018, pp. 25–37).

This change of mentality is also clearly a “leftist” project. The downsizing project, which is the direct opposite of liberalism and industrialism, emerged to give a new meaning to the left. Latouche had to redefine the concept of downsizing in the face of criticism. One of the common criticisms of the concept of degrowth is that the economy envisaged by degrowth will lead to global poverty. Accordingly, the downsizing of economies will deprive people of all the wealth and accumulation they have and drag people into a primitive life (Latouche, 2018, p. 42). The second point of objection is the claim that downsizing is anti-technological (technophobic). Accordingly, downsizing supporters take a position against scientific and technological developments in the world. Since they are anti-technological, in another sense they are longing for a primitive society (Latouche, 2018, p. 52). However, Latouche objects to both criticisms.

Jason Hickel, one of the most important authors to analyse the degrowth debate in a more recent period, evaluates the crisis of growth economics through concrete data while conducting the degrowth debate. While Hickel’s text emphasises the mental transformation like Latouche on the way to the concept of a society of abundance, which Latouche expresses as a concrete utopia, it also presents the point reached in the world from a broad perspective with numerical data. The place where Hickel starts

to question is the history of capitalism, which he titles “Mostly Harmful” (Hickel, 2021, p. 59). Hickel begins with a strong criticism of growth before explaining the concept of downsizing. In explaining the history of capitalism, Hickel goes back even before the Industrial Revolution, explaining the foundations of economic change in Europe from the 13th and 14th centuries to the present day, and opens the global reputation of capitalism to a radical debate by objecting to the idea that capitalism emerged naturally and is a necessary consequence of the historical flow. Hickel makes a familiar reading of the history of capitalism through the commodification of the human body, the loss of the meaning of human life and paving the way for the destruction of nature (Hickel, 2021, pp. 61–85).

On the other hand, what Hickel really wants to draw attention to is a comprehensive critique of human domination over nature, which radical ecological thought shares with a loud voice. According to Hickel, who presents an intense critique of enlightenment from Descartes to Bacon and from there to enlightenment in general, the end point of the ideas produced by the enlightenment period, which we know as the age of scientific development, is the legitimisation of human domination over nature. The legitimisation of absolute domination over nature by the classical enlightenment views, which recorded the scientific development of humanity as progress, further reinforced the strict hierarchy built between man and nature, and the superiority gained by man over nature through science resulted in the destruction of nature in a much more intense manner (Hickel, 2021, pp. 85–90).

According to Hickel, the whole world has fetishised the idea of “growth” and growth figures, and the limits of growth have completely disappeared. The complete digitisation of the world by an uncontrolled growth with no limits, just for the sake of making profit, has rendered people and nature completely passive under the management of states and corporations, and everything in nature has regressed towards the quality of a commodity that can be sold and consumed. We will see that Hickel puts forward a “post-capitalist” imaginary in the section of his book where he proposes a solution. This post-capitalist imagination is only possible through the realisation of some new principles (Hickel, 2021, p. 250).

Hickel says that the first step is to abandon the idea of what he calls “planned obsolescence”. What he means by planned obsolescence is the idea of giving up on goods that are in the category of “durable goods”, which we frequently see in white goods production, but have a limited life span from the beginning. By using longer lasting and durable products, the need to constantly renew the same products at short intervals should be eliminated. The second step is to reduce advertisements, which are one of the most important tools of consumption frenzy. Hickel, who thinks that adverts, which create an artificial perception of need in people instantly, play a very important role in consumption, suggests reducing this perception game of capitalism as much as possible. The third step is to end the single ownership of many goods that are rarely used and most of which are used as luxury consumer goods, and these goods should be subject to common ownership, albeit in a limited area. The fourth step is to put an end to food waste, one of the most important global problems. Because

the uncontrolled production of the food sector, which is driven by a simple greed for profit without considering the imbalance between production and consumption or supply and demand, also makes consumption uncontrolled, and the leftovers of individuals who try to consume more than they need with expired products constitute a large waste item. The fifth step is the urgent downsizing of sectors that produce nothing but ecological destruction. When these sectors start to downsize, firstly the animals used in the food sector will regain their natural life, and then the large and fertile lands used as breeding grounds will return to their natural order (Hickel, 2021, pp. 217–230).

Conclusion

The happiness created by the consumer society is not permanent. Since capitalism's concept of consumption has reached the stage of ecological destruction, the happiness it claims is temporary. The idea of economic growth does not produce a solution to the crises experienced in the past. This brings about a radical discussion of the idea of economic growth. The degrowth debate emerged at this point. The idea of degrowth demands limitation of production instead of continuous economic growth. Because unless economic growth is limited, the destruction of nature will accelerate. The idea of economic growth lies at the basis of today's ecological crisis. The fact that the idea of economic growth is seen as the main cause of the ecological crisis forms the basis of the "degrowth" debate. On the other hand, "degrowth" also reveals what kind of economic model it demands. This model focuses on the basic needs of individuals. It is claimed that a non-profit economic model that centers on the basic needs of society will bring abundance and prosperity. The degrowth debate, which produces a radical opposition to capitalism, seeks the happiness of society in sharing and fair distribution.

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