

Transcript: Skype session with Professor Tim Jackson

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Professor Tim Jackson

Tim Jackson is Professor of Sustainable Development at the University of Surrey. He currently holds a Professorial Fellowship on Prosperity and Sustainability in the Green Economy (PASSAGE) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). He will direct the multi-disciplinary Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP), also funded by the ESRC, starting in January 2016. He is the celebrated author of *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, and is an award-winning playwright with numerous radio-writing credits for the BBC.



TacklingPovertyNZ

How do you maintain economic growth while staying true to environmental values?

Tim Jackson

That's a quite complicated question in a way; I suppose I would say that the environmental values should travel up front, in answer to the second one... so, you know, you need to know where you are as a society in terms of your impact on the environment and the resource consumption that you are reliant on. But you also need to have a clear eye on your development goals, I would say – which you've mentioned in there – development goals like health and education and good nutrition and decent shelter and so on and so forth – those are all incredibly important things for the quality of people's lives – particularly the quality of people's lives in very poor countries. So those to me would be the two things that you kind of, you know, keep your eye on in terms of the balances I suppose.

And economic growth is probably still a means to those ends in the poorest economies because, no doubt about it, if you don't have – if you're living on less than 1.9 dollars a day, which is the extreme poverty line – and around 900 million people are living at that level – then you've got to think about growth of some kind in the economy in those spaces. But if you're living on 50–60 thousand dollars a year – as in North America for example – then you're in a very different situation and that's where that balance between environmental sustainability and economic growth has to be sought I think.

So, it's a quite complicated answer to a quite complicated question. But I would put up front – I would put the quality of our lives and the resource and environmental impacts that achieving that quality has – and if you've got your eye on both of those things then you've got a decent chance of having a good development model.

TPNZ

Do environmental issues disproportionately affect the poor, and if yes, how can we balance these?

TJ

That's a really interesting question again. It is certainly the case that some of the poorest countries are very adversely affected by things like climate change and deforestation – species loss actually affects us all even though we don't necessarily know about it affecting us immediately. But the idea that we're undermining the quality of our soils and the integrity of our ecosystem – sooner or later that's going to hit everybody. But it's also true that there are countries – particularly poorer, low-lying countries – that are going to be really hit very hard by the first signs of climate change.

So, it sort of depends on which problems you're looking at. I mean, actually there's another way of looking at it, which – where you could look at, you know, life quality. I mean in terms of life quality, you know, it's a very perverse picture in a way because the poorest countries struggle for basic necessities, struggle for decent levels of nutrition, struggle for health, struggle for the health of infants and lowering infant mortality to decent levels. And yet on the other side of the equation you have people in richer countries who are increasingly subject to what are being called lifestyle diseases – so heart disease, obesity, and so on and so forth. And those kind of lifestyle diseases – when you put them up next to the problems in poorer countries, where they struggle just for basic nutrition, you know, it kind of almost becomes a sort of obscene problem. Because you have one set of people who just have way too much in terms of calorie intake, and another set of people who don't even get the bare minimum.

So in those senses it's absolutely clear to me that the poorest countries are the ones where you have to create a decent development model, you have to provide decent infrastructure, you have to support in terms of trade, you have to support in terms of investing in low-carbon infrastructures. And on the other side of the equation I think the richest, most affable economies then have to look seriously at their levels of consumption and their – the way in which we think about what progress is. If we think progress is just more and more consumption and we're happy to take it, thank you very much and the devil take the hindmost – and the poorest countries, you know, sink under climate change and starve for ever – which I'm sure nobody actually really believes is what should happen. But if you move away from that – if you kind of try to find another route away from that, I think you've got to put your effort in both places, developing a decent quality of life in the poorest countries. I'm thinking about consumption and lifestyle in the richest countries and actually asking the question, does it help us? Is it good for us? To be eating so much that we become obese, to be developing lifestyle diseases, to always think in material terms rather than actually in terms of the quality of our lives. I would say the balance has to be really on both sides of that.

TPNZ

Given your diverse skillsets – you've got a background in playwriting and economics – how do you think we can effectively engage ordinary people to care and take action on poverty?

TJ

I don't know, I mean it's really interesting that actually what affects people at an emotional level – what moves them – is story, is narrative, is particularly sort of human-interest stories. So, you know, in the refugee crisis for example – I don't know, I assume it was probably similar in New Zealand – but certainly here in Europe there were just a couple of pictures, particularly pictures of children, that did more to change our sense of the nature of that crisis than thousands and thousands of words written and hours and hours of political argument. It was just, you know, instantly we saw that picture of that child on that beach, and we recognised that what was going on was kind of a horror.

And so I do think that actually, you know, a picture paints a thousand words – or even a thousand pages I would say sometimes – and story, that sense of story, connects us with other people. And that's been, I suppose, partly why I have continued with playwriting. I mean I actually started out in playwriting – it wouldn't be entirely true to say that they developed side by side but I have at least until recently been really keen to continue writing plays because actually that's a very different way of connecting to ordinary people and of ordinary people connecting to those kinds of issues.

So I do think in that sense – I don't think we should think of it entirely instrumentally; we shouldn't just think 'oh, uh, policy is not really working anymore, politicians have bogged down negotiations that they can't understand anyway, scientists can't even talk to ordinary people because they talk in such complicated language, so let's call on artists to do the job for us.' I mean it's very tempting to do something like that – say, 'well everything else has failed, let's try a few pictures or a story, a nice story' – I don't think that's the right way to think of it, necessarily. I don't think we should think of art in kind of too instrumental a way, as what we do when all else has failed. I think we should think of art in a much more integrated way – as actually art is the place where you can ask yourself those tough questions. Art is the place where you can communicate really difficult messages. Art is the place where you can explore our emotional contact with each other and our emotional contact to the world. Art is the place where we can go to when actually everything looks irresolvable. And that's one of the reasons why I kind of liked playwriting so much, because in a play you can have lots of different characters, and they're not all me, by any – well maybe they're all part of me – some small part of me speaking through each of those characters – but the characters have to be different, because that's where drama comes from. It comes from those differences and the way they play out in the world.

And in that context, you can sometimes, you know, get a bit deeper into understanding something – even as an admitted environmental scientist or an ecological economist – because you don't have to always make the same case. I found playwriting incredibly liberating in a way, because I could have characters who thought completely differently to the way that I did. And I know that those characters are real – a lot of them were drawn from people that I knew or people that I had known.

And I think that allows us a level of understanding that's kind of hard to achieve if we just continually think in very rational terms. And I'm not saying that rational, empirical thought is useless – far from it – it's a really important part of our work as environmentally concerned people, but it also has its limits. And it's getting beyond those limits, I think, that art can help us with, that drama can help us with. And it can also – there's another part of what drama – what art can do that I think is incredibly important, which is – it can lift us. You know, these can be very depressing debates sometimes – they can leave you with a sense of helplessness, hopelessness sometimes, and that's not a very constructive place to be, whereas art has a sort of transformative power. It has a consoling power. It has a power that kind of lifts us to think in terms of the best that things can be, as well as accepting and understanding the worst that things can be. So I'm a big fan of that idea that we should not simply address these questions in a sort of rational, empirical way. We should address them in a creative way. And we should use that creativity in ourselves, and we should direct that creativity, actually, to those around us, and engage their creativity in our discussions.

I think this is to me almost – I would say it's the two twin peaks, if you like, of what it's possible to be as a human being. One of them is that artistic peak, that creative peak, that ability to see beyond what appears to be possible: to create links that no one else has seen, to transform our experiences in ways that lift everyone. And I think the second one is the peak of empathy: of caring for others, of caring for our environment. And those two things, when you look at the real great accomplishments of human beings over time, you know, they tend actually to be one of those two things. They tend to be either real peaks of empathy or real peaks of creativity. And all the empire-building and the falls-to-dust stuff of centuries actually – it's definitely a part of our psyche and it's definitely a part of what we strive for, but actually somehow it always, in my mind at least, falls flat when we compare it to those two things.

TPNZ

How relevant are the Sustainable Development Goals to a first world country?

TJ

Yeah. Cool, that's also a tough one because they are massively relevant. But it's not a conversation that appears in the SDGs – in the language – in the way that we might want it to. The SDGs have emerged as a kind of follow-on agenda from the Millennium Development Goals. The Millennium Development Goals – it was acknowledged – are all, you know, number one priority is lifting people out of poverty. That overall target of reducing absolute poverty still sits at the heart of the SDGs, and so it's kind of tempting to think actually that this is all, you know, this is all about the developing countries and it's not particularly about rich countries. And I think really I would go back to my first answer to sort of explain why I think that's wrong, which is that you have these imbalances between the rich and the poor – you have these kind of enormous resource consumption levels in the rich economies whereas you barely achieve any subsistence in the poorest economies. And those two things are related to each other.

They are related to our economic model through our trade models, through our sense of what a good society is, through the way we try to pursue all of our goals – not just the Sustainable Development Goals. So the challenge, and I think this got lost somewhere along the way of writing the SDGs, in fact it is well-documented that there was quite a lot of – I wouldn't call it interference – but political nuances. I don't know if any of you have been through one of these processes of actually writing some text to be agreed on by a group but if you have, it is a fascinating place. And you'll see it this week in Paris. If you've had a look at the draft document, I mean, it's all brackets. Everything can be said three different ways and everybody is politically trying to manoeuvre themselves to get those brackets to say what they want, and later in the week to strike out the brackets that they don't want to see there. Like 'we don't want to see 1.5 degrees thank you very much, can we strike out all those brackets' with one set of people. And another set of people will be saying, 'no no no, we are having 1.5 in there come what may'. And at the end of the day, at the end of this week actually, it will be like a battlefield – marshal with all your forces to get the language that you want in the agreement and the language you don't want out of the agreement.

And that happened to the Sustainable Development Goals and you can read that sometimes in the way they are constructed. Example: the one of economic growth is a very, very muddled objective that talks about economic growth and full employment and so immediately conflates two different issues, and it doesn't really necessarily tell us about the quality of work or unemployment in different places, or where you might need economic growth and where you might not need economic growth. That sets it as a goal which should be achieved both by the rich countries and by the poor countries. And by doing so it obscures the fact that this balance that I was talking about is not properly reflected in those SDGs. It's not saying as clearly as it should be saying that actually, while the poorest countries clearly need a lot of development, clearly need some income growth, clearly need lots of investment, clearly deserve a better quality of life – there is a role for rethinking the consumption patterns of the poorest economies... and just looking at you distributing sweets there – can I have one? I may have just phased you out slightly because you started to think about other things there.

TPNZ

Sorry, I'm getting a bit hungry.

TJ

Me too mate. Okay so anyway that was the end of my answer. Just got totally distracted there.

TPNZ

Thank you Tim for taking time out of your evening to talk to us. I have got the final question for you. We would like to know a little bit about your next project and how it could be applicable to New Zealand's development.

TJ

Well I suppose I have quite a lot of next projects. My immediate needs are to finish a second revision, second edition of *Prosperity without Growth*. So I have the publisher breathing down my neck for that. It is

supposed to be delivered just after Christmas so happy Christmas for me.

And then immediately after Christmas also I am starting up a new research centre at the University of Surrey, which is called the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity. Actually, I have a participant from New Zealand in that centre. So that is a project that is very close to my heart. It follows a lot of the thinking that was in *Prosperity Without Growth* and it attempts to really build a robust concept of prosperity – and what prosperity could really mean in a sustainable way – rather than just economic growth forever, economic expansion forever. That prosperity can actually consist of something a little bit more nuanced than that... I suppose I should say what I think it does consist of – I think it consists of the abilities, the capabilities that people have to flourish within the constraints of the primary climate. And that flourishing is not just material – it is also social, it is also emotional, it is also creative, it is also about a sense of meaning and purpose.

But having said that, having established that ideal of prosperity, there are lots of questions. Real research questions that you could ask about it, like – what does it mean to different people? Is it accessible also to the poorest in society and the richest? How do you devise political institutions to deliver it? What is the role of art and creativity in having a sustainable – a more sustainable – prosperity, and how do you make your economies work in order to deliver it? And that, I suppose, is the third of my three main things that come into this Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, or CUSP as we like to call it.

But it also follows very much from the work that I was doing with *Prosperity Without Growth*, which is really thinking in very hard, delineated terms about the kind of economy that we want: an economy fit for purpose, an economy in which we can have full employment, an economy which remains financially stable, an economy which delivers quality of life, an economy in which you can invest in all the things you need to for the future, an economy where enterprise is more than just the bottom line of profit, an economy in which community matters. There are lots of really important questions and answers in relation to what the economy needs to be and I would say they have to be different for every country. New Zealand, you have very specific resource challenges, you have very specific political challenges, you have very specific cultural challenges and all of those answers will be slightly different for New Zealand to the United States.

What is on my timetable as soon as I finish talking to you guys: go back to revising *Prosperity Without Growth* with my publisher, go back to setting up this new Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, go back to figuring out how to make an economy work when it isn't relentlessly growing and when it is delivering quality of life for people.

TPNZ (Wendy)

Tim, I'm just going to pop in here for a moment. One of the issues that has come up a lot today – I really want these guys to come up with an agreed definition of

poverty today. Would you give them your thoughts on what that definition should look like?

TJ

That's a really interesting question because when I sat down to write *Prosperity Without Growth*, I started with a book by Peter Townsend which was written – he didn't play for The Who... there is a Peter Townsend who was the lead guitarist for a band called The Who, which you are all too young to know about but sadly I am not. But there was a guy called Peter Townsend who was a sociologist and he wrote a big report in the 1970s about poverty in the UK. And I found it – for me it was incredibly insightful. I took it, in some ways, as the sort of starting point for a broader base of prosperity because he said in that report that poverty is not just about money. He said it is not just about access to material things, it is not just access to goods and services, and that's key in the sort of language that I then borrowed from that report, in a way, to talk about prosperity. It is about the lack of access, the lack of ability to participate in society. You could almost take what I say about prosperity as a kind of mirror image of what Townsend was talking about in that report, which was talking about poverty. Poverty is not having all of those accesses, all of that access – not just the material things but the ability to participate in society, the ability to be a decent human being, the ability to have good social connection, to have a decent community around you, to feel the love of your family. All of these can be poverties. And to me, that's a very insightful way to think about that question. And was actually the fundamental starting point for me when I began to think about what prosperity is.

TPNZ

Hello, my name is Elaina, and on behalf of our team I just wanted to say thank you so much for taking your time to speak to us. That we get a brief moment to sit under your wisdom, to sit under your knowledge – it's really humbling, we are all really humbled to be honest. And just to have the opportunity to hear you say that it really is such a difficult, but challenging, but also really multifaceted issue – and to know that creativity can play a role in that is also actually I think a real relief for a lot of us because we have been hit pretty hard with various perspectives yesterday. So to know that we can use creativity in that and partner it with economics and politics and everything else is awesome. Thank you so much for your perspective on that. We just hope all the best for your future endeavours and everything you're working with. We are going to do what we can here to make sure that we can influence change in the brief moment we have being so young and vivacious.

TJ

I'm not so sure about this sitting under my wisdom; I think a lot of it has something to do with the camera angle. Thanks very much.