Degrowth – A Transcendence of Sensate Cultural Mentality? P. Sorokin and His Theory of Social Change as a Strategy Towards Socio-Ecological Transformation

Rudi Klanjšek
University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts, Maribor, Slovenia
rudi.klanjsek@um.si

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There are essentially two fundamental models that explain patterns of social change: the linear model, based on evolutionary theory, and the cyclical model, which posits that human societies, much like many other phenomena, undergo recurring cycles of development. As linear models of "eternal progress," rooted in the Enlightenment project, have come to dominate interpretations of human history and social transformation, the relevance of cyclical models warrants renewed examination. This study focuses on the cyclical model of social change developed by Pitirim Sorokin, evaluating the concept of degrowth as an indicator of the "progressive disintegration of sensate culture, society, and man," as well as a sign of the "emergence and gradual growth of the first seeds of a new idealistic/ideational sociocultural order" (Sorokin, 1957, Preface). Drawing on Sorokin's framework and its derived predictions, the study assesses a range of proposals and strategies aimed at transforming the dominant growth-dependent modes of production, living, and communication. Central to this analysis is Jason Hickel's work Less is More (2020), which serves as a key reference point.

Keywords:
environmental crisis,
degrowth,
cyclical theory,
sensate culture,
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ODRAST – PRESEGANJE SENZORIČNE KULTURNE MENTALITETE? P. SOROKIN IN NJEGOVA TEORIJA DRUŽBENIH SPREMEMB KOT STRATEGIJA ZA SOCIO-EKOLOŠKO PREOBRAZBO

RUDI KLANJŠEK
Univerza v Mariboru, Filozofska fakulteta, Maribor, Slovenija
rudi.klanjsek@um.si

Ključne besede:
okoljska kriza,
odrast,
ciklizem,
senzorična kultura,
družbena in kulturna transformacija

V osnovi obstajata le dva modela, ko gre za vzorce družbenih sprememb – linearni model, ki temelji na teoriji evolucije, in ciklični model, ki predvideva, da človeške družbe, podobno kot številni drugi pojavi, prehajajo skozi cikle bolj ali manj stalnega ponavljanja. Ker so linearni modeli »večnega napredka«, ki temeljijo na projektu razsvetljenstva, postali prevladujoča razlaga človeške zgodovine in družbenih sprememb, se zastavlja vprašanje o relevantnosti cikličnih modelov/razlag. Za odgovor na to vprašanje se ta študija osredotoča na ciklični model družbenih sprememb, ki ga je razvil Pitirim Sorokin, znotraj katerega se ocenjuje koncept odrasti in sicer kot indikator »progresivne dezintegracije senzorične kulture, družbe in človeka«; kot indikator »pojava in počasne rasti prvih zametkov nove idealistične/ideacijske sociokulturne ureditve« (Sorokin, 1957, predgovor). Posledično se s pomočjo Sorokinovega modela in izpeljanih napovedi ocenjuje niz predlogov/strategij, usmerjenih k preobrazbi prevladujočega načina produkcije, bivanja in komuniciranja, odvisnega od rasti, kjer se kot ključno uporabi delo »Manj je več« (2020), avtorja Jason Hickla.

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1 Introduction

Among the wealth of theories/historical analyses of social change, there are basically only two models when patterns of social change are considered – a linear model that relies heavily on the theory of evolution and a cyclical model that hypothesizes that human societies, like many other phenomena, go through cycles of more or less constant repetition.

Since linear models of "eternal progress," grounded in the Enlightenment project, became the predominant explanation of human history and social change, the question of the relevance of cyclist models/explanations arises. Namely, are cyclical models "unpopular" because they are irrelevant in describing and explaining patterns of social change or is their unpopularity related to the fact that they negate the paradigm of the eternal progress/infinite growth, identified as a "working religion" of the modern age (Lasch, 1991) and without which, as Pollard (1968) indicated, there would be only despair. To answer this question, the current study revisits the cyclist model of social change developed by Pitirim Sorokin in the context of an environmental crisis and proposed solutions.

The rationale for such an endeavor is threefold: First, while Sorokin was identified as "one of the leading figures in American sociology" (Simpson, 1953, p. 120), his seminal work, Social and Cultural Dynamics (4 vol., 1937–41; rev. and abridged ed. 1957/19701957) was seen as one of the greatest attempts to model and identify patterns of social change (e.g., Park, 1938). Second, besides predicting ecological, social, and economic crises - one of the most telling passages can be found in the third volume of unabridged versions of Social and Cultural Dynamics (1937, p. 535) - his model of social change also predicts a rise in the processes/initiatives that call for socio-ecological transformation. Finally, Sorokin's theory of social change offers important insights into how such a socio-ecological transformation will come about and what mechanisms can help speed it up. Specifically, the main aim of the current study was to evaluate the degrowth initiative (Hickel, 2020) in the context of Sorokin's theoretical model and to identify if and how Sorokin's model of social change can be used in building strategies that call for a transcendence of what in Sorokin's model is represented by Sensate cultural mentality.

The current study is structured as follows. First, Sorokin's model of social change is presented and discussed. Second, the degrowth initiative is evaluated in the context of "a progressive disintegration of Sensate culture, society, and man" and in the context of "an emergence and slow growth of the first seedlings of the new Idealistic/ Ideational sociocultural order" (Sorokin, 1957, foreword). Third, using Sorokin's model and derived predictions, a set of policy proposals/strategies, aimed at the transformation of the dominant, growth-dependent mode of production, living, and communication, is presented. In this sense, the text offers a novel approach in discussing the climate crisis and associated issues, suggesting that altering our perspective and communication about nature and the environment could lead to the cultural shift necessary to tackle the climate and environmental challenges.

The concept of sensate culture, as proposed by Sorokin, refers to a societal orientation that prioritizes material wealth, sensory experiences, and immediate gratification. This cultural mentality has been predominant in Western societies for several centuries, driving unprecedented technological advancement and economic growth. However, this has also led to numerous challenges, including environmental degradation, social inequalities, and a sense of spiritual emptiness among individuals.

Degrowth initiatives, on the other hand, represent a radical departure from the prevailing economic model. These initiatives advocate for a planned reduction in resource consumption and economic output with the goal of achieving a more sustainable and equitable society. By challenging the notion that continuous growth is necessary for human well-being, degrowth proponents argue for the fundamental reimagining of societal values and priorities.

This study investigates how degrowth strategies can potentially catalyze a shift from sensate cultural mentality towards a more balanced Idealistic or Ideational orientation. Idealistic mentality, as described by Sorokin, integrates both the material and spiritual aspects of human existence, while ideational mentality emphasizes both spiritual and transcendent values. By presenting some case studies of successful degrowth initiatives and their impact on community values and behaviors, this study also aims to identify some of the key factors that facilitate cultural transformation.

In sum, building on Sorokin's theoretical framework, this study aims to explore the potential of degrowth initiatives as a means to transcend the current sensate cultural mentality. By examining the progressive disintegration of sensate culture and the emergence of a new idealistic/ideational sociocultural order, this research seeks to develop practical strategies for transforming the dominant growth-dependent paradigm. This analysis contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable development and offers insights into alternative approaches to societal organizations and economic systems.

2 Sorokin's Model of Social Change

Sorokin built his unique theory of social dynamics on three key conceptual pillars. First is represented by a claim that all change is immanent: "all empirical phenomena – inorganic, organic, and sociocultural – are subject to change in the course of their empirical existence" (1957, p. 630). By this, he rejects (but does not neglect) purely environmentalist explanations that, in their essence, hypothesize that the natural state of phenomena is a form of static equilibrium, i.e., that phenomena "have no propium motum" (p. 632). In other words, Sorokin argues that whatever exists in time, that always changes. External factors can speed up or slow down the process but cannot stop it, as this would mean stopping time itself. Furthermore, Sorokin argued that sociocultural systems always produce consequences that are not a product of external forces but of the system itself. External forces can only hinder or strengthen the immanent potentiality/destiny of a given sociocultural system, but its logic is (largely) pre-set, self-determined by its very existence – external factors cannot force the system "to manifest what it potentially does not have" (p. 639); to do "what it immanently is incapable of doing" (ibid.). In this sense, the system is both (self)determined and free (from the influence of external factors), where the level of such freedom (derived from its self-determinacy) is dependent on the level of "integration of constituent parts" (p. 642).

Second, all processes, including those tied to social and cultural change, have limited variability – there is no such thing as an infinite trend or infinite variability (the principle of limit; p. 647-663). Following Aristotle and Hegel, Sorokin consequently argues that "no change or movement can proceed forever continuously in the same direction and without turns and rhythms" (p. 653). Thus, every system has limits (in the sense of what it can become), which, when

transcended, marks the beginning of an end of that system and the birth of a new one. However, as argued by Sorokin there is a "limited range of possibilities … in the creation of new fundamental forms" (p. 660) as there are limited numbers of possible answers in regard, for example, to the nature of truth (p. 677).

Lastly, Sorokin indicates that all systems (of truth) are valid, functional, adequate, etc. (from a certain viewpoint, in a certain context), but none of them is ever absolutely true, ever completely adequate. Consequently, since each of these systems "leads its human bearers away from the reality" (p. 681), its rise, its dominance (of such a system) inevitably leads to the "impoverishment of truth," to the weakening of the system's adaptive capacity. In turn, societies built on such premises become "more and more empty, false, inexperienced, ignorant; therefore powerless, disorderly, and base – "nobody can build his or society's life and culture on error, ignorance, and pure illusion." (p. 681). For Sorokin, the key moment of system change happens when the false part of the system begins to overweigh its valid part (ibid.). This process then repeats itself corsi ricorsi, while always carrying an aspect of uniqueness and sameness at the same time, being the same and not the same at the same time.

Using these three conceptual resting points, Sorokin builds a model of social change where human history is portrayed as something that in essence, always moves in super-cycles, between what can be seen as two "ideal types"; between two polar opposites – between a Sensate (consisting of three sub-types) and an Ideational type (also composed of three subtypes; for details see Sorokin, 1957, p. 27-39) [1]. Thus, in Sorokin's model, history oscillates between two distinct "culture mentalities" that differ concerning four key areas of social life: 1) the nature of reality; 2) the nature of the needs and ends to be satisfied; 3) the extent to which these needs and ends are to be satisfied; 4) the methods of satisfaction (p. 25).

The main characteristics of each cultural complex/mentality are presented in Table 1 (for the sake of brevity only key traits of sensate and ideational culture mentality are listed; for a detailed description of all main types and sub-types, see Sorokin, 1957, p. 27-39).

Table 1: Main Characteristics of Sensate and Ideational Cultural Mentality

MAIN ELEMENTS	TYPES OF CULTURE MENTALITY	
	Sensate	*Ideational*
Reality	Only that which is presented to the sense organs. It does not seek or believe in any supersensory reality; at the most, in its diluted form, it assumes an agnostic attitude toward the entire world beyond the senses.	Perceived as non-sensate and non-material, the realm of material or sensory experience is either unreal, illusory, unimportant, or, in some cases, even evil.
Nature of the needs and ends	Mainly physical	Mainly spiritual
Extent of satisfaction	Maximum satisfaction	The extent of their satisfaction is the largest and the level, highest
Method of satisfaction	Modification or exploitation of the external world	Self-imposed minimization or elimination of most physical needs, and to the greatest extent.

2.1 Sorokin's Predictions

In the foreword of the abridged edition (1957) of his seminal work Social and Cultural Dynamics (4 vol., 1937–41; rev. and abridged ed. 1957/1970), Sorokin indicated that three major processes are taking place: 1) an epochal shift of the creative center of humankind from Europe to the larger area of the Pacific-Atlantic; 2) a progressive disintegration of Sensate culture, society, and man; and 3) an emergence and slow growth of the first seedlings of the new Idealistic or Ideational sociocultural order.

The current study evaluated the last two predictions only – 1) a progressive disintegration of Sensate culture, society, and man; and 2) an emergence and slow growth of the first seedlings of the new Idealistic or Ideational sociocultural order – , mainly because the first prediction (epochal shift of the creative center) cannot be directly tied to Sorokin's theoretical model of social change.

2.1.1 A progressive disintegration of Sensate culture

One of the most telling passages concerning his first prediction can be found in the third volume of Sorokin's unabridged version of Social and Cultural Dynamics (1937, p. 535):

"…every important aspect of the life, organization, and the culture of Western society is in extraordinary crisis . . . Its body and mind are sick, and there is hardly a spot on its body which is not sore, nor any nervous fibre which functions soundly . . ."

Sorokin consequently argues that this is a sign that a phase is ending, that we are "currently" living in a state of transition, marked by the decay of the sensate phase. For him, this is manifested in all domains of social life. For example, he states "that practical failure of the excessive empiricism of our culture is demonstrated by our increasing inability to control mankind and course of sociocultural processes" (Sorokin, 1957, p. 695), where we "helplessly drift from one crisis to another", and where "neither happiness, nor safety, nor security, promised by the excessive empiricism of modern times is realized" (ibid.). He continues with what can be understood as echoes of Rousseau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and many other (anti-modern and postmodern) writers:

"Stripping man and values of anything absolute, super-empirical, divine and sacred; reducing them to a mere 'electron-proton complex', or 'complex of atoms', or 'reflex-mechanism' or mere 'stimulus-response relationship', the one-sided empiricism has tragically narrowed the world of true reality-value, and degraded man and culture to the level of these 'complexes', 'atoms' and 'mechanisms.'" (p. 696).

These general assessments of modern reality are then refined in the last chapter of Social and Cultural Dynamic (1957), where Sorokin presents thirteen trends (p. 699-701) that all point towards the loosing integrative power of the sensate culture, of its atomization, of it becoming less and less legitimate and credible; of it producing various pathologies at the social and individual level (he further expands on these trends in The Crisis of Our Age, published in 1941). Specifically, Sorokin states that the modern sensate culture is slowly disintegrating as it is burdened by continuous fragmentation and relativism:

"Sensate values will become still more relative and atomistic until they are ground into dust devoid of any universal recognition and binding power. The boundary line between the true and false, the right and wrong, the beautiful and ugly, positive and negative values, will be obliterated increasingly until mental, moral, aesthetic and social anarchy reigns supreme" (1957, p. 699).

2.1.1.1 Evaluation

Speaking broadly, Sorokin's analysis of what was then a contemporary society touches upon what can later be found in various, well-known analyses of (post)modern condition – e.g., in Beck's Risk Society (1986), in Baumann's Liquid Modernity (2000), in Berger's and Luckman's Modernity Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning (1995), in Homeless Mind (1973) by Berger, Berger, and Kellner. Namely, although diverse, these works all speak of fragmentation/relativization/pluralization of modern social life; of "liquidification" of (conceiving) "stable" modern structures (e.g., self, work, family, nation, science, progress) that (have) function(ed) as orientating and guiding principles of social life. Bauman, for example, writes of a transition from solid modernity to a more liquid form of social life, where the consequences of this transition can most easily be seen in contemporary approaches to self-identity. In liquid modernity, constructing a durable identity that coheres over time and space becomes increasingly impossible. As indicated by Sorokin, this is because "the sensory world is in a state of incessant flux and becoming" (1941, p. 80), with nothing to hold it together, with good or bad, right and wrong, etc. being constantly (subjectively) evaluated in terms of sensory utility, subjective pleasure, happiness.

Similarly, Beck, mirroring Sorokin's concept of the Age of Incertitude (ushered in by the sensory truth; 1941, p. 103), argues that today's life is permeated by uncertainty and risk (science included); by the fact that even one of the most important organizing principle of modern life – belief in rationality, science, and progress – lost its appeal and may even be dead. This is directly suggested in the well-known writings of Lyotard, who in Postmodern Condition (1979), argues that great meta-stories, including belief in progress and rationality, are essentially dead.[2] Consequently, Berger and Luckman (1995) argue that this condition brings new elements of insecurity in contemporary condition, where individuals face their everyday life as something that resembles building a house on quicksand:

"…individuals in modern society have to overcome the insecurity of meaning and uncertainty in moral justification. First, they cannot assume that what they consider good and right is considered good and right by others; second, individuals do not always know what is good and right is, even for themselves…" (p. 66).

In sum, many contemporary descriptions of contemporary society closely resemble Sorokin's arguments that, on a most fundamental level, suggest a loss of any coherent overarching reality definition; a definition that, as Berger and colleagues note (Berger, Berger, and Kellner, 1973), gives meaning to life as a whole, and without which individuals experience significant psychological strain (anomie leading to e.g., disorientation and alienation).

The fact that early years of the 21st Century have witnessed a worldwide epidemic of poor mental health and related illnesses (depression, anxiety) (World Economic Forum, 2019) [3], and there is a strong desire among the wide populace to "dial-back time" (indicative by the "conservative turn," predicted by Berger and Luckman [1995]) corroborates Sorokin's predictions and contemporary evaluations of "postmodern" condition. Additionally, there is an important corpus of empirical and theoretical research that analyzes/problematizes what is mentioned by Sorokin – that blurring the lines of good and bad, of right and wrong, strengthens social pathologies. For example, Passas (1990) writes:

"…the structure of contemporary societies is inherently anomie-promoting; that is, contradictions within it set in motion processes, whereby the lines between legitimate and illegitimate behavior and acts are blurred. In an anomic environment, where there is a degree of uncertainty or confusion as to what is and what is not acceptable, comparatively high rates of deviance can be expected." (p. 157).

Sorokin, arguing that this blurring, which in turn leads to other forms of social pathology, is largely a result of utilitarian ethics of sensate mentality where good and right is judged by the utility it brings to an individual, states:

"These progressively atomized Sensate values, including the man himself, will be made still more debased, sensual and material, stripped of anything divine, sacred, and absolute … They will be progressively destructive rather than constructive, representing in their totality a museum of sociocultural pathology … the Sensate

mentality will increasingly interpret man and all values "physiochemically," "biologically," "reflexologically," "endocrinologically," "behavioristically," "economically," "psychoanalytically," "mechanistically," "materialistically," as a universe of atoms and electron-protons with human robots enmeshed in their huge and inert web" (1957, p. 699).

This passage, although quite "poetic" and multidimensional, most clearly points towards two issues: a) towards the impoverishment of an individual; and b) towards the impoverishment of truth. Concerning the first, one can find support for these claims in classical writings, such as Marcuse's One-dimensional Man (1964), which is then further explicated in various postmodern writings such as those by Baudrillard (1988; 1994; 1999). Namely, Baudrillard sees a contemporary individual as someone who, via fragmentation (death of meta-stories), consumerism, and materialism, becomes saturated and completely alienated, an empty shell. He/She (and Other) becomes "a pure screen, a pure absorption and re-absorption surface of the influent networks" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 27), quite possibly because of what Sorokin had previously argued: that in the absence of adequate certainty, the individual seeks an artificial substitute (1941, p. 103), a substitute that is well represented by Baudrillard's concept of hyperreal.

Concerning the second, i.e., the "impoverishment of truth," brought about by an attempt of sensate mentality to completely dominate the system of truth, mainly by its mechanistic approach towards nature, society, and man, Sorokin's idea closely mirrors what was, for example, argued by Heidegger (1954/1977). In his The Question Concerning Technology, Heidegger indicated that modern, technological (i.e., sensate) age not only reduces (Enframes) everything to a standing reserve but that it also conceals the process of bringing-forth, consequently concealing (impoverishing) the truth itself as it drives out every other possibility of revealing:

"The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has already affected man in his essence. The rule of Enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of more primal truth.". Thus, where Enframing reigns, there is danger in the highest sense." (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 14).

And while it is true that such dangers are hard to assess and test empirically, it can be argued that such undertaking is less challenging if, for example, the Heideggerian concept of standing reserve and Enframing, represented as a sensate cultural complex in Sorokin's model, is applied to nature/environment. Namely, it is possible to argue that such enframing (or such cultural complex) is largely responsible for well documented environmental destruction and loss of biodiversity (e.g., Kolberg, 2014) as nature is primarily conceived as a resource to be used by man, as something to be used for economic gain and sensate pleasures, believed to bring happiness (if not salvation).

The issue of sense utility, in the sense that everything is judged through it (and reduced to it), is also pointed out by Sorokin, most notably when he speaks of science (and education):

"Science and philosophy, as we have seen, come to be imbued with utilitarian aims. Only those disciplines which, like physics and chemistry, biology and medicine, geology and geography, technology, politics, and economics, are eminently practical and serviceable are intensively cultivated. Hence, the aforesaid progress of the natural and technological sciences. Other disciplines, either metaphysics and 'nonpragmatic' philosophy or transcendental religion and absolute ethics, are relatively ignored. In so far as they are cherished, they assume the same utilitarian, sensory and pragmatic, or instrumental character … Of like character is the educational system, which is first and foremost a training school devoted to 'useful knowledge' and the crafts." (1941, p. 83-84).

Again, this theme, closely associated with the aforementioned impoverishment of truth, is almost perfectly mirrored in Lyotard's concept of performativity (1979) where only the knowledge that "performs" (economic utility) is valued; where education is no longer to be concerned with the pursuit of ideals such as that of personal autonomy or emancipation, but with the means, techniques or skills that contribute to the efficient operation of the state in the world market and contribute to maintaining the internal cohesion and legitimation of the state.

Indications of such a stance towards education are plentiful, usually found under the banner "If it doesn't pay, it doesn't stay" (It's Time To Worry When Colleges Erase Humanities Departments, Forbes, March 13 2018). But again – for Sorokin, such

situations of fragmentation, atomization, uncertainty, and reductionism are not endurable. Thus, a new reality will emerge:

"With all values atomized, any genuine, authoritative, and binding "public opinion" and "world's conscience" will disappear. Their place will be taken by a multitude of opposite "opinions" of unscrupulous factions and by the "pseudo consciences" of pressure groups." (1957, p. 699).

And while it could be argued again that such claims are too general to be "scientifically" tested, many well documented and related examples can be observed – e.g., the ascent of populism, skepticism towards democracy, the phenomena of fake news and alternative facts, the strengthening of political polarization, skepticism towards science, etc. For example, Gauchat (2012), studying US survey data from 1974 to 2010, found that despite increasing education levels, the public's trust in the science and scientific community has been decreasing. Additionally, he highlighted a rise of multiple factions that push their own cultural domains ("multitude of opposite opinions"), either for purely utilitarian ends (e.g., industry groups challenging climate change) or for ideological/religious reasons (e.g., leftist group rejecting the medical establishment/new conservatives challenging evolution) (The Mistrust of Science, The New Yorker, June 10, 2016).

Examples of this multitude of opposite opinions are numerous. Most recently, it can be traced to the Covid-19 virus (regarding its origin, its lethality, and its "aim"), but there are many others. For example, while some US states are considering laws that would allow Creationism to be taught by science teachers (US states consider laws allowing Creationism to be taught by science teachers, The Independent, March 16 2017), Blancke, Hjermitslev, and Kjærgaard (2014) found that Creationism started to play an expanding role in public debates about science policy and school curricula in Europe also (see also The Big Question: Why is Creationism on the rise, and does it have a place in education? The Independent, 12. Sept. 2008).

There is also the so-called "Flat Earth movement," which is also gaining popularity (as evidenced by the statistics available on the Flat Earth Society page (https://forum.tfes.org/index.php?action=stats; see also, e.g., America's flat-Earth movement appears to be growing, The Economist, November 28, 2017), as there are numerous groups that lead "culture wars" regarding family, abortion, gender

roles; groups that simultaneously fight and defend what was so illustratively depicted by the Norwegian King in 2016: "Norwegians are girls who love girls, boys who love boys, and boys and girls who love each other. Norwegians believe in God, Allah, everything and nothing" (King of Norway delivers emotionally charged speech in favor of LGBT rights, refugees and tolerance. The Independent, September 5, 2016).

What will result from this fragmentation is depicted in Sorokin's next statement:

"Contracts and covenants will lose the remnants of their binding power. The magnificent contractual sociocultural house built by the Western man during the preceding centuries will collapse. With its crumbling, the contractual democracy, contractual capitalism, including the private property, contractual free society of free men, will be swept away." (1957, 700).

In essence, Sorokin argues that "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992) will collapse, sweeping away core pillars of what is today known as a free society (this theme also pervades Sorokin's "sixth" [4] and "seventh point" [5]).

Again, numerous indications can be found that corroborate Sorokin's prediction. For example, there is a growing body of research that argues that in many Western societies, including established democracies, core ideas of political freedoms are being at least challenged (e.g., abortion, freedom of the press) if not severely constrained or completely abolished. Some speak of the "authoritarian turn" (e.g., Acemoglu, 2020; Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018), others of "democratic backsliding", but the common denominator of all is that democracy, as indicated by the Freedom House 2021 report, is under "siege" (Freedom House report, 2021). Additionally, recent examples of police violence in France (Yellow Vests Movement), the US (Occupy, Black Lives Matter) translate well into what Sorokin predicts in his "fifth" point:

"Rude force and cynical fraud will become the only arbiters of all values and of all interindividual and intergroup relationships. Might will become right. As a consequence, wars, revolutions, revolts, disturbances, and brutality will be rampant. Bellurn omnium contra omnes – man against man, class, nation, creed, and race against class, nation, creed, and race — will raise its head" (1957, p. 700).

He then adds that:

"The Sensate supersystem of our culture will become increasingly a shapeless "cultural dumping place," pervaded by the syncretism of undigested cultural elements, devoid of any unity and individuality. Turning into such a bazaar, it will become a prey of fortuitous forces making it an "object of history" rather than its self-controlling and living subject ... Its creativeness will continue to wane and wither … the place of moral categoric imperatives will be occupied by progressively atomistic and hedonistic devices of egotistic expediency, bigotry, fraud, and compulsion…Quantitative colossalism will substitute for qualitative refinement; "the biggest for the best"; a best-seller for a classic; glittering externality for inner value; technique for genius; imitation for creation; a sensational hit for a lasting value; "operational manipulation" for an enlightening intuition. Thought will be replaced by "Information, please"; sages by "smart Alecs"; real criteria by counterfeit criteria; great leaders by frauds … Population will increasingly split into two types: the Sensate hedonists with their "eat, drink and love, for tomorrow we die"; and, eventually, into ascetics and stoics indifferent and antagonistic to Sensate values." (Sorokin, 1957, 700-701).

2.1.2 An emergence and slow growth of the first seedlings of the new Idealistic or Ideational sociocultural order

According to Sorokin's theory, the slow death of the sensate, which is already in the making, makes room for the nascent Idealistic or Ideational sociocultural order, which may begin to further challenge established norms and values within society. As it takes root, it could gradually influence various aspects of culture, including art, philosophy, and social structures. Over time, this emerging worldview might gain momentum and attract more adherents, potentially leading to broader societal shifts and transformations.

Sorokin did not predict an immediate or total replacement of Sensate culture but noted the gradual emergence of counterforces that could lay the foundation for a new Idealistic or Ideational phase. He identified several key indicators:

- Revival of Ethical and Spiritual Consciousness

One of the strongest signs of transition is a growing interest in ethics, spirituality, and meaning beyond material success. Sorokin observed a resurgence of interest in philosophical and spiritual traditions that emphasize transcendence, moral responsibility, and interconnectedness. Additionally, he saw the rise of humanitarian and ethical movements, advocating for justice, compassion, and environmental consciousness, a return to universal moral principles, challenging moral relativism, and promoting a sense of shared values across cultures.

– The Rise of Altruism and Creative Love

Sorokin dedicated much of his later work to the study of altruism, mutual aid, and "creative love" as fundamental forces shaping the next cultural phase. He documented an increasing recognition of cooperation over competition in social, economic, and political spheres, growth of global solidarity movements, including humanitarian efforts, peacemaking initiatives, and ecological activism, and a shift in cultural values from self-centered materialism to a more community-oriented and spiritually conscious worldview.

– Criticism of Sensate Materialism and Consumerism

Even in his time, Sorokin saw the beginnings of intellectual and cultural resistance to materialist excess. He pointed to philosophers, social critics, and religious leaders who warned against the spiritual emptiness of consumerism; that there are emerging artistic and literary movements rejecting purely materialistic portrayals of life in favor of deeper, more introspective expressions of human experience. He also argued that there is a growing scientific interest in consciousness, mysticism, and the limits of empirical materialism, suggesting a shift toward a more holistic understanding of reality.

– The Quest for New Holistic Knowledge

Sorokin argued that Sensate culture's overemphasis on empirical science created an incomplete understanding of reality. He saw signs of a new intellectual synthesis with the emergence of integrative sciences, blending physics, psychology, and philosophy to explore human consciousness and the nature of reality; a movement away from rigid materialist epistemologies toward more holistic, systemic, and relational

paradigms; an increasing interest in Eastern philosophies, meditation, and non-dualistic perspectives, which emphasize inner experience and interconnectedness.

- Decentralization and the Search for Alternative Social Models

Lastly, Sorokin also observed a growing dissatisfaction with centralized, bureaucratic institutions and an increasing interest in localized, community-driven solutions. He foresaw the rise of cooperative economics, shared wealth models, and post-capitalist frameworks, an increased emphasis on ecological sustainability and decentralized, self-sufficient communities, and a transformation of governance structures toward participatory democracy and ethical leadership.

2.1.2.1 Evaluation

If we apply Sorokin's framework to today's world, we can see certain signs of the transition he predicted. For example:

- Degrowth and Ecological Consciousness: Echoing Sorokin's critique of materialism and a potential increase in the search for alternative social models, modern movements like degrowth economics, permaculture, and sustainable development seek to de-emphasize consumption and prioritize well-being over GDP growth (Hickel 2020; Kallis et al., 2018).

- Revival of Spiritual Practices: Recent studies indicate a notable increase in individuals engaging with spiritual practices and seeking deeper meaning beyond material success. A resurgence in meditation, mindfulness, and holistic health movements reflects a cultural shift away from purely Sensate values. (Van Gordon et al., 2013; Lomas, 2017; Schmidt, 2011; Choe & O' Regan, 2020).

- Ethical and Social Justice Movements: Global humanitarian movements, calls for economic justice, racial equality, and gender equity, and the push for corporate social responsibility signal a shift toward ethical prioritization. Movements such as Black Lives Mater, Occupy, Me-Too, etc., together with various political actions and organizational frameworks which seek to promote the fair treatment and full participation of all people, particularly groups who have historically been underrepresented or subject to discrimination on the basis

of identity or disability (Diversity, equity, and inclusion - DEI) are all signifiers of an increase in ethical concerns, both at the level of an individual and on the level of institutions and society as a whole. For example, a longitudinal study from England and Wales on attitudes towards homosexuality and gay rights has shown a marked liberalization since the 1940s and 1950s. This trend accelerated in the 2000s, culminating in the legalization of same-sex marriage in England and Wales. Importantly, this liberalization parallels growing public support for other aspects of equality, including gender equality (Clements & Field, 2014).

- Scientific Interest in Consciousness and Holistic Systems: The rise of neuroscience research on meditation, quantum physics discussions on consciousness, and holistic medicine suggests an epistemological shift away from mechanistic reductionism. Contemporary scholarship also reflects a renewed interest in integrating spiritual and moral values into various fields of study (e.g., Stuckrad, 2023).

- Alternative Governance and Decentralization: Increased interest in cooperative economics, participatory democracy, and ethical AI development reflects dissatisfaction with purely Sensate institutions. For example, Germany and several other European countries have experienced the emergence of many social movements that demand more direct democracy, particularly in decisions related to environmental quality and technological choices (Brand, 1987; Webler & Renn, 1995).

In sum, Sorokin argued that civilizations do not change overnight but through a gradual disintegration, crisis, and renewal process. While Sensate materialism still dominates global culture, its foundations are weakening under the weight of its contradictions. He argued that these changes manifest in a renewed focus on ethics, spirituality, and interconnectedness, in movements toward cooperation, social responsibility, and humanitarianism, in a paradigm shift in science and philosophy, embracing holistic and integrative knowledge, in the rise of economic and political alternatives focused on sustainability and well-being.

Sorokin's thesis suggests that while the Sensate phase is still dominant, the "first seedlings" of a new Idealistic or Ideational culture are already sprouting. These emerging values and movements indicate that societies may be transitioning toward a more balanced, spiritually enriched, and ethically grounded civilization.

3 Climate crisis as a catalyst for change - degrowth as a model of social change

The climate crisis has sparked a wave of activism, particularly among youth. In 2018, three prominent social movements - Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and the Sunrise Movement - emerged in response to urgent calls from scientists for unprecedented action to address the climate crisis (Stuart et al., 2020). Despite facing significant opposition, these movements continue to grow and create a stronger trajectory for deep social change. The School Strike 4 Climate, initiated by Greta Thunberg, exemplifies how social media has transformed political engagement, allowing younger generations to voice their concerns to a global audience (Boulianne et al., 2020).

Many, if not all, of these movements, argue that the main driver of environmental degradation and climate crisis is the current capitalist system; hence, no solution to the environmental crisis can afford not to address the issue of the capitalist system itself. In other words, the common denominator of climate movements and activism is that a fundamental transformation of the system is necessary.

The concept of degrowth proposes precisely such a radical political and economic reorganization, challenging the dominant growth-based development paradigm (Kallis et al., 2018). It aims to construct a society that "lives better with less" through an intertwined cultural and political change that embraces degrowth as a positive social development. This involves reforming institutions that make growth imperative and implementing policies like basic income, reduced working hours, environmental taxes, and controls on advertising.

These points are highlighted and elaborated in Hickel's much-appraised and cited work titled "Less is More" (2020; according to Google Scholar, the book was cited more than 1000 times by January 2025). The work presents a radical critique of capitalist consumerism and its destructive impact on both the environment and

human well-being, where its central argument is that the current economic system—premised on perpetual growth—drives ecological collapse, deepens social inequalities, and fails to improve quality of life beyond a certain threshold.

Hickel situates his argument within the broader context of ecological overshoot. According to his research, the global economy now extracts approximately 100 billion tons of material annually, far exceeding the planet's regenerative capacity. High-income nations, which consume most of these resources, drive this excessive materialism. The consequences include:

- Biodiversity collapse: The mass extinction of species is occurring at rates 1,000 times faster than pre-industrial levels due to habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change.
- Climate crisis: Carbon emissions, largely driven by industrial expansion and consumer habits, continue to rise despite international climate agreements.
- Resource depletion: Nonrenewable resources, such as rare earth metals and fossil fuels, are being extracted at unsustainable rates, leading to geopolitical tensions and ecological destruction.

Hickel argues that technological solutions alone will not prevent environmental collapse if growth remains the core objective of global economies. While "green growth" (economic expansion based on renewable energy and efficiency improvements) is often promoted as a solution, empirical studies suggest it is more of a myth than reality. As Hickel shows, renewable energy expansion cannot keep pace with rising energy demands if the economy continues to grow at current rates. Specifically, he argues that reliance on speculative technologies like Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) in climate models, which assume that we can overshoot carbon budgets and later remove excess CO2 from the atmosphere, is a dangerous gamble, as BECCS is unproven at scale, would require vast amounts of land, and could exacerbate food shortages and biodiversity loss. He concludes that technological solutions, while important, cannot replace the need for systemic change and a reduction in material consumption.

His critical examination of the techno-optimist narrative leads him to argue that the only viable solution is *degrowth — a planned reduction of material and energy consumption, particularly in high-income nations*. As Hickel indicates, degrowth prioritizes

sustainability and human well-being rather than the relentless pursuit of material accumulation. His thesis suggests that moving away from excessive consumerism is not just an economic or environmental necessity but also a cultural shift away from the dominant sensate mentality described by Sorokin in great detail.

Hickel begins by tracing the origins of capitalism, challenging the conventional narrative that it emerged naturally from feudalism. Instead, he argues that capitalism was born out of violent processes of enclosure, colonization, and the exploitation of both human labor and natural resources. The enclosure movement in Europe, which privatized common lands, forced peasants into wage labor, creating a class of workers dependent on capital for survival. This process was mirrored globally through colonization, where European powers extracted resources and labor from the Global South to fuel their industrial economies. Hickel thus emphasizes that capitalism is not a natural or inevitable system but one that was imposed through coercion and violence.

The book then explores how capitalism's growth imperative is structurally embedded in the system. Hickel explains that capitalism is driven by the need for constant expansion, as capital must be reinvested to generate more profit. This creates a "juggernaut" of growth that is inherently unsustainable. He critiques the idea that technological innovation can decouple economic growth from ecological impact, arguing that historically, technology has been used to intensify resource extraction and consumption rather than reduce it. The exponential nature of growth means that even small annual increases in GDP lead to massive increases in resource use over time, pushing the planet's ecosystems to the brink of collapse.

One of Hickel's most critical insights is that consumerism is not an organic expression of human nature but a constructed economic and cultural phenomenon. He traces the rise of advertising in the 20th Century as a tool to manufacture desires, manipulating individuals into believing that material possessions are synonymous with happiness and success. However, psychological studies show that materialist societies experience higher levels of anxiety and social fragmentation as individuals compete for status through conspicuous consumption. In contrast, societies with strong social support systems and less economic inequality tend to report higher life satisfaction and well-being levels. For example, materialistic individuals often report lower overall life satisfaction, as their high expectations can lead to chronic

disappointment and anxiety when those desires are unmet (Alif & Vigari, 2019; Dittmar et al., 2014; Noonan, 2024). Relatedly, economic inequality exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and anxiety among individuals, creating a competitive environment that fosters social fragmentation. Those in lower socioeconomic strata are more vulnerable to these feelings, as material wealth becomes a critical determinant of social status and perceived self-worth (Said et al., 2022; Melita et al., 2021; Allardyce et al., 2005). This resultant anxiety often manifests as social isolation and a reduced sense of community, further deepening social fragmentation (Präg, 2017).

Moreover, studies have shown that materialism serves as a mediator in the relationship between subjective well-being and impulsive buying tendencies, revealing how the pursuit of material goods can create a cycle of anxiety and dissatisfaction (Šeinauskienė et al., 2016; Dittmar et al., 2014). This cycle is particularly pronounced in competitive societies, where individuals engage in comparative behaviors that can lead to further anxiety about social and economic standings (Noonan, 2024; Melita et al., 2021). The fragmentation of social ties is exacerbated in these contexts, as individuals may prioritize the pursuit of wealth over building supportive relationships, thereby undermining social cohesion (Lau et al., 2014).

Hickel's argument thus resonates well with social critiques of consumerism made by thinkers such as Thorstein Veblen (The Theory of the Leisure Class) and Erich Fromm (To Have or To Be?). Like them, he emphasizes that shifting away from a consumption-driven culture could improve collective well-being rather than diminish it. In other words, "Less is More" provides a compelling argument that humanity must move beyond consumerism and materialist economic models if we are to survive the ecological crises we face. His argument strongly suggests that the modern world, driven by sensate values of material wealth and economic expansion, is in a state of crisis, much as Sorokin predicted. And while Hickel does not frame his argument in explicitly cultural terms, his vision for degrowth and ecological balance aligns with a broader transition away from sensate excess toward a more holistic, ethical, and sustainable worldview. Whether this shift leads to a renewed idealistic or ideational cultural mentality remains to be seen.

However, if history and Sorokin's cyclical theory hold true, the collapse of the current sensate model may be necessary for a more balanced and sustainable civilization to emerge. Hickel's work suggests that we are witnessing the consequences of sensate excess, where the pursuit of material wealth has led to:

- Environmental collapse due to over-extraction of natural resources.
- Social inequality as economic structures concentrate wealth in the hands of a few.
- Psychological alienation as individuals prioritize consumption over meaningful relationships and communal well-being.

If one follows Sorokin's model, the crisis of consumerism and environmental destruction could indicate that sensate culture is reaching its limits and must (and will) transition into a new phase. Hickel does not explicitly reference Sorokin, but his advocacy for degrowth and a new economic paradigm aligns with Sorokin's notion that civilizations must evolve beyond sensate materialism or risk collapse.

Hickel's alternative to consumer capitalism does not necessarily advocate for a return to ideational culture (i.e., a religious or metaphysical worldview). However, his emphasis on interconnectedness, ecological consciousness, and communal well-being over material wealth does suggest a movement toward an idealistic cultural framework. This could mean a rejection of materialism as the primary metric of success, greater integration of ethical and ecological considerations in economic decision-making, and a shift from individualistic, consumption-driven identities to more communal and sustainable ways of living.

Hickel argues that societies that have embraced low-consumption, high-well-being models—such as certain Indigenous communities or the Nordic welfare states—offer blueprints for a post-capitalist future that balances human needs with planetary limits. His vision for a post-growth world would require a major structural change that would include the following:

- Reforming economic indicators: Moving beyond GDP as a measure of success and adopting metrics like the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), which accounts for well-being and ecological sustainability.

- Redistribution of wealth: Implementing universal basic services (healthcare, education, housing) to reduce reliance on economic growth for social welfare.
- Work-time reduction: Shortening the workweek to distribute labor more equitably and allow people to focus on community and well-being rather than consumption.
- Ecological restoration policies: Enforcing strict limits on resource extraction and prioritizing regenerative agriculture, conservation, and circular economies.
- Decommodification of essential services: Ensuring that sectors such as healthcare, housing, and education are not driven by profit motives but serve public well-being.

These transformations all reflect the need for a fundamental departure from sensate cultural logic, which has prioritized economic expansion at the expense of social and ecological stability.

4 Alignment of Jason Hickel's Less is More with Pitirim Sorokin's Theory of Social Change

As already indicated, Hickel's arguments resonate quite well with Sorokin's theory and extend this alignment to explore the implications for contemporary society. I present the main points of overlap/concurrence.

4.1 Sorokin's Sensate Mentality and Hickel's Critique of Capitalism

Sorokin's sensate mentality is characterized by a focus on material wealth, sensory experiences, and empirical knowledge. It prioritizes the tangible, measurable, and material aspects of life, often at the expense of spiritual, ethical, and relational values. In a sensate culture, success is measured by economic growth, technological advancement, and consumption, while non-material aspects of life—such as community, spirituality, and ecological harmony—are devalued.

Hickel's critique of capitalism aligns closely with Sorokin's description of the sensate mentality. Hickel argues that capitalism, as an economic system, is inherently sensate in its orientation. It prioritizes endless growth, material accumulation, and the commodification of nature and human labor. The pursuit of GDP growth, which Hickel identifies as the "prime directive" of capitalism, reflects the sensate obsession

with quantifiable metrics of progress. However, Hickel demonstrates that this focus on material growth has led to ecological destruction, social inequality, and a decline in human well-being despite increases in wealth and consumption.

Hickel's work can be seen as a critique of the sensate mentality's dominance in modern society, which rests on the capitalist mode of production. He highlights how the sensate focus on material wealth has created a culture of consumerism, where people are encouraged to derive meaning and satisfaction from the acquisition of goods rather than from relationships, community, or spiritual fulfillment. Again, this aligns with Sorokin's argument that sensate cultures tend to become morally and spiritually bankrupt, as they prioritize external, material achievements over internal, ethical development.

4.2 The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Sensate Culture

Sorokin argued that sensate cultures eventually reach a point of crisis, as their materialistic and individualistic values lead to social and ecological disintegration. Hickel's analysis of the ecological crisis can be understood as a manifestation of this sensate crisis. The relentless pursuit of economic growth, driven by capitalist imperatives, has pushed the planet's ecosystems to the brink of collapse. Hickel shows how the sensate focus on material accumulation has resulted in deforestation, soil degradation, ocean acidification, and climate change—all of which threaten the stability of human civilization.

Hickel's emphasis on the interconnectedness of ecological and social systems is yet another point of alignment with Sorokin's critique of the sensate mentality's fragmentation of reality. In a sensate culture, nature is seen as a resource to be exploited rather than a living system to be respected. This dualistic worldview, which separates humans from nature, is a hallmark of sensate thinking. Hickel calls for a shift towards an animist ontology, which recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and emphasizes reciprocity rather than exploitation. This is precisely what Sorokin envisages as an ideational or idealistic culture, which prioritizes spiritual and ethical values over material wealth.

4.3 Degrowth as a Shift Towards an Ideational or Idealistic Culture

As indicated, Sorokin's ideational mentality is characterized by a focus on spiritual, ethical, and non-material values. In an ideational culture, success is measured by inner fulfillment, moral integrity, and harmony with the divine or the natural world. The intermediate idealistic mentality combines elements of both sensate and ideational cultures, seeking a balance between material and spiritual values. Said this, Hickel's vision of degrowth rests on a similar vision as degrowth, in its essence, challenges the sensate obsession with material accumulation and calls for a reorientation of the economy towards human and ecological well-being. For example, Hickel argues that a degrowth economy would prioritize public goods like healthcare, education, and affordable housing while reducing unnecessary production and consumption. This is very much what one could call an idealistic balance between material needs and non-material values, such as community, reciprocity, and ecological harmony.

Next, Hickel's call for a shorter working week and a reduction in consumerism addresses Sorokin's critique of the sensate mentality's overemphasis on productivity and consumption. By freeing people from the relentless pursuit of material wealth, degrowth could create space for more meaningful and fulfilling activities, such as art, spirituality, and community engagement. If achieved – if one follows Hickel's argument, this is not an "if" but "when" question – this would represent a move away from the sensate focus on external achievements and towards an ideational focus on inner fulfillment and ethical living.

4.4 Cultural and Spiritual Transformation

Hickel and Sorokin, while coming from very different theoretical and time-space contexts, both emphasize the need for a profound cultural and spiritual transformation to address the crises of modernity. Sorokin argued that the transition from a sensate to an ideational or idealistic culture requires a fundamental shift in values, beliefs, and worldviews. Similarly, Hickel calls for a shift away from the dualistic worldview that separates humans from nature and towards a more holistic and relational understanding of reality.

Hickel's exploration of animism as an alternative ontology offers a profound challenge to the dominant materialist worldview of modern society. By recognizing the intrinsic value and agency of all living beings, animism fosters a sense of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility between humans and the natural world. This perspective aligns closely with Sorokin's concept of an ideational culture, which emphasizes spiritual and transcendent values over material concerns. In an animist framework, nature is not viewed as a resource to be exploited but as a complex web of relationships that humans are intrinsically part of and responsible for maintaining.

This statement captures a profound reorientation of how humans might conceive of, relate to, and ultimately communicate about the environmental crisis. Animism—a worldview in which the natural world is alive, interconnected, and imbued with spirit—challenges the dominant Western paradigm that treats nature as inert, external, and subordinate to human use. When viewed through the lens of media theory, particularly the work of Marshall McLuhan, this shift in perspective enables a critical examination not only of the messages conveyed about climate change, but also of the mediums through which those messages are transmitted.

McLuhan's famous aphorism, "The medium is the message," underscores the idea that the form of communication deeply shapes the meaning and impact of its content (McLuhan, 1964). Applied to environmental discourse, this suggests that how we communicate about the climate crisis may be just as important as what we say. Modern climate communication is often characterized by highly abstract, technical, and data-driven forms: graphs, satellite imagery, carbon budgets, and predictive models dominate public discourse. While these tools are vital for scientific understanding and policy-making, they frequently produce psychological and emotional distance. The sheer scale, abstraction, and impersonal tone of such media can render the crisis unreal or overwhelming, thereby undermining both empathy and action.

From McLuhan's perspective, these are "cold" media—media that require high levels of interpretation and do not invite emotional or emphatic participation. In contrast, animist traditions rely on "warm" media: oral storytelling, ritual, music, embodied practice, and communal experience. These forms engage participants deeply, not merely as receivers of information but as co-creators of meaning. An

animist approach to climate communication, then, would emphasize relational and experiential modes—evoking not statistics but stories, not distance but presence.

Consider, for example, how Indigenous communities often narrate ecological knowledge through myth, metaphor, and intergenerational oral traditions. Such storytelling is not merely symbolic; it is epistemological, shaping how people understand their place in the world and their responsibilities toward non-human beings (Abram, 1996). These media practices align with McLuhan's idea that media are extensions of the human nervous system—tools that alter perception, cognition, and social relations. In the animist context, communicative acts are themselves part of the ecological web—they mediate not just human-to-human interaction but human-to-nature relationships. Moreover, McLuhan warned that new media could both extend and displace human capacities. While digital platforms allow for global awareness of environmental issues, they also risk numbing users to the local, the embodied, and the sacred. Videos of melting glaciers or maps of deforestation often become just more content to scroll past. The medium's inherent detachment clashes with the animist insistence on lived experience, responsibility, and intimacy with place.

Other communication theorists reinforce this point. James Carey's (1989) distinction between the transmission view and the ritual view of communication is particularly relevant. The former sees communication as the delivery of information; the latter as the construction of shared meaning through symbolic participation. Animist communication is ritualistic in this sense—grounded in reciprocity, symbolism, and community. Climate discourse that fails to engage in this mode may achieve factual clarity but not cultural transformation. Similarly, the field of eco-semiotics offers insights into how communication occurs across species and ecological systems. From this standpoint, nature is not just a backdrop or resource but a semiotic actor—a communicator in its own right (Kull, 2001). Birds, rivers, wind, and seasons carry messages, and humans must be attuned to listen. Mainstream climate narratives, however, often silence these voices by reducing ecosystems to metrics and functions.

Ultimately, reframing the climate crisis through an animist and media-theoretical lens calls for a paradigmatic shift. Rather than asking how to better convey the urgency of climate change in existing formats, we might ask: What forms of communication

can reawaken a sense of kinship with the Earth? What mediums invite not just awareness but care, responsibility, and belonging? Consequently, to address a crisis rooted in disconnection, the media of communication must themselves be relational. Storytelling, ritual, place-based education, participatory art, and interspecies listening are not merely cultural expressions—they are strategic interventions. They resist the detachment of cold media and foster the conditions for genuine ecological consciousness.

In sum, the implications of adopting an animist worldview in the context of degrowth are far-reaching. It necessitates a fundamental restructuring of economic systems, social relations, communicative practices, and individual behaviors to prioritize ecological balance and collective well-being over endless material growth. This shift towards an ideational or idealistic culture, as envisioned by both Hickel and Sorokin, would involve reimagining concepts of progress, success, and human flourishing. It calls for a society that values qualitative improvements in human and ecological well-being over quantitative economic indicators, fostering a more harmonious and sustainable relationship between human societies and the natural world.

5 Conclusion and Implications for Contemporary Society

One could argue that the alignment between Hickel's work and Sorokin's theory of social change is evident, where both perspectives have important implications for contemporary society. Both thinkers suggest that the crises of modernity—ecological collapse, social inequality, and spiritual emptiness—are rooted in the dominance of the sensate mentality of endless material growth where nature is seen as a resource to be exploited rather than a living system to be respected. To address these crises, we, according to the authors, need a cultural and spiritual transformation that shifts our values and priorities away from materialism and towards a more holistic and ethical way of life.

Hickel's call for degrowth provides a practical framework for this transformation. We can create a more equitable and sustainable society by reducing unnecessary production and consumption, shortening working hours, and investing in public goods. This shift would require a fundamental rethinking of our economic and

cultural systems, moving away from the sensate focus on material wealth and towards an idealistic balance between material and spiritual values.

In sum, Jason Hickel's work *Less is More* aligns closely with Pitirim Sorokin's theory of social change, particularly in its critique of the sensate mentality and its call for a shift towards an ideational or idealistic culture. Both thinkers argue that the crises of modernity are rooted in the dominance of materialism and the fragmentation of reality. Hickel's vision of degrowth provides a practical pathway for this cultural transformation, emphasizing the need for a more holistic and ethical relationship with the natural world. By embracing degrowth and moving away from the sensate mentality, humanity can create a more sustainable and fulfilling future.

The integration of Sorokin's cyclical model with degrowth theory thus provides a robust interdisciplinary framework for understanding and addressing modernity's crises. However, it is important to note, that there are some important issues that need to be highlighted when evaluating the feasibility and implications of this synthesis.

First, there is the issue of determinism vs. agency. Namely, Sorokin's model, while insightful, implies certain cultural determinism by framing societal transitions as inevitable cycles. Hickel's degrowth, in contrast, emphasizes human agency through policy and grassroots activism. This tension raises questions: Can intentional societal transformation accelerate Sorokin's predicted cultural shift, or are such changes bound to historical rhythms? The answer likely lies in a dialectical interplay - structural crises create conditions for agency, while collective action shapes the trajectory of cultural evolution. This would correspond to Sorokin's idea that social interventions can slow or speed up the historical process, but they cannot change the inevitable as every system has an inherent tendency to collapse on itself due to its internal inconsistencies, fissures, and contradictions.

Second, the feasibility of degrowth, which, according to Hickel's would require wealth redistribution and work-time reduction, faces significant barriers in a globalized capitalist system. Powerful actors invested in growth – corporations, governments reliant on tax revenue, and consumerist populations – may and do resist degrowth. Opposition is also coming from various research. Bergh (2011), for example, emphasizes that degrowth presents a misunderstanding of the relationship

between economic growth and environmental sustainability. He posits that promoting a-growth – an economic stance that permits growth where it does not harm the environment – could be a preferable approach compared to an outright rejection of growth through degrowth paradigms. Bergh argues that degrowth may lead to a reversal of economic progress, particularly in developing nations where growth is crucial for alleviating poverty and improving living standards (Bergh, 2011).

This view is echoed by Pesch (2018), who suggests that the binary opposition of growth versus degrowth oversimplifies complex socioeconomic dynamics, especially in contexts where populations depend on growth for survival and development. Furthermore, proponents of technological optimism contend that technological innovation can decouple economic growth from environmental harm. The notion that innovative technologies can address ecological challenges without necessitating a reduced economic output is a crucial point raised in opposition to degrowth. This perspective argues that ongoing advancements could provide solutions to environmental issues while maintaining or even enhancing economic productivity (Gainsborough, 2017). Critics from this school of thought maintain that degrowth undermines the potential for leveraging technology to achieve sustainable development goals, positing that rather than detracting from human well-being, growth can align with ecological principles (Banerjee et al., 2020). Still, localized experiments, such as eco-villages or cooperative economies, do demonstrate that alternatives are indeed possible. For example, an examination of urban degrowth practices by Hermans and colleagues (2024) highlights how »shrinking cities« can serve as practical experiments for degrowth, as they compel local entities to reassess resource usage and economic models in the context of declining populations. Another evidence supporting the feasibility of degrowth initiatives can be found in the community-led initiatives analyzed by Essuman and Emrick-Schmitz, particularly Le Biau Jardin in France and OUNI in Luxembourg. Their study shows how localized efforts can successfully embody and advance degrowth principles, demonstrating that grassroots movements are already testing burdensome economic paradigms and exploring sustainable alternatives. Additionally, the insights from Tenorio and Gómez-Baggethun (2024) suggest that solutions can emerge from integrating degrowth within existing economic frameworks (Tenorio & Gómez-Baggethun, 2024). These case studies highlight that degrowth is not purely about reducing economic output but can also intersect with adopting more sustainable

practices. This indicates that structural economic changes promoting degrowth can simultaneously address pressing environmental challenges (Sers, 2022), potentially making such initiatives more attractive to policymakers. In summary, various local implementations, community-led actions, and theoretical advances contribute to a growing body of evidence supporting the possibility of a transition towards a degrowth economy that remains viable socially, economically, and environmentally.

Scaling these requires politicizing degrowth, linking it to movements for climate justice, labor rights, and "decolonization of souls" consumed by consumerism.

Third, and relatedly, while both Sorokin and Hickel critique techno-optimism, technology (e.g., renewable energy, circular production) on the other side could support degrowth if it would be decoupled from the growth logic. In other words, without cultural transformation, green and other technologies risk perpetuating sensate values—e.g., electric vehicles as status symbols. It thus seems that a holistic approach must subordinate technology to ethical frameworks prioritizing sufficiency over efficiency.

Fourth, cultural and spiritual transformation necessitates reimagining narratives of progress, which, as indicated, is a "working religion of the West" and without which only despair would loom. Hickel's call for "animist ontologies" and Sorokin's emphasis on altruism highlight the need for education systems, media, and art to cultivate ecological consciousness and ethical reflection. However, global cultural diversity complicates this – while indigenous worldviews offer blueprints for reciprocity, universalizing them also brings risks of neo-colonial imposition.

Fifth, while Sorokin's predictions gain traction in contemporary trends – rising spirituality, ethical movements, and ecological activism, more studies are needed to assess whether these constitute a coherent cultural shift. Comparative analyses of regions adopting degrowth policies (e.g., Kerala's welfare model, Nordic cooperatives) could illuminate pathways for broader transformation. Relatedly, McLuhan's theory reminds us that media environments shape not only our knowledge, but our ways of being. If we are to move from a paradigm of exploitation to one of reverence and reciprocity, we must create communicative environments that reflect and nurture this shift. The animist worldview offers a template for such

communication—not as a nostalgic return to the past but as a vital guide to a livable future.

In conclusion, the crises of the 21st Century demand radical rethinking of societal values and structures. Sorokin's cyclical theory and Hickel's degrowth agenda, though rooted in different epochs, converge on a critical insight: survival depends on transcending sensate materialism. This transition is neither guaranteed nor linear, but the coalescence of theoretical foresight and practical experimentation offers insight that these processes are slowly underway, where a concentrated effort might speed them up. Thus, the task ahead is not merely to resist collapse but to cultivate the "seedlings" of a world where human and planetary well-being are inseparable.

Endotes

[1] There is also a third, mixed type that Sorokin called an Idealistic type (consisting of two sub-types) and which represents the (never lasting) reconciliation of the two.

[2] Lyotard argues that this is so because events always span beyond their (sensate) representations. Which in turn means that the intellect cannot grasp the true nature of events (via representations). Consequently, attempts to build an objective and universalistic interpretation of these events are, according to Lyotard, illusionary.

[3] Issues related to poor mental health are explicitly stated in trends 11 and 12 (Sorokin, 1957, p.700-701): "In the increasing moral, mental, and social anarchy and decreasing creativeness of Sensate mentality… depressions will grow worse… peace of mind and happiness will fade…suicide, mental disease, and crime will grow. Weariness will spread over larger and larger numbers of the population".

[4] "Freedom will become a mere myth for the majority and will be turned into an unbridled licentiousness by the dominant minority. Inalienable rights will be alienated; Declarations of Rights either abolished or used only as beautiful screens for an unadulterated coercion." (Sorokin, 1957, p. 700).

[5] "Governments will become more and more hoary, fraudulent, and tyrannical, giving bombs instead of bread; death instead of freedom; violence instead of law; destruction instead of creation. They will be increasingly short-lived, unstable, and subject to overthrow." (Sorokin, 1957, p. 700).

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