



## De-growth: Do you realise what it means?☆

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### ABSTRACT

The implications of de-growth are much more far reaching and radical than seems to be appreciated. It is important to start with a brief consideration of the magnitude and nature of the global predicament, because when this is understood it becomes clear firstly that consumer-capitalist society cannot be made sustainable or just, secondly that a satisfactory and viable post-capitalist society must take a particular form, and thirdly that specific implications for transition strategy are indicated.

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### 1. Introduction

The recent emergence of the de-growth movement has been remarkable and inspiring. However it would seem that many within it do not recognise the vast and radical implications of the de-growth notion. The first part of the following discussion seeks to make clear that the nature and magnitude of the global sustainability problem are such that a satisfactory society cannot be achieved without replacing several of the fundamental structures and systems of consumer-capitalist society.

The central theme in *The Transition to a Sustainable and Just Society* (Trainer [2].) is that there is a powerful, inescapable logic connecting the “limits to growth” analysis of the global situation, the form that a satisfactory alternative society must take, and transition theory and practice. Thus the second part of this discussion argues that when the magnitude and nature of the global predicament is understood it becomes obvious that a satisfactory society must be some form of *Simpler Way*, centring on the enjoyment of non-affluent lifestyles within mostly small and highly self-sufficient local economies under local participatory control and not driven by market forces.

Finally it is argued that the foregoing conclusions yield coercive implications for transition strategy, which generally contradict those taken for granted in green and left circles.

#### 1.1. *The global situation: its seriousness and its nature*

There are three fundamental lines of argument for the rejection and replacement of consumer-capitalist society. The first is to do with its unsustainability, the second is to do with its injustice and moral unacceptability, and the third to do with deteriorating cohesion and quality of life.

### 2. Sustainability: an outline of the “limits to growth” case

There is now an overwhelming case that ecological, resource and cohesion problems cannot be solved by or within consumer-capitalist society. This is because, firstly the magnitude of the problems is now too great, and secondly because the

☆ Some of the themes discussed have also been considered in Trainer [1].

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problems are being generated by the systems and processes that are built into the foundations of this society. The fundamental cause of the problems including the destruction of the environment, the deprivation and “underdevelopment” of the Third World, resource depletion, conflict and war, and the breakdown of social cohesion, is over-production and over-consumption.

Levels of material affluence are far too high to be kept up for long or to be spread to all the world’s people. It is important to grasp the magnitude of the over-shoot.

- If the probably 10 billion people we will have on earth within about 40 years were to use resources at the per capita rate of the rich countries, annual resource production would have to be about 8 times as great as it is now [2].
- Several resources are already scarce, including water, land, fish, and a number of minerals. Oil and gas are likely to be in decline soon, and largely unavailable in the second half of the century. Coal supply could peak within three decades [3].
- Recent “Footprint” analysis indicates that it takes 8 ha of productive land to provide water, energy, settlement area and food for one person living in Australia [4]. If 10 billion people were to live as Australians do about 80 billion ha of productive land would be needed. However that is about 10 times all the available productive land on the planet.
- The most disturbing argument is to do with the greenhouse problem. In the near future it is likely to be agreed that in order to stop the carbon content of the atmosphere rising to dangerous levels we must totally eliminate emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> by 2050 (Hansen says 2030) [5,6]. Geo-sequestration cannot enable this, if only because it can only capture about 85% of the 50% of emissions that come from stationary sources such as power stations [7].

These kinds of facts and figures make it abundantly clear that rich world material “living standards” are *grossly* unsustainable, far beyond levels that can be kept up for long or spread to all people. We are not just somewhat beyond sustainable levels of resource consumption, we have already overshoot by a factor of 5–10. Many people, especially within green and left circles are familiar with the above facts and figures but seem not to grasp their significance. The magnitude of the overshoot requires enormous reductions that cannot be made within or by consumer-capitalist society.

The above figures are to do with the present situation, but that does not define the problem we face. At least 3% per annum economic growth is demanded and usually achieved in this society. If Australia had 3% p.a. increase in output to 2050 and by then all 10 billion people expected had risen to the material living standards Australians would have, every year the world’s economy would be producing almost 20 times as much as it does today. Yet the present level is grossly unsustainable. The mainstream seems to be completely unaware of the magnitude of these implications of its current material “living standards”, let alone those of its commitment to growth.

### 2.1. “But technical advance will make it all possible”

The common response to the general “limits” claim is that technical advances can solve the problems enabling us to go on living with ever increasing “living standards”. Green agencies can be among the front ranks of those claiming technical solutions already exist and attributing the continuation of the problems to the failure of politicians to implement them. People on the left are similarly inclined to assume that when capitalism has been eliminated “everyone can have a Mercedes.”

However it is easily shown that the overshoot is far too great for any plausible technical advances to be able to reduce the problems to tolerable proportions. Perhaps the best known “technical fix” optimist, Amory Lovins, claims that we could at least double global output while halving the resource and environmental impacts, i.e., we could achieve a “Factor Four” reduction [8]. But it is easily shown that this would be nowhere near sufficient to solve the problems.

Let us assume that present global resource and ecological impacts must be halved (although much more than that is needed). It has been explained above that if we in rich countries average 3% growth, and 10 billion rose to the living standards we would then have by 2050, total world output would be about 20 times as great as it is today. It is not remotely plausible that technical advance will make it possible to multiply total world economic output by 20 while halving impacts, i.e., enable a *Factor 40 reduction*?

The most powerful yet unexamined tech-fix assumption is that renewable energy sources can be substituted for fossil fuels, thereby enabling abundant energy affluence while eliminating the greenhouse and other problems. A case against this faith is detailed in Trainer [9]. (For an updated summary see Trainer [10].) To indicate its strength consider the following few figures re biomass sources of liquid fuel.

We will probably be able to derive 7 tonnes of biomass per ha from very large scale production, and 7 GJ of ethanol per tonne of biomass. Thus it would take 2.6 ha to produce the 128 GJ each Australian uses each year as liquid fuel, i.e., oil plus gas. If 10 billion people were to live as we do now we would need 26 billion ha of forest. . . on a planet that has only 13 billion ha of land. Trainer [9] presents a detailed numerical derivation concluding that the quantities of renewable energy plant needed if all world energy is to be provided by renewable would require the present ratio of global energy investment to GDP to be multiplied by at least 10.

This does not mean we should forget about renewables. They are the sources we should be moving to full dependence on as soon as possible. But they cannot fuel a consumer society for all. They would have to be part of The Simpler Way (discussed below).

### 3. The gross injustice of the global economy

To the above points to do with sustainability we must add considerations to do with the extreme injustice of the global economy. It allocates most of the world's resources to the enrichment of corporations and those who shop in rich-world supermarkets. It gears the economies and resources of the Third World to the demands of the rich world. It ensures that their resources are not devoted primarily to directly improving the lives of the world's poor majority.

The global economy has these effects primarily because it is a market economy. In a market economy scarce things go mostly to the rich, i.e., to those with more money to pay for them. For example about one-third of the world's grain is fed to animals in rich countries, while around 1000 million people are hungry. This is no puzzling paradox; it is a direct consequence of the fact that in the market place it is more profitable to allocate the grain to animals rather than to poor people. Hence rich world per capita consumption of most resources is around 15 times that of the poorest half of the world's people.

Even more importantly, the market ensures that the development that takes place will be development in the interests of the rich. It is more profitable to develop cosmetics factories to use Third World resources to produce exports to rich countries than for those resources to produce necessities for local people. The Structural Adjustment Packages of the IMF and World Bank force indebted countries to adhere to these market principles and they prohibit *appropriate* development, ensuring that only the development that promises to maximise the global profits of some corporation will occur.

The above figures make it clear that rich world affluent living standards would not be remotely possible if rich countries were not getting far more than their fair share of global resources, including many of the resources of poor countries. Although for the most part it is the normal functioning of the global market economy makes this possible, in addition a great deal of effort goes into securing the empire, e.g., through the support of client dictatorships willing to sell us their oil.

In a satisfactory global economy the rich countries would have to get by on something like their fair share of global resources, which would be a minute proportion of the quantities they now get. Add the fact that the availability of resources is likely to diminish severely in the near future and we again arrive at the conclusion that a satisfactory society can only be defined in terms of per capita resource consumption levels that are a small fraction of those in rich countries today.

### 4. Deteriorating social cohesion and quality of life

Less space needs to be given here to the argument that consumer society is suffering long term deterioration in the social bond. Many indices of breakdown, such as for drug and alcohol abuse, family stability, eating disorders and especially stress and depression are rising. Inequality is increasing and various indices of community, "social capital" and "sustainable economic welfare" are decreasing. These trends are being caused primarily by the priorities driving competitive, individualistic and acquisitive market economies.

#### 4.1. Beyond our predicament

The point of the foregoing sketch has been to make clear the magnitude, nature and cause of the global predicament. These do not seem to be well understood even among environmental agencies and activists. Because the amounts of producing and consuming going on in the world are already many times beyond levels that might be sustainable, the goal must be not just to establish a steady state economy, but to get to an economy in which production, consumption, investment, trade and GDP are small fractions of their present quantities. Secondly it is clear that the causes of the predicament lie in some of the fundamental structures and commitments of consumer-capitalist society. Such a society cannot be fixed; it must be largely scrapped if the many serious problems they cause are to be solved.

#### 4.2. Implications for the form a satisfactory society must take

If the foregoing argument is sound then it follows that what is required is far greater social change than Western society has undergone in several hundred years. The first implication to be considered below is that the changes associated with de-growth will permeate just about the whole of society, i.e., they will require the scrapping or remaking of many central institutions and systems. The second implication is to do with the general form that a satisfactory society must take. It will be argued the crucial general principles follow logically and indisputably from the foregoing diagnosis of our situation.

#### 4.3. Growth is integral to the system

It is a mistake to think of getting rid of growth as a kind of component replacement task, as if the growth element in this society can be taken out and a non-growth element put in its place. Growth is integral to the system. Most of the system's basic structures and mechanism are driven by growth and cannot operate without it. Growth is not like a faulty air conditioning unit in a house, which can be removed leaving the rest of the house to function more or less the way it did before. Consider the following organic connections, integration and far-reaching implications.

- If there is to be no growth then there can be no interest payments. If more has to be paid back than was lent or invested, then the total amount of capital to invest will inevitably grow over time. The present economy literally runs on interest

payments of one form or another. An economy without interest payments would have to have totally different ways of carrying out many processes.

- Therefore almost the entire finance industry has to be scrapped, and replaced by arrangements whereby money is made available, lent, invested etc., without increasing the wealth of the lender. That is incomprehensible to most current economists, politicians and ordinary people.
- Among related problems is how to provide for old age, when this cannot be done via superannuation schemes relying on returns on investment?
- The present economy is literally driven by the quest to get richer; this motive is what gets options searched for, risks taken, construction and development underway, etc. The most obvious alternative is for these actions to be motivated by a collective effort to work out what society needs, and organise to produce and develop those things. However this involves an utterly different world view and driving mechanism. We would have to find another way to ensure innovation, entrepreneurial initiative and risk taking when people cannot look forward to getting richer from their efforts. (This is not necessarily a difficult problem; see [2], and the Parecon proposals of Albert [11].)
- In a zero growth economy there can be no concept of profit. The income from transactions would in general have to equal the costs, or again wealth would accumulate. Thus there would have to be “subsistence” economies; i.e., systems in which people come to the “market place” with goods and services of a certain “value” and leave with other goods and services of the same “value”. “Markets” would be for exchange and distribution, not for making, accumulating, money over time.
- The problem of inequality would become acute and would demand attention. It could no longer be defused by the assumption that “the rising tide will lift all boats”. In the present economy growth “legitimises” inequality and defuses the problem. Extreme inequality is not a major source of discontent because it can be said that economic growth is raising everyone’s “living standards”.
- If there is to be no growth there can be no role for the market mechanism. Many who oppose growth do not seem to realise this. The market is about maximising; i.e., people go into the market to make as much money as possible. In a zero-growth economy the hidden hand which adjusts supply, demand and price in a market economy can no longer perform those functions because that hand can only seek outcomes which increase wealth. In other words there is an inseparable relation between growth, the market system and the accumulation imperative that defines capitalism. *If we must cease growth we must scrap the market system.*
- The above changes could not be made unless there was also a profound cultural change, involving nothing less than the complete abandonment of any concern with gain. For more than two hundred years Western society has been focused on the quest to get richer, to accumulate wealth and property. This is what drives all economic activity, including the innovation and developmental firms undertake, and the behaviour of individuals and firms in the market, and it is the supreme principle of national policy.

But the logically inescapable point here is that in a zero-growth economy there could be no place whatsoever for this psychological motive or economic process. People would have to be concerned to produce and acquire only that stable quantity of goods and services that is sufficient for a satisfactory quality of life, and to seek no increase whatsoever in savings, wealth, possessions etc. It would be difficult to exaggerate the magnitude of this cultural transition from the mentality that is typical in consumer society and that has been dominant in Western culture for a long time.

The argument to this point has been that these are among the huge and easily overlooked implications of de-growth, because growth is not an isolated element that can be dealt with without remaking the rest of society. It is not that this society *has* a growth economy; it is that this *is* a growth society.

If this diagnosis of the situation is valid, our task is far more daunting than most green and left people imagine. Most greens seem to be seeking only to reform a system that would still deliver affluent living standards and economic growth via market forces. Many on the left at least realise that radical system change is required, but the left has a strong tendency to think that the changes do not need to go beyond getting rid of capitalist control. It is assumed that then the same old industrialised and centralised systems can be run in much the same way but distributing the product more equitably and enabling high material living standards for all. The above account of our situation rules out such thinking. (For a detailed discussion of these themes see Trainer [2].)

#### 4.4. *Is de-growth compatible with capitalism?*

Some advocates of de-growth believe we could still have a capitalist economy, again revealing a failure to grasp how radical and enormous the implications of de-growth are.

Capitalism is by definition about accumulation, making more money than was invested, in order to invest the surplus to have even more. . . to invest to get even richer, in a never-ending upward spiral. This would not be possible in a steady state economy, let alone one in which there has been marked reduction in output.

It would be possible in a stable economy for a few to still own most capital and factories, and to live on the income from these investments, but they would be more like rentiers or landlords who draw a stable income from their property. They would not be entrepreneurs constantly seeking increasingly profitable investment outlets for ever-increasing amounts of capital. Thus the core defining principle of capitalism, accumulation, would not exist.

Herman Daly believes that “productivity” growth would enable capitalism to continue in an economy with stable resource inputs. This would be so, but it would be a temporary effect and too limited to enable the system to remain capitalist. (The case is detailed in Trainer [1].) The growth rate which the system, and capitalist accumulation, depends on is mostly due to additional production, not productivity growth. Secondly productivity measure used (by economists who think dollars are the only things that matter) takes into account labour and capital but ignores what is by far the most important factor, i.e., the increasing quantities of cheap energy that have been put into new productive systems. For instance over half a century the apparent productivity of a farmer has increased greatly, but his output per unit of energy used has fallen alarmingly. From here on energy is very likely to become scarce and costly. Ayres [12] has argued that this will eliminate productivity gains soon (which have been falling in recent years anyway), and indeed is likely to stop GDP growth before long.

Thus the scope for continued capitalist accumulation in a steady state economy would be very small, and confined to the increases in output per unit of resource inputs that is due to sheer technical advance independent of resource inputs. There would not be room for more than a tiny class, accumulating very gradually until energy costs eliminated even that scope. Meanwhile it would become obvious to all that it made no sense to leave ownership and control of most of the productive machinery in the hands of a few who need not work. As Smith [13] points out effectively, the inescapable implication of de-growth is “socialism” of some kind, but many, including Herman Daly and Jackson [14] seem to have difficulty accepting this. It would seem obvious that in a situation of stable and limited inputs a society would quickly realise that it must somehow collectively determine production, exchange, distribution, investment and development.

But the overwhelmingly important factor here has yet to be taken into account. As has been made clear above the need is not just for zero-growth, it is for dramatic reduction in the amount of producing and consuming going on. These must be cut to probably less than one-fifth of the levels typical of a rich country today, because the planet cannot sustain anything like the present levels of producing and consuming, let alone the levels 9 billion people would generate. This means that most productive capacity in rich countries, most factories and mines, will have to be shut down. How much scope would there then be for capital accumulation? It is inconceivable that a capitalist society could survive such a transition.

#### 4.5. *What form must a de-growth society take?*

The central concern of The Simpler Way project has been to offer a somewhat detailed vision of a viable and attractive alternative society [2,15]. When assessing it the context set by the foregoing discussion should be kept in mind, i.e., the end of consumer society abundance and the coming of an era of intense and irremediable scarcity. The task is to design a society that would be satisfactory for all on rates of material consumption that are a small fraction of those typical of rich countries today. The essential Simpler Way claim is that this could be done, it could be done easily, and it would liberate us to enjoy a far higher quality of life – but only if very different attitudes and values came to be held. It is also claimed that we will inevitably move towards (but not necessarily reach) these ways as existing systems increasingly fail to provide for us.

Some of the following themes have been argued by other discussions of alternative possibilities, including the Parecon and Inclusive Democracy initiatives [11,16]. The distinctive features of The Simpler Way approach are firstly its focus on the micro-economy of town, suburb and neighbourhood, where it is claimed most needs could be met, and will have to be met. The focus is on smaller scaled localism than is usually implied by this term. This will be necessary to enable the social bonds required to make the new micro-economies work. The discussion is less concerned with the larger and more distant regional and (much reduced) state economies, let alone national economic realms involving large factories, trade, national railways, etc.

The second distinctive claim is that given the context of scarcity a sustainable and just society all could enjoy has to be defined primarily in terms of frugality, micro-scale localism, “subsistence”, self-sufficiency and non-material life satisfactions, at the household, neighbourhood and town levels. Few if any current visions of the good society or of a post-capitalist society recognise the centrality this theme must have, including the typical “socialist” vision but also including those put forward within the environmental movement and by the Inclusive Democracy and Parecon projects.

The following notes derive from my experience living as a peasant-homesteader on a bushland block near Sydney, and from my acquaintance with people in the Eco-village movement. (Again, for the detailed account see Trainer [2,15].)

#### 4.6. *Far less affluent lifestyles*

Most obviously it would have to be a non-affluent, a very frugal way of life, in which the concern is to produce and consume only as much as is needed for comfortable material living standards. It must be stressed that this does not mean deprivation or hardship. It is about being content with what is sufficient for a high quality of life. More importantly it is about deriving life satisfaction from alternatives to material affluence, such as the rich social, cultural and spiritual experience that The Simpler Way would enable.

#### 4.7. *Mostly small and highly self-sufficient local economies*

Large scale, centralised and globalised economic systems will not be viable. There will not be the energy to sustain all that transport, trade, tourism, and foreign investment. We must therefore develop as much self-sufficiency as we reasonably can

at the national level (meaning trade of only those crucial items that cannot be produced internally), at the household level, and especially at the neighbourhood, suburban and town levels. We need to convert our presently barren suburbs into thriving local economies which produce most of the basic goods and services they need from local resources of land, labour, skill and capital. This will be enabled by the movement of many people from cities to presently dying country towns, and to the new settlements on land that will be eagerly sold by the many agribusiness farmers who will no longer be able to survive in the absence of globalised food systems.

Backyards would (again) contain vegetable gardens, fruit trees, workshops and poultry. There would be many small enterprises in neighbourhoods such as the local baker, fish farmer, furniture maker and potter. We would decentralise many large firms, enabling most people to get to work on foot or by bicycle. Much production could come from backyard, part time and hobby businesses, many of them engaged in enjoyable craft and hand-tool production. However it would make sense to retain a few larger mass-production factories, mostly regionally, and some national enterprises, e.g., steel works and railway equipment.

Many very small market gardens could be located throughout suburbs and even cities, e.g. on derelict factory sites and beside railway lines. A high proportion of our honey, eggs, crockery, vegetables, furniture, fruit, fish and poultry could come from local family businesses and cooperatives. Very little food would need to be imported into suburbs and towns, assuming intensive home gardening, Permacultured streets and commons, high-yield heirloom varieties and multi-cropping. [17].

There should be many neighbourhood workshops, functioning as recycling stores, meeting places, leisure centres, barter exchanges and libraries. We could dig up many roads because we would not need much motor transport when we had reduced production and decentralised what's left, thereby possibly converting one quarter to one third of urban land area to commons providing many free goods for all to use. These would be maintained by community working bees and would include orchards, bamboo clumps, herb patches and forests, and ponds for ducks and fish.

Production on this micro scale is not necessarily "inefficient" even in presently conventional economic/dollar terms, given the vast savings it enables, e.g., in travel to work, transport of goods, bureaucrats, experts, consultants, infrastructures, packaging, waste recycling, advertising, etc.

#### 4.8. *More communal, cooperative and participatory ways*

We would share, give away surpluses, cooperate and volunteer. The commons would be part of the extensive communal wealth all would have access to. There would be many committees and regular voluntary community working bees, building, maintaining and managing the commons and the local infrastructures.

The alternative neighbourhood would be leisure-rich, full of interesting things to do, familiar people, common projects, animals, gardens, forests, lakes, little firms and community workshops. Consequently, people would be less inclined to travel away at weekends and holidays, thereby reducing national energy consumption.

There would be far more community than there is now. People would know each other through interaction on local projects, and would be mutually dependent. One would predict a large decrease in the incidence of drug abuse, stress, loneliness, depression and similar social problems.

#### 4.9. *The economy*

The decades of transition should be thought of as a period in which the old economy (Economy A) is increasingly replaced by the new Economy B, which would slowly be built and run by the community through its committees and town meetings. It would increasingly take control of those needs which cannot be left to the normal Economy A. From the start we would organise towards eliminating unemployment, homelessness and poverty, by setting up cooperatives to produce many basic goods and services. Over time the goal would be to identify needs and to increasingly gear local resources to meeting them. During the years of transition Economy B would broaden and consolidate as the mainstream economy increasingly failed to provide, and people came across to the new options.

Economy B would be run collectively, via town committees and meetings which worked out town priorities and ways of achieving them. The criteria would be sufficiency in standards (what is good enough), doing it ourselves (with shovels if necessary), evaluating in terms of quality of life (not dollars), beefing up local self-sufficiency and therefore reducing imports, and attending to effectiveness (rather than "efficiency"). Use of monetary capital would be minimised; the town has large resources of land, labour, talent and good will and the task is to harness these to meet needs.

The proportion of the economy eventually under direct social control would be up to communities to determine. My preference is for most of the economy to remain as small privately owned "firms" and cooperatives, given that in the new culture (below) their goals would not be profit maximisation and growth but the provision of secure livelihoods and stable incomes along with the satisfaction that comes from the freedom to run one's own operation to make a worthwhile contribution in one's preferred way.

The new economy would probably only need a small monetary sector because many people would meet their needs mostly from household output, barter and giving of surpluses, and via "free" goods from the commons. Consequently many people might work only one day a week for money and spend the rest of the week enjoying a wide variety of interesting and useful activities within their neighbourhoods.

There would also be a wider national economy to be managed, but the necessary level of social control over this would be more easily achieved given that there would be no growth and that its scope would be a very small proportion of the present economy, and its purpose would be to provide basic goods and services such as steel, national postal and railway systems that are crucial for life in the towns.

There would be a very large reduction in the need for people commuting to offices to work in suits before computer screens. Many would enjoy highly varied “work” days in much more practical situations, although high level technical skills would still be needed (in far less quantity.)

In Chapter 4 of Trainer [2] a settlement of this kind is discussed in some detail deriving an approximate per capita footprint of 0.25 (although regional and national inputs to the town might double this), compared with the 8 ha now estimated for the average Australian.

#### 4.10. Government: the implications for “democracy”

In no field are the implications of the foregoing vision more profound than with respect to government in general, and democracy in particular. The main implication is that representative democracy will have to be scrapped. This is not optional. Again the logic of the situation means that in the conditions we will soon have to cope with representative democracy will be largely irrelevant, because it will not enabled the kind of governing that will be essential.

Consider the situation we will be in. Centralised governments will have few resources at their disposal. The basic structures and processes requiring governing will be highly decentralised to the level of many small towns, suburban villages and neighbourhoods. These are where most of the everyday goods and services will have to be produced and distributed and where the organisational, research, development, adjustment and dispute resolving decisions will have to be made. Thus this is where most “governing” will have to take place.

The situation will also be one of intense dependence on the locality, on its ecosystems, soils, water catchments, infrastructures, and on its social systems and processes, morale and “social capital”. Everyone will be acutely aware that these must be kept in good shape or the town will not work well. This is a situation in which the premium will be on reaching consensus on what is in fact the best arrangement for the town. (Note that this is most likely to be achieved if dissent and debate are encouraged, and if those disadvantaged by an outcome know that generous adjustments will be made for them.) Governing therefore could not be primarily about the zero-sum business of getting from a paternal government the decision that favours one interest group at the expense of others. Nor can it be about 51/49 majorities getting their way. It must be mainly concerned with trying to find the way that all agree is best for the town. These conditions contradict the present adversarial, conflict and power ridden, and patriarchal conception of democracy.

Centralised governments could not possess the information required to make the decisions. The right decision for the town will depend on the knowledge, insights and values held within the town, on its history, traditions, ecology, personalities and relationships. No distant state bureaucracy, even if it had abundant resources, could work out what is best for the town.

The town will not work well unless its morale, conscientiousness, responsibility, energy and citizenship are in good shape. Otherwise people will not turn up well to working bees, committees and concerts, think conscientiously about public issues or care deeply about the town. Above all citizens must feel that it is their town, they run it, they appreciate it and they are proud of it. This means they must be conscious of having the power and the responsibility to make sure the town works well, provides for all and is admirable. The town will work best if there is a minimum of discontent, conflict, inequality or perceived injustice, so all will recognise the need to make sure all are provided for, none are unhappy and none are dumped into unemployment or poverty.

Thus the situation of dependence on our ecosystems and on each other will require and reinforce concern for the public good, a more collectivist outlook, taking responsibility, involvement, and thinking about what’s best for the town. None of this would be possible if the governing was carried out by distant representatives. Again, these are not merely optional preferences or ideals. These conditions must be fulfilled or sustainable small and largely self-sufficient communities in conditions of scarcity cannot thrive. A major virtue of the Simpler Way is that it *requires* and *rewards* cooperation and care.

In this situation much of the work of government would take place informally in the everyday conversations people engage in within workplaces, kitchens and cafes. These interactions would gradually sort out what people thought the best option for the town is. Voting would be a minor element and town meetings would often only confirm policies now recognised by all to be desirable. The aim would be consensus; if a vote is split it probably means it is not yet clear to all which option is technically best for the town.

The form of government required therefore has to be a radically participatory democracy. This means not just all citizens having the power to make the decisions but also having the power and responsibility to carry them out. Although some professional bureaucrats and experts would be used where appropriate, the bulk of the “work” will (have to) be done by citizens, voluntarily. Keep in mind that the scale and complexity of the economy would be minute compared with that which states have to deal with today, the technologies involved would be mostly simple, there would be no struggles over lucrative mega-development contracts, and the little energy would be going into zero-sum conflicts of self-interest.

Anarchist principles would also apply to the issues that extend beyond the town, such as the use of committees and delegates to assemblies at the level of federations of regions and industries. These would have the role of working out policies

to be taken back down to the town assemblies where the voting would occur. In other words even the remnant state-level decisions (e.g., concerning steel works, railways, national security, etc.) would ultimately be made by citizens.

#### 4.11. *The new values*

Obviously this vision could not possibly work unless there had been a huge change in values. It requires a world view which is basically collectivist, cooperative and concerned to nurture other individuals and the community. Most difficult of course is that it cannot work unless acquisitiveness is replaced by satisfaction with what is sufficient.

The need for a new world view has been recognised within the de-growth movement, for instance in Latouche's reference to a "new imaginary". A major and probably distinctive strength claimed for The Simpler Way vision is its emphasis on the alternative sources of life satisfaction that would be enabled, including security (e.g., from unemployment, economic depression, poverty and "exclusion"), a relaxed pace, a nurturing community, participation in community self-government, growing and making and creating things, being respected for work that makes a valued contribution, living in a beautiful landscape and a leisure-rich environment, having access to artists and craftsmen, enjoying a rich and varied cultural life including festivals and celebrations and having much time to devote to personal development – and having the peace of mind that comes from knowing that you are not part of the global problem. The claim here is that we could easily ensure a far higher quality of life than is now experienced in consumer society.

To summarise, the argument has been that when the grossly unsustainable and unjust nature of consumer-capitalist society is understood it becomes clear that the only way out has to be via a Simpler Way of some kind. Few on the left or in green circles seem to realise this.

#### 4.12. *Implications for transition theory and practice*

Following is a brief indication of some important implications of the foregoing analyses for the transition process. Again the claim is that these are inescapable logical consequences of the initial limits analysis of our situation and of the nature of the alternative that must be sought. In general these implications contradict the assumptions underlying the current activities of green, left and mainstream efforts to solve global problems. (Transition theories and strategies are discussed at some length in Trainer [2].)

- There is no point in working to take state power, either within the parliamentary system, or by force and revolution. Even if the Prime Minister and cabinet suddenly came to hold all the appropriate ideas and values, they could not make the required changes. In fact they would be quickly ejected from office if they tried. The changes can only come from the bottom, via slow development of the ideas, understandings, and values within ordinary people, leading them to begin building and taking control of their local economies. These crucial ideas, values and intentions cannot come to be except through a lengthy process of learning the new ways from experience in the places where people live.

Thus our strategy must differ from the classic left/Marxist focus on building a political movement that will take over the state and then reorganise society from the centre, perhaps with a heavy hand (although Marx thought that in time the need for a central authoritarian state would fade away). That made more sense when the goal seemed to be to shift energy-intensive, centralised and industrialised systems from capitalist control to "socialist" control.

- Working for green parties to get green candidates elected is not the best use of scarce energy. The necessary radical changes cannot be brought about through parliaments, given the dominant ideology and the role of the state. The task is to change that ideology, and that is not best done by working in the electoral political arena. Green parties and movements are now almost entirely merely reformist; they do not challenge growth, market forces or affluence and they are not calling for radical structural changes away from affluent consumer-capitalist society. (See the excellent critique by Smith [18].)
- We do not have to get rid of consumer-capitalist society before we can begin to build the new society. At this point in time fighting directly against the system is not going to contribute much to fundamental change. (Sometimes it is necessary to fight against immediate threats.) The way to transcend the consumer-capitalist system in the long run is to *ignore it to death*, i.e., to turn away from it as much as is possible and to start building its replacement and persuading people to come across. As the Anarchists say, we must work to "Prefigure" the good society here and now within the old, and thereby develop the required vision in more and more people.
- The main target, the main problem group, the basic block to progress, is not the corporations or the capitalist class. They have their power because people in general grant it to them. The problem group, the key to transition, is people in general. If they came to see how extremely unacceptable consumer-capitalist society is, and to see that The Simpler Way is the path to liberation, then the present system would be quickly abandoned. The battle is therefore one of ideology or awareness. The task is to help people to see that radical change is necessary and attractive, so that they enthusiastically set about building the new local economies.

Kropotkin and Tolstoy stressed this grass-roots perspective, recognising the irrelevance of striving for state power. The remarkable achievements of the Spanish Anarchist collectives in the 1930s were the work of "ordinary" people in whom the



necessary ideas and values had been developed over many previous decades, enabling them to quickly and effectively organise local control when the opportunity came [19].

- There will be no significant change while the supermarket shelves remain well stocked. Only serious scarcity will jolt people into action. If/when a petroleum shortage impacts it will concentrate minds wonderfully. But when it comes the window of opportunity could be brief and risky. If things deteriorate too far too fast there could easily be too much chaos for sense to prevail and for cooperative local alternative systems to be organised.
- The increasing difficulties of consumer-capitalist society will force us towards small, local economies whether we like it or not. Local farm, jobs and cooperative systems and frugal ways will tend to be set up as petroleum dwindles and transport and travel become too costly.
- Therefore the top priorities for anyone concerned about the fate of the planet must be to contribute to the development of the required radical global consciousness.
- The most effective way to do this is to plunge into building elements of The Simpler Way, here and now, where we live. In the last thirty years many have begun to build, live in and experiment with the new practices and settlements. When things begin to shake loose we will need to have established enough impressive examples so that people can see there is a better alternative, and begin moving into it.

The main reason why we should engage in this building is not to bring more of the new institutions into existence – it is to be in the best possible position to gain the access that will enable us to influence the thinking of people. By working with them on local projects we will be able to help them to see that we must eventually go far beyond more community gardens etc. and embrace radical system change. We urgently need to accumulate experience and wisdom on how best to go about involvement in local action which helps people to see the need for the big structural changes.

The most promising development to work within is the rapidly growing Transition Towns Movement. If a transition to a sustainable and just world is achieved it will be through a movement of this general kind. But much has to be done to get the movement to go beyond its present (diverse, important and inspiring) concerns to become more clearly focused on the major long term structural changes that are required. Most relevant here is the goal of taking control of the local economy away from the market and ensuring that cooperative and participatory processes deal with local basic needs. Our task is to work within such movements to establish radical system change as the ultimate vision and goal. (For a critique of the Transition Towns movement, see Trainer [20].)

- The frontier for this revolution is not international or even national. It is suburban. Some action to change international systems will be needed but it is a mistake to focus on trying to get governments or international agencies to make the changes for us, (which is what many within the World Social Forum for instance are doing.)
- It could be a remarkably peaceful revolution. . . if enough people can be helped to see the sense of moving to The Simpler Way. The strategy sketched does not involve risk or danger or heroism or violence. The corporations, banks and ruling classes will probably soon be grappling with the lack of resources, environmental crises, chronic recession/depression and the general breakdown of their systems. They will not have the resources to block the initiatives people will be taking up in thousands of towns and suburbs. The rich and the corporations will have no power if enough of us decide to ignore them and to build our own local systems. They cannot run armies and secret police forces very well without lots of oil.
- Working to build elements of the Simpler Way here and now provides the best possibility of maintaining morale and enthusiasm. This strategy enables us to practice and enjoy aspects of the new society right from the beginning of the revolutionary era.

## 5. Conclusion

It is of the utmost importance that the global predicament should be accurately diagnosed and that the best alternative goals and means to them should be clearly worked out. In The Transition it is argued at length that much of the current thinking within critical circles on these issues is mistaken. The foregoing pages attempt to show that the general “limits” analysis of our predicament is overwhelmingly convincing, and leaves no option but to embrace some kind of Simpler Way. Few if any current discussions of the global situation argue this general solution, or derive its implications for transition strategy. Most, especially from left and green quarters, would reject it. It has been boldly asserted here to facilitate its critical assessment and to challenge those who hold significantly different views to show what its inadequacies might be.

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