

Simpler way transition theory

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Abstract

Industrialised societies have far exceeded sustainable levels of production, consumption, resource use and ecological impact. It is not generally understood that this means solutions must involve De-growth to much simpler lifestyles and systems. This makes the goals and the means of the required transition unlike any those in any previous revolution. Industrialised, globalised, competitive, individualistic, acquisitive and market-driven society must be replaced by mostly small localized communities maximising self-sufficiency and self-government within cooperative communities embracing and frugal non-material values. The implications for the transition process are also radical. Successful strategy cannot focus on political action within existing decision making institutions, confronting the ruling class, taking state power or resorting to physical force. The required changes cannot be made unless they are widely seen to be desirable. Thus this is primarily a cultural revolution. Therefore a sound theory of transition will be quite different to that assumed by conventional analysts, "green" activists, "populists" or those within the Marxist/socialist camp. A major element within the Simpler Way theory is the claim that official decision making institutions and procedures are incapable of bringing about the required changes. System collapse is therefore highly likely and desirable transition can only be achieved if sufficient commitment to The Simpler Way has previously been built.

The situation: The nature of the required transition.

It is necessary to begin by focusing on the enormous and poorly understood magnitude of the global sustainability situation. Major global problems including resource depletion, environmental destruction, deprivation of the Third World, resource wars and deteriorating social cohesion, cannot be solved unless the amount of producing and consuming going on is dramatically reduced, probably by 90%. There are two lines of reasoning leading to this conclusion, one to do with resource and ecological limits, and the other to do with the nature of the economy.

The Situation: 1 - The limits to growth.

Following is an overview of the case that present rich world per capita levels of GDP probably have to be cut to around 10%. (For the detailed case see TSW: *The Limits to Growth*.)

The commonly cited "Ecological Footprint" index shows that to provide the average Australian with food, settlement area, water and energy takes about 7 ha of productive land (World Wildlife Fund, 2018.) If by 2050 the expected 9.8 billion people were to have risen to the present "living standard" in Australia, and the planet's amount of productive land is the same as it is today (this is highly unlikely), then the amount for humans to use per capita would be 0.8 ha. In other words Australians today are using about ten times the amount per capita that would be possible for all to use.

There are other indices which yield worse multiples. The figures given by Hickel (2018) show that for materials consumption the ratio is 2.5 times as bad as for productive land. Wiedmann

et al. (2014) state a similar conclusion; the average per capita consumption of the ten main iron ore and aluminium consuming nations is around 80 times the average of all the rest.

However this has only been an indication of *the present* grossly unsustainable situation. To this must be added the fundamental and universal commitment to ceaseless growth in production, consumption, trade, investment, “living standards”, wealth and GDP. The impossible implications are easily demonstrated. If 9.8 billion people were to rise to the GDP per capita Australians would have in 2050 given 3% p.a. economic growth, then total world economic output would be approaching *18 times* the present amount. But the present amount is grossly unsustainable: the WWF estimates that even now we would need to harvest from 1.7 planet Earths to meet current resource demand sustainably.

Note that in future resource availability is likely to be significantly diminished compared when the above numbers were derived.

Rejection of this limits to growth case involves the belief that technical advance will deal with the associated problems, that is, enable continued increase in production and consumption while bringing environmental impacts down to sustainable levels. It is not difficult to show the extreme implausibility of this claim. The core assumption is that resource use can be “decoupled” from growth in economic output or GDP, i.e., that technical advances can bring resource and environmental impacts down to sustainable levels while enabling continued GDP growth. But the above figures show the enormity of the reductions that would be required. Impact rates per unit of GDP would have to be cut to the region of 2% of present rates by 2050. More importantly, the general finding of the many studies of “decoupling” find that despite constant effort to improve efficiency and productivity, growth of GDP is accompanied by growth of resource use. (See the extensive review by Parrique et al., 2019.)

To summarize, the overwhelmingly important conclusion to be drawn from the limits to growth analysis is that the overshoot, the degree of unsustainability, is so great that a sustainable society cannot be defined other than in terms of De-growth to levels of per capita resource use, production, consumption and GDP that are in the region of one-tenth or less of present Australian per capita levels. Few analyses focus on this multiple, and therefore few recognize the profound implications for thinking about the form a sustainable society must take, or for the transition path to it. It is the foundational premise in the following discussion of Simpler Way transition theory.

The Situation: 2 – The limits to capitalism

It is clear from the above discussion of limits that the present economic system is a major element in the causal chain, and that a sustainable economy must not just be a steady state economy but one which has undergone De-growth down to a small fraction of present levels of production for sale. The present economy cannot do this. Growth is one of its indispensable, defining characteristics. Capitalism involves constant accumulation of capital and thus the imperative to find additional investment outlets for it.

In addition, the required economy could not be driven by market forces. This mechanism inevitably generates inequality, injustice, and wealth maximisation. It allocates scarce resources and goods to richer people and nations, simply because they can pay more for

them. Similarly it determines that “development” is driven by what will maximize the profits of investors in the global economy, not by the needs of individuals, societies and ecosystems.

The present economy leaves as much as possible to be determined by market forces. However a satisfactory society that operated within severe biophysical limits would have to carefully plan and regulate the use of very scarce resources. Its economy would have to be at least predominantly “socialized”, in some form.

The justification for the economy’s distribution and development effects has been the claim that eventually the wealth it generates will “trickle down” to enrich all. Apart from the many other challenges to this rationale, the foregoing discussion of limits rules it out as there is no possibility of global resources enabling growth to the point where trickle down has lifted all to acceptable living standards.

There would be considerable agreement that even though the effects of limits and scarcity have not yet impacted heavily, the present economy is not heading in the direction of sustainability and justice, It has now led to disturbingly high global levels of debt, inequality, resource conflicts, social breakdown and discontent. The 1% have risen to extreme wealth while the take home pay of the average American worker has hardly risen in forty years. Growth and productivity rates have been in slow decline for decades and the advent of robotics is likely to drive aggregate wage levels and thus demand down and therefore exacerbate these deteriorating conditions and trends. Above all loom the prospects of peak “fracking” and thus “peak oil” and “peak debt”. (See below.)

The system’s only recipe for salvation is more rapid growth, the very thing that is tightening the limits noose. It is therefore clear that the economic system is a major generator of global sustainability problems and that it is not capable of solving them. Thus there is a strong case that a sustainable and just economy cannot be a capitalist economy.

The profound significance of the foregoing analyses could hardly be exaggerated. They show that a sustainable and just society cannot be achieved unless many fundamental components of the present society are more or less scrapped and replaced by extremely radical alternatives. What is required goes far beyond the claims of the De-growth movement. (For a more detailed explanation see *De-growth, a Friendly Critique*.) For instance, given the above need for a possibly factor ten cut in per capita resource consumption a mere *reduction in scale within existing systems* cannot be the answer; it can only be achieved by change to radically different systems.

What then is the alternative?

The Simpler Way answer to this question has been detailed in various places and will only be briefly summarized here. (See TSW: [The Alternative, Sustainable Society](#)) The argument is that if the limits are as severe as has been outlined above then the only way to get the per capita resource use rates right down while ensuring a good quality of life for all is through transition mostly to settlements in which are core elements are;

- Communities that are small in scale, closely integrated, highly self-sufficient, running their own local economies through cooperative and participatory processes.

- Economies which enable local people to gear local resources to meeting needs, with low dependence on imports from the national economy. That means profit maximization would not drive these economies.
- Voluntary committees, co-operatives and working bees which develop and maintain infrastructures, harvest from community gardens etc.
- Mostly small community self government via town assemblies and participatory democratic processes.
- Mostly low intermediate and traditional technologies, e.g., much use of hand tools.
- High levels of community and social cohesion. No unemployment; all have a livelihood. Committees oversee areas such as aged care, youth welfare, water recycling, orchards, leisure provision.
- Extensive development of commons providing many free goods especially via “edible landscapes”.
- Small scale and proximity enables integrated functions, e.g., kitchen scraps can go to nearby poultry, and animal manures can go to compost heaps, fish ponds and methane digesters, at negligible dollar, transport, energy and bureaucratic costs.
- Informal “work” and administration by community members eliminates much need for costly professional input, e.g., in aged care and education.
- Large cashless, free goods and gifting sectors.
- Little need for transport, enabling bicycle access to work and conversion of most suburban roads to commons.
- For many, the need to work for a monetary income only one or two days a week.
- Predominantly collectivist values, prioritizing the welfare of the locality.
- Above all, non-material sources of life satisfaction, contentment with frugal material “living standards”.
- Beyond these settlements there would still be “state” bureaucracies dealing with for instance railways, some large scale and mass production industries, such as for steel and cement, universities to train professionals, and (small) cities. However their scale would be greatly reduced, although resources available for socially useful R and D could in fact be significantly increased.

Thousands of people now live in these kinds of conditions within the global Eco-village Movement. (See [GEN](#)). The government of Senegal is working to convert 1,400 villages to these principles. (St Onge, 2015.) The *Remaking Settlements* study (Trainer, 2019) derives estimates supporting the claim that these procedures could cut the energy, dollar and footprint costs typical of a Sydney suburb by more than 90%, while improving the quality of life. Reductions of this magnitude are achieved by the Dancing Rabbit Eco-village in Missouri (Lockyer, 2017.)

It is reasonable to ask whether this vision is viable given that half the world’s people now live in cities. Can it be done in Tokyo? The first point to make is that it is our best option. It gives us a far better chance of shifting all people to sustainable and just ways than they have in Tokyo today. Secondly, the goal would be to defuse big cities by enabling many people to move to rural regions, establishing villages and towns on lands previously dominated by agribusiness. But Permaculture, urban agriculture and related approaches make possible remarkably high yields in densely populated areas, and in regions with poor soils by use of animals and plants and the recycling all nutrients including human “wastes”. A fishing industry can be located in small backyard tanks throughout a neighbourhood. Rooftops, brick walls and concrete roads can be gardened by using containers. In a highly self-sufficient economy

most urban roads could be dug up and converted to gardens, ponds and orchards. These kinds of practices can make most of present city suburban areas viable. Community gardens in Havana produce 20 tonnes of food per ha. each year, twelve times the average Australian wheat yield. (Again for numerical reasoning see the *Remaking Settlements* study.)

The argument so far has been that when the discussion begins with an understanding of the situation in terms of biophysical limits, the logically inescapable conclusion is that only settlements of this general kind can enable a sustainable and just society. This transition goal contradicts those driving previous revolutions.

This society cannot solve the problems

The conventional assumption is that the problems can and will be solved by the institutions and processes of present society, such as by parliaments implementing effective policies in line with international agreements to cut carbon emissions, and ordinary people accepting legislated adjustments in their circumstances. But from the perspective of The Simpler Way this expectation is now clearly mistaken. Given the foregoing account of the magnitude and nature of the problems, the institutions and political process of this society are not capable of rationally facing up to and making the enormous and disruptive changes required. Consider the following reasons.

1. The enormity of the changes required

Even the De-growth literature generally fails to adequately represent the magnitude and difficulty of the reductions required. If rich world volumes of production and thus consumption of resources must be cut by up to 90%, then *most* of the present quantities of industry, transport, travel, construction, shopping, exporting, investing etc. has to be phased out. How is this going to be done? It cannot be a matter of closing a coal mine and transferring the workers to other jobs, because the amounts of production, work and jobs have to be cut dramatically. It would have to involve the creation and massive implementation of totally new social structures and procedures, whereby most people could live well without producing anywhere near so much as before. This could not be done unless it involved historically quite unprecedented and rapid cultural change, to widespread public understanding and acceptance of the extremely radically new systems and values, and a willingness to build and operate the new local systems.

2. There isn't time

Even if the understanding and the will existed, it is difficult to imagine that the required changes could be carried out in a few decades. They involve reversing what have been some of the fundamental drivers of Western civilization over the last two hundred years. Yet it is probable that the following three main global threats each give us no more than ten years if they cannot be eliminated.

2a. Carbon. According to various estimates the “carbon emission budget” associated with a 67% chance of limiting temperature rise to under 1.5 degrees will have been exhausted within about twelve years. (Levin, 2018, Steffen, 2020.) Many insist that this one in three chance of failure as far too high to accept. A more responsible target would significantly reduce the budget, and the time left to move off fossil fuels. Note also that these estimates do not take

into account the positive feedbacks, such as warming causing loss of snow causing absorption of more solar heat. Currently there are around 490 new coal-fired power stations being built, with 790 planned. (Global Coal Plant Tracker, 2020.)

By 2050 energy demand is likely to be around 890 EJ/y, 56% higher than at present. (Minqui, 2019.) Input from renewable sources would have to increase by 27 EJ/y but the current rate of increase is only 0.72 EJ/y. (Our World in Data, 2019.) This equates to building 1.5 million 2 MW wind turbines every year, costing over 6% of world GDP not including the cost of storage, grid strengthening etc. And plant built now will probably only last 20-25 years, half as long as coal-fired plant. It does not appear likely that satisfactory renewable energy solutions can be found for emissions from the heavy land transport, agriculture, fugitive, military, shipping and aircraft sectors. These numbers would seem to completely rule out any possibility that acceptable emissions targets can be met in the time available.

2b. Oil. It is likely that a major and permanent collapse in oil availability will occur, possibly within a decade. (Ahmed, 2017.) It is generally recognized that the availability of conventional petroleum peaked around 2005 and has declined significantly since then. World supply has continued to increase due to the remarkable rise in output from the advent of “fracking” in the US tight oil regions. However there are strong reasons for expecting this source to peak and decline soon. (Hughes 2016, Cunningham 2019, Whipple 2019, Cobb, 2019.) The major producers have not made a profit in any year of operation while accumulating a debt of over one quarter of a trillion dollars. It seems that an oil price high enough for producers to break even is too high for the economy to avoid recession. Unless there are major and unforeseen technical breakthroughs reducing costs, which are not thought to be likely, at some point in the near future lenders will probably cease providing capital.

In addition Ahmed (2017) presents a persuasive case that most Middle East oil producing nations are encountering such serious ecological, food, water, population growth and climate problems that their capacity to export could be largely eliminated within ten years. Meanwhile the amount of energy it takes to produce a barrel of oil is increasing significantly (Brockway, et al., 2019). Despite these alarming observations the precariousness and urgency of the petroleum situation is attracting little attention.

2c. Debt. After remaining more or less stable for two decades, global debt has doubled in the last two, is now equivalent to around three times global GDP, is far higher than before the GFC, and is regarded by various economists as inevitably bound to crash soon (Brown, 2018).

Many other biophysical difficulties are reducing the capacity of economies to deal with the accelerating problems tightening the limits noose, including water scarcity, fisheries decline, deteriorating mineral grades, accelerating costs of ecological disruption including climate change, agricultural soil damage and loss, ocean acidification, and sea rise. A holocaust of extinctions appears to have begun, now including insects and thus pollination of food crops. These and other factors will cut into the diminishing resources available to apply to solving system difficulties.

3. Existing political institutions are not capable of making changes of the magnitude required

Existing systems are reasonably good at making small changes. Elections are usually won by small margins so governments cannot afford to irritate significant numbers of voters or they will be thrown out. But they cannot adopt policies that go against the vital interests of significant sectors.

This situation is partly a consequence of the self-interested, competitive, individualistic ethos built into present cultural and political systems. Burdens are not shared appropriately but are typically left to groups least able to avoid them. Because dealing with the predicament effectively would be seen to involve painful adjustments on a massive scale people would be acutely sensitive to perceived inequities in the adjustments they were called upon to make. Fierce resistance, disputes and appeals would surely proliferate over the new options presented, the changes in locations, and especially the dramatically reduced levels of income, purchasing and consumption.

4. The problems interact, compound and positively feedback

Often solving one problem increases difficulties in other areas, especially energy demand. More importantly problems often have multiplicative interactive effects. For instance Ahmed's analysis of Middle Eastern oil producers shows how climate change, drought, rising temperatures, soil loss and rapid population growth are mutually reinforcing to generate intractable challenges for governments. Their declining capacity to cope leads to repression in an effort to contain discontent and maintain order, which feeds back to generate more discontent, further disrupting productive systems and capacity to cope.

Thus the difficulties now being experienced due to climate change are likely to be swamped soon by a tidal wave of many compounding positive feedback effects. Several analysts have detailed how the combined effects are likely to lead to sudden and catastrophic breakdown in the global economy. (For instance, Mason 2003, Korowicz, 2012, Morgan, 2013, Kunstler, 2005, Greer, 2005, Bardi, 2011 and Duncan 2013.)

5. Effective action could not be taken unless governments were predominantly "socialist"

The required massive restructuring could not be carried out unless powerful centralized states could drive them through despite strenuous resistance. As noted, current political systems usually determine that governments have only small electoral margins and thus are well designed for stability as they enable small sectors to block changes which threaten their interests. Needless to say it is not likely that widespread public readiness to accept "socialist" governments with the required powers to implement vast and unprecedented change is going to emerge in time, unless governments acquire very strong and authoritarian powers. It is not plausible that such governments with a De-growth program could be elected within the present pro-growth and pro-"liberal" ethos.

Resistance can be expected to be especially fierce on the part of those with most to lose and most power to thwart De-growth, viz. the rich. A sufficient amount of De-growth would mean the elimination of most of the investment opportunities yielding their wealth. They own the media and the think tanks, (and it could be said the politicians to whose campaign funds they

have donated.) They have the power to move their factories overseas and thus devastate regions, currency values and trade balances if governments do not adopt policies that suit them. Many would say that the transnational corporate and banking elite have long since taken control of the global economy and will not, indeed cannot tolerate significant deviation from policies that maximize growth in profitable investment opportunities.

6. *The conventional world view is oriented in the wrong direction*

The dominant world view takes for granted that solutions to problems must involve high-tech “end of pipe” fixes that deal with the effects of unsustainable practices, as distinct from moving away from the practices that generate those effects. Proposals must not and need not interfere with growth. The automatic tendency is to go for more complex, energy and capital-intensive supply side technologies. Minerals getting scarce ... then mine the moon.

The world view also takes it for granted that individual and national progress equals getting wealthier, that purchasing is the key to the good life, that competitive self-interest is socially progressive and collectivism is mistaken, that luxury and indulgence are attractive, and thus that frugality and self-sufficiency are not. Bigger houses are preferable to smaller ones, globalisation is desirable because it enables access to more and cheaper goods and services, if you can afford it then it is in order to consume it, travel is morally unproblematic, small farming is for peasants, the future of food is high-tech agribusiness preferably in multi-story greenhouses, intense specialization is the future so the Jack-of-all-trades will not be needed, simplicity and frugality are not fashionable and why repair it when you can throw it away and buy another one cheaply.

In addition modernity has developed structures and systems that would now make it extremely difficult if not impossible to implement the necessary solutions, notably evident in the city where high rise buildings and freeways have eliminated backyard fruit and vegetable gardening and have made energy-intensive transport, water, sewer, power etc. systems essential. Nations have become heavily dependent on trade to secure things they once made for themselves, meaning vast commitments to air and sea transport systems. Suburbs have become leisure deserts meaning that resort must be made to energy-intensive globalized sources, including international holiday travel.

Perhaps most problematic is the absence of any notion of ordinary people taking control over the running of their own neighbourhoods, suburbs and towns. Councils and state governments decide what is to be done and they look after maintenance and attend to any problems that arise. Post modernism focuses attention on trivia, predominantly electronic but also in the form of sport, fashion, Facebook gossip, movies, celebrities and spectacles. Individuals consume fleeting thrills, which add to the factors distracting from any sense of collective concern to get together to do something about shared local problems. These taken for granted outlooks and predispositions constitute a mentality that is not conducive to the required transition.

But these reasons pale beside the one that is most significant.

7. The fundamental nature of the predicament and therefore what has to be done to solve it is not recognized

Few people have any understanding of the limits to growth situation and the need for large-scale De-growth. The almost universally held supreme goal among virtually all those in executive government and associated bureaucracies, in the economics profession, in the media, and by the general public, remains indubitable commitment to limitless increase in production and consumption. A now vast limits to growth literature accumulated over the past 50 years has heavily documented the self-destructive irrationality of this commitment, but the mainstream has more or less completely ignored it and has little or no awareness of the situation.

These considerations would seem to constitute a strong case that this society is not capable of dealing with the predicament. Thus the fundamental premise in Simpler Way transition theory is that there is no prospect of achieving transition to a sustainable and just society deliberately and rationally via official policy making institutions and processes. The only way the transition might be achieved will be discussed below.

The inadequacy of common transition theories

If the foregoing account is accepted little space needs to be given to assessing the merits of conventional and generally green thinking about transition strategy. These are not based on the realization that the limits to growth means there must be De-growth to some kind of simpler way, and they assume that the required changes can be achieved via the normal decision making processes of existing society. However more needs to be said about the socialist perspective, given that it derives from long established Marxist theory on social change.

What can we learn from Marxist transition theory?

From The Simpler Way perspective the answer is, much that helps us understand the situation, but unfortunately not much that is useful for this unique revolution. Marx's analysis of capitalism and its contradictions, dynamics and fate are of great importance, but his ideas on the revolutionary goal and the transition process are seriously mistaken, due primarily to the advent of limits.

But first some of the valuable insights. Possibly the most important one is Marx's view that capitalism has built into its foundations contradictions that will in time lead it to self-destruct. The most serious of these would seem to be that capitalism inevitably generates greater inequality. A few now possess most of the world's wealth while large numbers in even the richest countries struggle, and are not seeing significant increase in their incomes. Hence the rise of the discontent that has led to Brexit, Trump, right wing extremism and the French "Yellow vests". Thus it seems Marx was correct in saying capitalism would lead to increasing immiseration followed by trouble. Thus Marx provides important elements in Simpler Way transition theory, notably the notion that the dynamic built into the system's very nature will be the primary cause of its elimination.

Now what aspects of the transition issue do Marxists and the general Left get wrong. Unfortunately, from The Simpler Way perspective, just about all of them. Firstly they get the goal wrong. They have a long and unblemished record of striving to free the forces of production from the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production so that the throttles in the factories can be turned up enabling "...everyone to have a Mercedes." (This perspective is exemplified by Phillips, 2014.) The foregoing discussion shows that in most respects a satisfactory post-capitalist society must contradict the dominant socialist vision deriving from Marx. It cannot be capitalist but nor can it be highly industrialised, or state-centred or affluent or have a high or growing GDP.

When we turn to strategic implications almost all aspects of the standard "Marxist" vision can be seen to be mistaken. Firstly there is the dominant notion that the ruling class is to be overthrown by a determined vanguard party willing to use force to take state power, in order to then bring about the necessary changes. In most if not all revolutionary movements in recent history this was probably the correct and only option. But the goal in those cases was basically to take control over the productive apparatus and then to run it more effectively and justly, getting rid of the contradictions previously impeding output and distribution. However as explained above, that can no longer be the goal. It now has to be to reduce output and "living standards".

In addition that goal *cannot be achieved by the state*. It is a cultural problem, not primarily an economic or redistributive problem. It has to involve largely dismantling the existing industrial, trade, agricultural financial etc. systems and replacing them with smaller and radically different systems driven by citizens committed to radically new ideas and values. This cannot be done by force; it can only be achieved by people who understand and willingly accept simpler lifestyles and systems. The state cannot give or enforce the world view, values or dispositions without which such structural changes cannot be made. No amount of subsidies or information or secret police can make villagers cooperate enthusiastically and happily to plan and develop and run their thriving local economies.

Perhaps the major fault in Marx's view of transition was the complete failure to recognize the significance of this cultural factor. He saw transition solely as a matter of economics and power, of getting rid of the ruling class, of getting hold of state power and thus getting the capacity to force change through. As Avineri (1968) explains, he assumed that even after the state had been taken the masses would still hold the old capitalist world view, focused on better incomes, accepting bosses and alienating work conditions, being disciplined workers, being individualistic and competitive, and wanting affluence. Marx assumed that these dispositions could be attended to much later, during the slow transition from "socialism" to "communism". That might have made sense in a revolution involving violent takeover of industrial apparatus to be run by an authoritarian group intent on turning those throttles up, but it's not relevant to this revolution.

The Eco-socialist is strongly inclined to argue that if we had state power we could facilitate that change in consciousness, help people to see the need for localism, etc. But there is a major logical confusion here. No government with the required policy platform, one focused on transition to simpler systems and lifestyles and decimating the GDP, could get elected unless people in general had long before adopted the associated extremely new and radical world view. So the main task is to work on the development of that change in grass-roots consciousness, and if that succeeds to the point where the right kind of party is elected, the *revolution would have already been won*. The essence of this revolution is in the cultural

change, and if that is achieved then the taking of state power and the structural changes thereby enabled will best be seen as *consequences of* the revolution. Focusing on taking state power would not contribute much if at all to cultural change. This rejection of resort to force, power or violence, and turning to the awareness task is central in the strategic thinking of some notable Anarchists of the past, including Tolstoy, Gandhi and Kropotkin (Marshall, 1992).

Other criticisms of standard Marxist/socialist transition theory follow from this but will only be mentioned briefly here. One is the notion that capitalism must mature and be swept away before the new society can be built. However because the Simpler Way approach depends on the development of new ideas and values it must involve a period of slow emergence of these within the old system, and it does not assume that the scrapping of the old system is a step that has to be taken *prior to or separately from* building the new one.

The left has a fundamental faith in the importance and the role of the working class in the revolution. However there are a number of reasons why it is not likely to lead the coming revolution. Unfortunately the traditional class interests of workers in capitalist society do not align well with The Simpler Way. Workers are vitally dependent on wages and thus on the “health” of the economy. They are for better conditions, bigger pay packets enabling increased consumption, more jobs and production, more trade, a greater role for the state in running things, redistribution of wealth and provision of better “welfare” by the state. In general the working class is strongly in favour of economic growth.

This revolution is not just or primarily about liberating the worker from capitalism. It is about liberating all people from consumer-capitalist society. In addition, all people not just the working class, must be the revolutionary agents through their participation in and control of the development of the emerging new local communities.

Hence the major tactical principle would seem to be, “Do not confront capitalism”. This contradicts the socialist’s fundamental assumption that we must get rid of the old before the new can be built, on the rubble. However the historically unique situation we have now entered presents us with the need for a non-confrontational strategy, one that involves turning away and “ignoring capitalism to death”. (This does not deny the need to confront over specific threats, such as to log a forest.)

Capitalism cannot survive if people do not continue to purchase, consume and throw away at an accelerating rate. The Simpler Way strategy (in the present early Stage 1 of the revolution; see below) is to gradually build the alternative practices and systems which will enable more and more people to move out of the mainstream, to spurn consumer society, and to secure more of their material and social needs from the alternative systems and sources emerging within their neighbourhoods and towns. The hope must be that people will come across to The Simpler Way because as the resource, ecological and financial crises intensify and seriously disrupt supply to their supermarkets they will increasingly come to realise that this is their best, indeed their only option.

The revolutionary left is strongly inclined to dismiss this approach as naïve, on the grounds that if threatened by alternatives the rich and powerful will crush deviants. However in an era of deteriorating resource availability and increasing disorder it is not obvious that ruling elites will find it easy to do this. It will not be a matter of turning the police and army on rioting workers but of preventing large numbers of people in scattered towns and suburbs from

organizing cooperative gardens and committees and working bees. Versions of this turning away strategy are increasingly being endorsed and practiced, for instance among the large scale Andean peasant movements, most notably the Zapatistas, and the Rojavan Kurds. (See also, Appfel-Marglin, 1998, p. 39; Relocalise, 2009; Mies and Shiva, 1993; Benholdt-Thompson and Mies; 1999, Korten, 1999, p. 262; Rude, 1998, p. 53; Quinn, 1999, pp. 95, 137.)

What will happen?

Following is an attempt to sketch the most likely trajectory ahead, leading to conclusions regarding the way a desirable outcome might be achieved.

The multi-factored limits noose will tighten, hopefully slowly but probably too quickly. Many of its elements are gathering momentum and compounding to increase difficulties towards a time of great and terminal troubles. As explained, the key determinants of our near-term fate are the future of fracking and of debt. Most likely is a relatively sudden end of the debt-fueled tight oil venture which triggers a global debt crisis and a far more serious and possibly terminal global economic collapse than GFC1.

Many analysts have tried to draw attention to where these limits are heading. Mason (2003) for instance sees the many problematic trends culminating in “The 2030 Spike”, the title of his book. As noted above, among those who discuss the multi-dimensional global breakdown likely to be brought on before long by limits and scarcity are Korowicz (2012), Morgan (2013), Kunstler (2005), Greer (2005), Bardi (2011) and Duncan (2013).

The next collapse might not be the final one; some foresee “... a long and bumpy road down”. Randers (2012) expects the time to troubles to be around 2070. However Ahmed (2017) Mason (2003) and others give reasons to expect it to be before 2030. The hope must be for a protracted Goldilocks depression, one that is not so severe as to destroy the chances of salvage, but savage enough to jolt people into recognizing that they must shift to local, cooperative and frugal self-sufficiency.

The situation will at best be confused and chaotic, with governments and “leaders” continuing to not understand causes and quick to blame the wrong things. The present tendencies to right-wing populism and fascism will gain momentum. Privileged classes will scramble to support repressive measures to restore order and protect their security and property. Angry lower classes will call for strong leaders willing to break rules. (A recent survey found this to already be true of a majority of UK people; Walker, 2019.) Capitalism will again morph into its fascist form. There will not be sober, clear headed rational thinking about causes and solutions. Governments will be even less capable of analyzing or dealing with the situation effectively than they are now.

The international possibilities are similarly disturbing. Dominant powers will become more energetic in their efforts to control sources of scarce resources and markets. Third world governments are likely to allow greater environmental destruction and to resort to increasingly repressive measures to control dissent over deteriorating living conditions (Ahmed, 2017).

It clear that even now before most of the above mentioned limits factors have impacted significantly the global economy is in trouble. Long term profit rates have been falling, interest

rates have been lowered almost to zero in a futile effort to kick start the economy, and the wheels have been kept turning primarily by taking out and “spending” astronomical amounts of debt. Collins (2019) points out that the economy has already shifted into a “catabolic” or “cannibalistic” phase. As the capacity to do good business producing and selling useful things deteriorates, investors turn to activities that plunder the economy. It is as if a hardware firm starts selling its own roofing iron. The illicit drug industry and the Mafia are similar; rather than producing new wealth the owners of capital turn to ways of extracting previously produced wealth. The rise to domination by the financial industry is part of the syndrome, enabling profits from the investment of ever-rising wealth to take the form of rents on assets and services.

The hope has to be that these events will force large numbers of people to realizing that the system is irretrievably broken and can never be restored, but far more importantly to see that their only option is to organise cooperative needs-focused local economies as fast as they can. Their circumstances should make it obvious that they must cooperate and work out how to convert their localities into gardens, workshops, co-ops, orchards etc. They will see that they must set up committees and working bees and town meetings to decide what it's best to do. Most important will be the enforced shift in mentality, from being passive recipients of government, accepting rule by distant officials, to collectively taking control of their own fate.

Similarly there will be a rapid shift in expectations as people realise that they cannot have their old resource-squandering self-indulgent affluence back. They will see that they will have to be content with what is sufficient, and will have to cooperate and prioritise the common good, and avoid competing as individuals for selfish goals. (Ironically it is very likely that the experienced community and quality of life will immediately improve.) Things like this are already happening where Neoliberalism has had its most destructive effects, for instance in Detroit, the Catalan region, and in Greece.

The pre-figurers

The chances of a satisfactory outcome have been greatly increased over the last three decades by the emergence of the Eco-village and Transition Towns movements. There are now thousands of people living in highly self-sufficient intentional communities, and involved in efforts to make their towns more self-sufficient, cooperative and self-governing. This practical phenomenon is being accompanied by a large literature elaborating the theoretical case for local alternatives.

Here probably for the first time in history we are seeing the rapid spread of a “utopian” practice, mostly among ordinary people in rich and poor regions. A remarkable example is provided by the Catalan Integral Cooperative involving thousands of people in activities explicitly designed not to have anything to do with the market or the state. (TSW: *The Catalan Integral Cooperative*.) As was mentioned above, in the Third World many more are involved in developments such as the Via Campesino peasant movement, and the establishment of Eco-Villages in Senegal.

This scene provides us with the answer to the general question of transition strategy. What is to be done? The answer is, build Eco-villages and Transition Towns. This is the Anarchist principle of “pre-figuring”, that is, working on establishing the new systems here and now

within the old. Don't wait until the old system has been swept away and don't prioritise fighting head-on against it (Rai, 1995, p. 99; Pepper, 1996, pp. 36, 305; Bookchin, 1980, p. 263).

The point of pre-figuring can easily be misunderstood. It is not primarily to increase the number of post-revolutionary ways that exist, and the assumption is not that just setting up post-revolutionary arrangements one by one will lead to these eventually having replaced consumer-capitalist ways. The main point is educational/ideological. By becoming involved in the many emerging local initiatives activists are likely to be in the most effective position to acquaint participants and onlookers with the Simpler Way perspective, and with the need to eventually go on from the present localist preoccupations to the more distant Stage 2 problem of dealing with growth, the state, the market and the capitalist system. (See further below.) The point is in other words, cultural and educational. Establishing small examples of the radical new arrangements is likely to be the best way to help people to see the desirability of those ways, and to see the need to abandon conventional ideas, systems and values. Only when there is widespread acceptance of the new worldview will it be possible to make changes at the level of the state and the national and global economies.

Thus in this revolution it is necessary to think in terms of two stages. The focal concern in the present Stage 1 is slowly building in our towns a "Needs Driven Economy" under or beside the old "Profit Driven Economy", whereby people can devote local productive capacities to collectively meeting as many local needs as possible. The crucial sub-goal here is increasing the extent to which *citizens take control* of their town, as distinct from allowing their fate to be determined by distant politicians, bureaucrats, market forces and corporations.

Stage 2 of the revolution

Following is a brief indication of the direction the later events in the transition might take.

As local economies become more widespread and elaborate and as the global economy deteriorates it will become increasingly obvious that scarce national resources must be deliberately and rationally devoted to the production of basic necessities, as distinct from being left for market forces to allocate to the most profitable purposes. There will always be items that towns cannot produce for themselves. In general most of these can come from surrounding regions, including grain and dairy produce, tools and light machinery, various materials, appliances, glass and irrigation equipment (...although the *Remaking Settlements* study finds that surprisingly little would need to be imported from further afield.) However some will have to come from more distant sources such as steel and cement works. It will therefore be necessary for all towns and regions to be able to import these few but crucial items from the national economy, and to be able to produce some of them to export into it.

These conditions will generate the pressure that in time will force states to carry out revolutionary change in national economies. People will become acutely aware that scarce national resources must not be wasted but must be devoted to providing settlements and regions with the crucial materials and manufactures they cannot produce for themselves. This will require planning to distribute to all towns the opportunity to produce and export some few items, so that they can pay for their importation of those few they need. There will also be tasks and functions that must be planned and administered from the centre, such as allocating water use throughout a river basin, and facilitating the movement of workers from

moribund industries to new ones, again bearing in mind that the total volume of producing going on will have to be cut to a small fraction of the present amount.

Thus the survival imperatives emanating from the grass roots will force central governments to greatly increase intervention, planning, regulation and restructuring. It might at first sight seem that this means the emergence of or need for greatly increased state power. On the contrary it *is likely to be a process whereby power is taken away from the centre, and whereby citizens exercise increasing control over central governments, via their town assemblies*. The tone will shift from making requests on the state to making demands, and then to taking increasing power over the planning and decision making processes.

It will be increasingly recognized that the local is the only level where the right decisions for self-sufficient communities can be made. Thus the remnant state-level agencies will in time become controlled by and servants of the towns and regions, run via the typical Anarchist processes involving thoroughly participatory town self-government. Eventually all significant decisions including concerning national policies, will be made by town assemblies voting on options brought down to the town level from conferences of delegates from towns and regions (drawing on professional expertise where appropriate.)

The chances of the transition proceeding as has been outlined here are not at all promising, but the argument has been that this is the path that must be worked for. One of its merits is that it envisages a transition that could be entirely peaceful and non-authoritarian.

A major issue that has not been addressed in this account is the likely response to the coming breakdown by the capitalist class and its associates. Only brief reference can be made here to some relevant themes. The breakdown will write off vast amounts of debt, investment, corporations and assets, thus eliminating much of the capitalist class. (As in Anarchist Spain in the 1930s many bankrupt factory owners will be happy to join community collectives, transferring their assets to them.) What remains of capitalism will certainly attempt to shift to its fascist form, but resource scarcity along with drastically impoverished “effective demand” will thwart this. Many regions, especially in the Third World will be cut adrift as plantations, sweat shops and mines cease to be profitable, and thus will be liberated to follow the Zapatistas. Attempts to impose savage “austerity” on rich world masses are likely. The outcome will depend on the extent to which people have come to clearly understand that their fate depends on establishing localism. If its advocates and pre-figurers fail to spread the vision widely in the short time there is left to do this, then the longer term trajectory will be towards war lords semi-feudalism and large scale population die-off.

It should be evident that both the nature of the alternative society that has been sketched here, and the transition path to it, embody classical Anarchist principles. In the coming era of limits, scarcity and frugality only communities running on Anarchist principles can deliver a sustainable and just society, and the path to the establishment of those communities cannot be other than via pre-figuring and ordinary citizens in existing settlements building thoroughly participatory arrangements. Neither the new society nor the path to it can involve significant degrees of centralization. The appropriate world view is therefore Eco-Anarchism, rather than Eco-Socialism.

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