

Prosperous Descent

Samuel Alexander

PROSPEROUS DESCENT: CRISIS AS OPPORTUNITY IN AN AGE OF LIMITS

Published by the Simplicity Institute, Melbourne, 2015

www.simplicityinstitute.org

No part of this work may be reproduced, recorded, or transmitted in any form, whether in print or electronically, without the express written permission of the copyright owner.

Permission to distribute on a non-for-profit basis may be granted upon request.

Copyright © 2015 Samuel Alexander

Cover design by Andrew Doodson

All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-0-9941606-0-7

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT *PROSPEROUS DESCENT*:

‘*Prosperous Descent* is a creative and important contribution to a movement with surprising momentum, one that challenges the very notions of progress and wellbeing on which our societies are constructed. It is a radical challenge in the best sense of the term. We can all learn a great deal from Samuel Alexander, both about our societies and about how to live our lives.’

– **Clive Hamilton, author of *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* and *Growth Fetish***

‘In this treatise, Samuel Alexander strives with great persuasiveness and using all the right arguments to convince us to switch from the misery of the present into the utopia of frugal abundance, to escape the Apocalypse looming.’

– **Serge Latouche, author of *Farewell to Growth***

‘This timely book reminds us that the good life is the simple life; a life within limits. It is a truly interdisciplinary volume, covering topics from the macroeconomics of a planned degrowth, to the ecology of planetary limits, to the sociology of voluntary simplifiers. A must read.’

– **Giorgos Kallis, co-editor of *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era***

‘Consumer capitalist society is characterised by a deep feeling of anxiety and isolation. It persists by inculcating a deep sense of disempowerment and diluting our radical imagination. The strength of this book lies in its ability to delicately weave together not only the theory but also the practice of simplicity. It carries with it the moral weight of generations of people who have demonstrated a different way of living and the shallowness of consumer society.’

– **Peter D. Burdon, author of *Earth Jurisprudence* and co-editor of *Wild Law: In Practice***

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	ix
1. A Critique of Techno-Optimism <i>Efficiency without sufficiency is lost</i>	1
2. Post-Growth Economics <i>A paradigm shift in progress</i>	29
3. Planned Economic Contraction <i>The emerging case for degrowth</i>	63
4. Degrowth Implies Voluntary Simplicity <i>Overcoming barriers to sustainable consumption</i>	89
5. Reimagining the Good Life Beyond Consumer Culture <i>A revolution in consciousness</i>	113
6. Ted Trainer and The Simpler Way <i>A sympathetic critique</i>	135
7. The New Economics of Oil <i>Energy, economics, and the twilight of growth</i>	159
8. The Paradox of Oil <i>The cheaper it is, the more it costs</i>	175
9. Voluntary Simplification as an Alternative to Collapse <i>Prosperous descent in the Anthropocene</i>	199
10. Radical Simplicity and the Middle Class <i>Exploring the lifestyle implications of a 'Great Disruption'</i>	229
11. Voluntary Simplicity as an Aesthetics of Existence <i>The art of ethics in a consumer age</i>	253
12. The Hour is Darkest Just Before Dawn <i>Crisis as opportunity</i>	293
<i>Appendix – Contents of SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY</i>	299
<i>About the Author</i>	301

Acknowledgements

These collected essays are an outgrowth of work initiated in 2006, when I began working on my doctoral thesis, 'Property Beyond Growth: Toward a Politics of Voluntary Simplicity'. Since then the ideas and perspectives they express have developed in the process of establishing and teaching a course called 'Consumerism and the Growth Economy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives', which forms part of the Masters of Environment at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Over this time, most of the essays have been published in peer-reviewed journals or other academic publications, as detailed below:

A version of Ch. 1 was published as a *Post Carbon Pathways* report, with the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute (January, 2014); a version of Ch. 2 was published in *Arena* (2014) 41/42: 93-122; a version of Ch. 3 was published in *Environmental Politics* (2012) 21(3): 349-368; versions of chapters 4, 8, and 10 were published as *Simplicity Institute Reports* 12b, 15a, and 12p, respectively; a version of Ch. 5 was published in the *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability* (2011) 7(3): 133-150; a version of Ch. 6 was published in *Capitalism Nature Socialism* (2014) 25(2): 95-111; a version of Ch. 7 was published as an *Issues Paper* with the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute (March, 2014); a version of Ch. 9 was published in *Foresight* (2014) 16(6): 550-566 ('Descent Pathways' Special Issue). I am grateful for the opportunity to reprint. Chapters 11 and 12 have not previously been published.

In writing these essays I was encouraged, challenged, and inspired by my colleagues and fellow authors at the Simplicity Institute, especially Ted Trainer, Mark Burch, Simon Ussher, David Holmgren, Serge Latouche, Esther Alloun, and Johnny Rutherford. I owe special thanks to Antoinette Wilson and Johnny Rutherford for helping proof and prepare this manuscript. I would also like to thank Professor John Wiseman and the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute for the support offered as I prepared this manuscript for publication. Debts of gratitude and Guinness are also owed to my very good friend Andrew Doodson for designing the cover for this book. Your time and creativity are always greatly appreciated.

Finally, to Helen and Laurie – whose love, support, and tolerance make all my efforts possible. Thank you, as always, for everything.

There is one way forward: the creation of flesh and blood examples of low-consumption, high-quality alternatives to the mainstream pattern of life. This we can see happening already on the counter-cultural fringes. And nothing – no amount of argument or research – will take the place of such living proof. What people must see is that ecologically sane, socially responsible living is *good* living; that simplicity, thrift, and reciprocity make for an existence that is free.

– **Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends***

INTRODUCTION

I sometimes tell my students that I am an ‘apocaloptimist’. While, in truth, I am neither apocalyptic nor optimistic, this neologism serves as a fruitful conversation starter. It allows me to begin stating the case for why we, the human species, are facing overlapping crises of unprecedented magnitude – crises that are threatening the very persistence of our civilisation. At the same time, I explain why all of these problems are of our own making and, indeed, that their solutions already exist and are within our grasp, if only we decide that solving them is seriously what we want. I also maintain that the process of solving or at least responding appropriately to these problems can be both meaningful and fulfilling, if only we are prepared to let go of dominant conceptions of the good life. This means embracing very different ways of living, while also restructuring our societies to support a very different set of values – especially the values of frugality, moderation, and sufficiency. In short, I argue that the problems we face today are as grave as the solutions are available and attractive, and this tension is reflected in the title of this book – *PROSPEROUS DESCENT* – which I use provocatively to signify a paradox whose meaning will be unpacked in the following pages and chapters.

Before outlining the content of the following chapters, let me introduce some of the basic themes which shape all the essays collected in this book (and its companion volume, *SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY*). To begin with, I take a global perspective, even if my focus is generally on the cultures and economies prevalent in what are called the ‘developed’ nations. One of the normative assumptions underlying the essays is that we, human beings, are not citizens of any particular nation-state, the borders of which are artificial constructs of limited moral relevance. Rather, I contend that we are, as Diogenes claimed long ago, ‘citizens of the cosmos’, members of a global community of life, today more so than ever before. Our moral obligations, therefore – our commitments to justice and sustainability, in particular – cannot and should not stop at the borders of our own communities or our own nations. Justice and sustainability are global, seemingly abstract challenges demanding a global perspective, even if our actions and interventions must inevitably be local and concrete.

In globalising one's perspective, however, one is inevitably radicalised. As soon as we start asking questions about what a just distribution of the world's resources would look like, or what material standard of living could be *universalised* on our already overburdened planet, it immediately becomes clear that justice and sustainability, if these fuzzy notions are to mean anything, require nothing short of a revolution of the existing order of things. As this book will argue, we cannot merely tinker with the systems and cultures of global capitalism and hope that things will magically improve; those systems and cultures are not the symptoms but the causes of our overlapping social, economic, and ecological crises, so ultimately those systems and cultures must be replaced with fundamentally different forms of human interaction and organisation, driven and animated by different values, hopes, and myths. Uncivilising ourselves from our destructive civilisation and building something new is the great, undefined, creative challenge we face in coming decades – which is a challenge both of opposition and renewal. Together we must write a new future, a task that has already begun as individuals and communities begin to build the new world within the shell of the old. But this new future must look radically different from the past if the crises we face are to be tolerably resolved. There are no prizes, of course, for being the most 'radical' theorist or movement, yet if evidence, ethical reflection, and logic all demand a radical position, then as a matter of intellectual integrity, radical we must be – even if it is unclear why a position should be called 'radical' if the forces of reason and evidence are on our side. Such is the state of things.

Today there are unfathomable amounts of wealth and power concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority of super-rich elites, while great multitudes of our fellow human beings live lives of humiliating destitution. Early in 2014, for example, it was reported that the richest 85 people today have as much accumulated wealth as the poorest half of humanity.¹ This is not 'civilisation' as I understand the term. Nothing – no amount of fancy theorising – can justify such a skewed distribution of wealth and power, nor can this distribution be passed off as a 'natural' outcome of free individuals operating within free markets. It would be more accurate to say it is the natural outcome of unfree individuals operating within unfree markets. The current distribution of wealth and power, both within nations and between them, is a function of decisions human beings have made about how to structure our economies and political systems, and one does not need a fancy

¹ See R. Fuentes-Nieva and N. Galasso. 2014. 'Working for the few: Political capture and economic inequality', Oxfam Briefing Paper, 20 January 2014.

moral or political theory to conclude that the existing distribution, shaped by the existing, globalised economy, is shamefully unjust. It is self-evidently, painfully, and hideously unjust, even if usually we divert our eyes from this distasteful reality, it being too difficult to dwell on for long. Nevertheless, the point is that if human beings made these oppressive and destructive systems, so too can we unmake them and remake them into different systems, better systems, more humane systems – if we commit ourselves to that enormous task.

Our challenges, however, go well beyond distributional questions and call on us to rethink contemporary understandings of ‘progress’, ‘development’, ‘sustainability’, and even the meaning of ‘civilisation’ itself. What does it mean to be ‘civilised’ today? What is it that we want sustained? How will we sustain those things? At what cost? And for whom? Sustainability must not be conceived of as the project of sustaining anything resembling the status quo, although that is a common assumption and, indeed, it currently defines the international development agenda. The high consumption way of life which is enjoyed by the richest one or two billion people on Earth, and which is widely celebrated as the peak of civilisation, simply cannot, due to ecological limits, be universalised to the world’s seven billion people, let alone the eight, or nine, or ten billion people that are expected to inhabit the planet in coming decades. What are the implications of this ecological impossibility? When we ask ourselves what way of life would be consistent with a ‘fair share’ of the world’s finite resources, it quickly becomes evident that a just and sustainable civilisation must not seek to universalise the high impact consumer way of life. That would be ecologically catastrophic – a catastrophe that is, however, in the process of unfolding as conventional modes of ‘sustainable development’ are pursued tragically into the future.

If the global population is to live safely within the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet, we must be prepared – especially those of us in the developed regions of the world – to reimagine the good life by embracing ‘simpler ways’ of living based on notions of moderation, frugality, appropriate technology, and sufficiency. These notions are rarely discussed in mainstream environmental literature, and they are unspeakable by our politicians, yet I hope to show that they are indispensable to the proper understanding of our predicament and signify our only way out of it. If once it was thought that technology would ‘save the day’, producing efficiencies that would allow a growing global population to live high consumption lifestyles while remaining within the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet, today it is increasingly clear that such techno-optimism lacks all evidential credibility. Universal

affluence is nice in theory, perhaps, or perhaps not even nice in theory. But empirically, the promise of technological salvation has failed us. Despite decades of extraordinary technological advance, the ecological burdens humanity places on nature continue to increase. The face of Gaia is vanishing. Efficiency without sufficiency is lost.

Although there is a demonstrable ecological imperative to embrace simpler lifestyles of moderate consumption, there are, fortunately, many reasons to think that such lifestyles would actually be in our immediate self-interest. As will be seen, evidence indicates that even those who have attained the consumerist ideal so often find that it does not satisfy them, suggesting that human beings just do not find consumption a source of much fulfillment – despite what the advertisements insist. Most people living in consumer cultures today are materially richer than at any other time in history, yet too many of us also tend to be poor in time, poor in community engagement, and lack an intimate connection with nature. Our wealth is dubious. It has come at too high a price.

Human beings all have basic biophysical needs, of course, that must be met in order for us to flourish, but not far beyond those basic needs it seems that consumption has fast diminishing marginal returns. The never-ending pursuit of affluence is like a treadmill on which we keep running without advancing, eventually becoming a zero-sum game of ‘status competition’ which degrades the planet while distracting us from more worthy pursuits. And so the logic of sufficiency is clear: we *must* step off that consumerist treadmill for ecological reasons, and we *should* step off it for social justice reasons, but we should *want* to step off it because if we transcend consumer culture we will discover that there are simply more fulfilling ways to live. Consumerism is a tragic failure of the human imagination. Certainly, we can do much better.

This book holds up ‘simple living’ or ‘voluntary simplicity’ as the most coherent alternative to consumerism. I use these terms not to imply crudely regressing to old ways of living but instead to imply *post-consumerist* ways of living. These ways of living would weave together the best human innovations and traditions but use these knowledges and practices to create low-impact lifestyles of moderate consumption, which are nevertheless rich in their non-material dimensions. Although this way of life defies simplistic definition, practically it can mean growing organic food in backyards or urban farms, or supporting local farmers’ markets; it can mean wearing second-hand clothes or mending existing items, and creating or making necessary goods out of recycled materials rather than always acquiring them new; it can mean purchasing solar panels or supporting renewable energy initiatives, while also

radically reducing household energy consumption by riding a bike, taking public transport, co-housing, or simply using a washing line instead of a dryer. A process not a destination, the practical implications of voluntary simplicity are endless, which presents us with an immensely creative challenge, especially in consumer cultures. It implies the general attempt to minimise wasteful and superfluous consumption, sharing what we have, and knowing how much is ‘enough’, all the while redirecting life’s vital energies toward non-materialist sources of meaning and fulfillment, such as friends and family, social engagement, creative activity, home production, meeting our civic duties, or exploring whatever one’s private passions might be. The fundamental premise of this book – of all my work – is that a simple life can be a good life.

Nevertheless, although I argue that true sustainability certainly implies living more simply in a material sense, the following essays also maintain that we must simultaneously build structures and institutions that reflect, embody, and foster the same ethics of sufficiency. This means moving away from macroeconomic systems that have an inbuilt imperative to ‘grow or die’, toward post-growth systems that provide for the material needs of all but which do not seek to provide people with ever-higher levels of affluence. These would be highly localised, zero-growth economies based on permaculture principles, which use mostly local resources to meet mostly local needs. (I tried to describe such an economy – a sufficiency economy – in my last book, *Entropia: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation*, which was inspired by the likes of Henry David Thoreau, William Morris, Serge Latouche, David Holmgren, and Ted Trainer.)

For social and ecological reasons, the problem of population growth must also be confronted (somehow) with dedication and equity, since population is obviously a multiplier of everything, including ecological impact. Nevertheless, the population problem must not be used as a scapegoat to deflect attention away from the more fundamental problems: consumerist aspirations shaping the dominant myth of progress and structures of growth locking us into that myth.

If our civilisation does not embrace an ethics of sufficiency – and if we persist in the fantasy of globalising affluence and hoping technology and ‘free markets’ will solve our social and ecological problems – we will meet the same fate as the snake that eats its own tail. Before this century is out, our civilisation will have collapsed; will have consumed itself to death.



At this stage the paradox of *PROSPEROUS DESCENT* – the paradox that less can be more – should appear somewhat less paradoxical. The phrase is intended to signify the ‘upside of down’, a positive response to the impending limits to growth which necessitate post-consumerist ways of living. One way or another, for better or for worse, the descent of industrial civilisation is approaching us – in fact, it would seem that the descent is already underway. But currently, the unfolding descent is unplanned and far from prosperous, because most efforts are directed, consciously or unconsciously, toward *sustaining the existing civilisation* rather than *creating something new*. Resource limits – especially oil constraints – are beginning to squeeze the life-force out of economies that are dependent on cheap energy inputs to grow, and the reckless burning of fossil energy has begun to destabilise our climate. This is industrial civilisation. It is grossly unsustainable. It is not serving the vast majority of humankind. It has no future.

In order to make the best of the overlapping crises we face – in order to turn those crises into opportunities – the following essays argue that we need to develop cultures that reject consumerism and create far less energy and resource intensive ways of living. To support this cultural revolution in consciousness, we must also build economic and political structures that support and promote the practice of sufficiency. In the most developed regions of the world, this means radically downshifting away from high consumption ways of living and embracing far simpler ways of reduced and restrained consumption. This is the ‘descent’ – the descent away from growth and consumerism – that I argue can be ‘prosperous’, if we negotiate the transition wisely and take to the task with vigour, creativity, and urgency. This book and its companion volume, *SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY*, attempt to unpack and defend this bold vision, as well as explore the thorny question of how to realise it.

Before proceeding I should briefly anticipate an objection that will no doubt arise even from this preliminary overview. Let me be clear: the notion of ‘prosperous descent’ is not a prediction. I am not arguing that human beings are *going* to create a global village of thriving, sufficiency economies, nor do I even suggest that this is *likely*. And I am certainly not arguing that an unplanned, chaotic civilisational collapse into poverty is going to be ‘prosperous’ (so please do not accuse me of that). My argument is simply that economies of sufficiency, in which the entire community of life can flourish, are the *only* way to respond effectively to the overlapping crises of industrial civilisation. To oppose Margaret Thatcher with her own words: ‘there is no alternative’.

If this can be established, as I believe it can, it would follow that we should try to create sufficiency economies, here and now, even if our chances of success do not look good. We may never realise the ideal of a sufficiency economy, but having a coherent ideal functions as a compass to guide action. Without a compass, our energies and efforts would lack direction and thus could easily be misdirected with the best of intentions. Indeed, I worry that dominant strains of the environmental movement today can be understood primarily as misdirected good intentions, efforts which tend to be mistaken in attempting to ‘green’ a growth-orientated mode of production that can never be green. Others oppose the existing order without having any conception of what should replace it. Even those who reject the growth economy sometimes fail to understand the radical implications of such a proposal; fail to understand that we cannot give up growth while other aspects of life more or less go on as usual. Sufficiency, I contend, is a revolutionary project.

While I believe the practical question of ‘strategy’ – the question of how to realise a sufficiency economy – should remain open and dependent on context, the ‘theory of change’ that informs these essays is one grounded in grassroots, community-based action and initiatives. That is to say, I contend that until we have a *culture* or *social consciousness* that embraces sufficiency, our politicians are not going to be driven to create the necessary *structures* of sufficiency, nor, in the absence of such a culture, are we going to build new structures ourselves. In fact, even if such a culture of sufficiency emerged, our politicians are likely to be sluggish and non-responsive in supporting it. This means that the primary (although not necessarily the exclusive) forces of societal change must come ‘from below’, from people like you and me, working in our local communities, at the grassroots level. Before all else, we need to create the social conditions for deep transformation. There is a huge amount our governments *could do*, of course, to create just and sustainable economies of sufficiency, and in certain chapters I explore some available policy options. This can help us imagine alternative forms of human society and organisation. But we must not wait for governments to act, or we will still be waiting while the ship of civilisation sails over the cliff and crashes into the dark abyss below.

In any case, we should not want our governments to *impose* justice and sustainability upon us, and perhaps that would not be possible even if they wanted to. Instead, we must become politically mature enough to govern ourselves toward a better world and shape our own fates. To the extent that governments can assist us, I argue that they should be aiming to *deconstruct the barriers* to a sufficiency economy, and provide us with the freedom to choose it.

Currently that freedom is disastrously constrained, which sadly seems to be part of the design of Empire.



I will close this introduction by providing a brief outline of the chapters that follow. These essays have been ordered to reflect steps in an argument, however they all stand alone well enough, so there is no need, necessarily, to read them in order. Certain lines of argument, in places, are repeated or summarised, but I hope this serves primarily to emphasise key points and weave the essays together into a coherent whole.

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the book by presenting an evidenced-based critique of techno-optimism. Most people today, including many environmentalists, assume that technological advancement will eventually ‘decouple’ our economic growth from environmental impact, thereby allowing us to grow our economies without limit while at the same time reducing ecological impact. This position – which I am calling techno-optimism – is the foundation of dominant conceptions of ‘sustainable development’ and the primary reason so many people assume there are no ‘limits to growth’. If this techno-optimism is justifiable, sustained economic growth may eventually solve global poverty and raise the living standards of all, without destroying the necessary ecosystems that sustain life as we know it. But it is not justifiable. The opening chapter presents a critique of techno-optimism, showing it to be without evidential foundation and dangerously flawed. There are limits to growth – limits which in fact seem to be upon us – and we ignore them at our own peril. The implication is that any adequate response to today’s overlapping crises requires a global shift away from growth economics toward a macroeconomics ‘beyond growth’.

Chapter 2 reviews the key thinkers and movements in the emerging paradigm of ‘post-growth’ economics. It begins by presenting a brief overview of the conventional growth paradigm, in order to later highlight, by way of contrast, some of the most prominent features of the alternative paradigm. A substantial literature review of post-growth economics is then provided, after which some of the outstanding issues in this emerging paradigm are outlined. This chapter raises questions about what prospects this alternative paradigm has for the economics of growth; what significance it may have if it were ever to succeed; and what the implications could be if it were to remain marginalised. The chapter concludes by outlining a research agenda of critical issues.

Chapter 3 outlines the sociological, ecological, and economic foundations of a macroeconomics ‘beyond growth’, focusing on the

idea of degrowth. Degrowth opposes conventional growth economics on the grounds that growth in the highly developed nations has become socially counter-productive, ecologically unsustainable, and uneconomic. Stagnating energy supplies and rising prices also suggest an imminent ‘end of growth’. In response to growth economics, degrowth scholars call for a politico-economic policy of *planned economic contraction*, an approach which has been broadly defined as ‘an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions’. After defining growth economics and outlining the emerging case for degrowth, this chapter considers the feasibility of a macroeconomics beyond growth and sketches an outline of what such a macroeconomics might look like as a politico-economic programme.

Chapter 4 is based on the idea that a degrowth process of planned economic contraction depends on, and must be driven by, a culture of ‘simple living’ – or, as the title of this chapter puts it, ‘degrowth implies voluntary simplicity’. Be that as it may, this chapter shows that things are not that simple. Our lifestyle decisions, especially our consumption practices, are not made in a vacuum. They are made within social, economic, and political *structures of constraint*, and those structures make some lifestyle decisions easy or necessary and other lifestyle decisions difficult or impossible. These structures can even ‘lock’ people into high consumption lifestyles. Change the social, economic, and political structures, however, and different consumption practices would or could emerge. This chapter seeks to deepen the understanding of the relationship between consumer behaviour and the structures which shape that behaviour, in the hope that the existing barriers to sustainable consumption can be overcome or avoided.

Chapter 5 outlines in more detail the theory and practice of ‘voluntary simplicity’. This term defies easy definition but can be preliminarily understood as a way of life in which people choose to restrain or reduce their material consumption, while at the same time seeking a higher quality of life. For reasons discussed in previous chapters, there is a desperate need for alternative practices and narratives of consumption beyond those prevalent in the most developed regions of the world today, and increasingly people see voluntary simplicity or ‘simple living’ as a coherent and attractive alternative to the ‘work-and-spend’ cycle of consumer culture. After addressing issues of definition, justification, and practice, this chapter concludes by considering some objections that can be levelled against voluntary simplicity, both as a living strategy and as a nascent social movement.

Chapter 6 presents a sympathetic critique of Ted Trainer's vision of 'The Simpler Way', which he has been developing and refining for several decades. Trainer's essential premise is that overconsumption in the most developed regions of the world is the root cause of our global predicament, and upon this premise he argues that a necessary part of any transition to a sustainable and just world involves the consumer class adopting far 'simpler' lifestyles in terms of material and energy consumption. That is the radical implication of our global predicament which most people seem unwilling to acknowledge or accept, but which Trainer does not shy away from, and, indeed, which he follows through to its logical conclusion. Trainer's complex position can be understood to merge and build upon various strains of socialist, anarchist, and environmentalist thinking. Of particular importance is his critical analysis of the literature on renewable energy, which he argues does not support the assumption that renewable energy can sustain consumer societies. If Trainer is correct, sustainability implies moving toward societies with far lower energy demands than the developed economies, with all that this implies about reduced consumption and production. Needless to say, this directly contradicts the techno-optimism of most sustainability discourse, which assumes that existing and projected energy demands can easily and affordably be met with renewable energy.

Chapter 7 provides a review of the peak oil situation and offers a response to recent claims that 'peak oil is dead'. The analysis shows that oil issues remain at the centre of global challenges facing humanity, despite recent claims of oil abundance, and that the challenges are only going to intensify in coming years as competition increases over the world's most important source of fossil energy. The main issue, however, is not whether we will have enough oil, but whether we can afford to produce and burn the oil we have.

Chapter 8 provides an outline and analysis of various explanations for why the price of oil has fallen so dramatically between June 2014 and February 2015 (the time of writing). The main conclusion defended is that so-called 'cheap oil' (at ~\$50 per barrel) is just as problematic as expensive oil (at \$100+ per barrel), but for very different social, economic, political, and environmental reasons. Just as expensive oil suffocates industrial economies that are dependent on cheap energy inputs to function, cheap oil merely propagates and further entrenches the existing order of global capitalism that is in the process of growing itself to death.

Chapter 9 presents the most important theoretical contribution of the book, but it is a contribution that I suggest has hugely significant practical implications. The analysis revisits

Joseph Tainter's theory of complexity and collapse and responds to his argument that 'voluntary simplification' (which is essentially Tainter's term for degrowth or the simpler way) is not a viable path to a stable civilisation. Tainter argues forcefully, I admit, that in order to solve the problems facing our species we will need increased energy supplies, and on that basis he rejects the strategy of voluntarily reducing consumption. While I accept many aspects of Tainter's profound theoretical framework, this chapter ultimately rejects his conclusion, arguing that we are at a stage in our civilisational development where increasing energy consumption is now causing some of the primary problems that energy consumption is supposed to allow us to solve. In order to 'solve' some of the central crises of our times – in particular, in order to solve the problem of diminishing marginal returns on complexity which Tainter argues has led to the collapse of civilisations throughout history – I maintain that we must embrace a process of voluntary simplification. The primary contribution of this chapter lies in showing why Tainter's dismissal of this strategy is misguided and that, in fact, voluntary simplification is the only alternative to collapse.

Chapter 10 is a thought experiment based on a 'collapse scenario', which attempts to explore the lifestyle implications of what Paul Gilding has called a 'Great Disruption'. The question the chapter poses is this: how would an ordinary member of the consumer class deal with a lifestyle of radical simplicity? By radical simplicity I do not mean poverty. Rather, I mean a very low but biophysically sufficient material standard of living. This chapter argues that radical simplicity, in this sense, would not be as bad as it might first seem, provided we were ready for it and wisely negotiated its arrival, both as individuals and communities. The aim of this chapter is to provoke readers to reflect deeply on the question of what material standard of living is really necessary to live a full, human life. If it turns out that much less might be needed than is commonly thought, then in our age of ecological overshoot, this should provide us with further grounds for attempting to minimise our consumption and move toward lifestyles of sufficiency. If we do not choose this path, then my concern is that lifestyles of radically reduced consumption will be soon enough imposed upon us, but in ways that are unlikely to be experienced positively. As Thoreau once said, 'when a dog runs at you, whistle for him' – which I interpret as suggesting that we should embrace those things that necessarily await us whether we want those things or not. Nietzsche expressed a similar point: *amor fati* ('love thy fate').

Chapter 11 is the most philosophical of these collected essays, and is also the longest. It is placed toward the end because it may

also be the least accessible, but I include it because I am convinced that the issues it raises are of the utmost importance. The chapter summarises then applies the ethical writings of Michel Foucault to the theory and practice of voluntary simplicity, drawing in particular on his notion of an ‘aesthetics of existence’. Foucault argued that ‘the self’ is socially constructed. So far as that is true, inhabitants of consumer societies have probably internalised the social and institutional celebration of consumer lifestyles to varying degrees, and this will have shaped our identities and worldviews, often in subtle, even insidious, ways. But Foucault also argued that ‘the self’, as well as being shaped by society, can act on itself and change itself through a process of ‘self-fashioning’. This raises the ethical question: what type of person should one create? Given that overconsumption is driving many of the world’s most pressing problems, it may be that ethical activity today requires that we critically reflect on our own subjectivities in order to *refuse who we are* – so far as we are uncritical consumers. This Great Refusal would open up space to create new, post-consumerist forms of subjectivity, which is surely part of the revolution in consciousness needed in order to produce a society based on a ‘simpler way’. After outlining Foucault’s ethics and situating them in the context of consumption practices, the chapter concludes by describing several ‘techniques of the self’ that could be employed by those who wish to practise the idea of voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence.

Chapter 12, the final chapter, is a short essay which was delivered at the Festival of Ideas, at the University of Melbourne, Australia in October 2013. It looks back from the year 2033 to consider how a transition to a low-carbon society might transpire, based on the notion that a crisis is also an opportunity.

It is worth acknowledging that the essays in this book do not answer all questions and, in fact, may raise as many questions as they answer. A second book of essays is also being published, which I hope will fill some of the gaps. A provisional contents page of that volume, called *SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY: ENOUGH, FOR EVERYONE, FOREVER*, is included as an appendix to this book.