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TED TRAINER AND THE SIMPLER WAY *A sympathetic critique*

Although the changes required are immense, in most towns and suburbs the essentials could largely be achieved in months – at negligible dollar cost – if enough of us wanted to make them... But designing and building is not the problem. That’s easy. The problem is developing the understandings and values whereby ordinary people will want to design and build new systems, and will delight in doing so.

– Ted Trainer

1. Introduction

For several decades Ted Trainer has been developing and refining an important theory of societal change, which he calls The Simpler Way (1985, 1995, 2010a). His essential premise is that over-consumption 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 an adoption of materially far ‘simpler’ lifestyles by the over-consumers. That is the radical implication of our global predicament which most people, including most environmentalists, seem unwilling to acknowledge or accept, but which Trainer does not shy away from, and, indeed, which he follows through to its logical conclusion. This chapter outlines and presents a sympathetic critique of Trainer’s complex position (2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012b), a position that can be understood to merge and build upon various strains of socialist, anarchist, and environmentalist thinking (e.g., Morris, 2004; Gorz, 1994; Bookchin, 1990; Meadows, Randers, and Meadows, 2004).

Trainer’s work is an important and original contribution to the debate surrounding eco-socialism. Although he assumes an

essentially Marxist account of capitalism, and argues that state power is generally employed in the service of private capital expansion, it will be seen that Trainer rejects the underlying growth paradigm that traditionally shaped both capitalist and socialist economics (Hamilton, 2003). Furthermore, he rejects the conventional Marxist strategy of taking control of the state, and instead advocates a radically low-consumption, anarchist answer to the question of social and economic transformation. The new, zero-growth economy, he argues, will never be introduced from the ‘top down’, but must be built from the grassroots up, without reliance on state support. Nevertheless, Trainer also addresses the issue of structural change in ways that are typically neglected by grassroots eco-social movements (e.g., Hopkins, 2008). He is also uniquely rigorous in his critique of renewable energy, despite being unconditionally in favour of it, which advances sustainability discourse in critically important ways, and with challenging implications.

My analysis of these issues is designed in part to bring more attention to a theorist whose work has been greatly underappreciated, so the discussion is more expository than critical. But I also raise questions about Trainer’s position and develop it, where possible, in the hope of advancing the debate and deepening our understanding of the important issues under consideration.

2. The Global Predicament

Trainer’s vision of The Simpler Way can only be understood in relation to his diagnosis of the global situation, which arises out of the ‘limits to growth’ analysis (Meadows, Randers, and Meadows, 2004). While the figures and statistics on resource depletion and environmental degradation are well known (e.g., MEA, 2005), Trainer maintains that their significance is not generally acknowledged or fully understood. The global economy, he argues, is far beyond the levels of resource and energy use that can be maintained for much longer (Global Footprint Network, 2012), let alone extended to all people. Add to this situation the fact that the global human population is expected to increase to nine billion in the next few decades, and the magnitude of our problems becomes clear. ‘Our way of life’, he concludes, ‘is grossly unsustainable’ (Trainer, 2010a, 19). To make matters worse, there is also a mounting body of evidence indicating that the richest nations are experiencing a breakdown of social cohesion and a stagnating quality of life (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Lawn and Clarke, 2010; Lane, 2000), which implies that even if we could globalise and sustain consumer

societies over the long term, we may not want to (Alexander 2009, 2011a).⁸

The problems, however, do not end there. In addition to the ecological and social issues just noted, Trainer joins many ecological economists (e.g., Daly, 1996) in highlighting the absurdity of the prevailing attitudes toward economic growth. The growth project continues to define the global development agenda (Purdey, 2010), despite evidence indicating that the existing global economy is already exceeding the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet (Global Footprint Network, 2012). Although the intricacies of the critique cannot be detailed here, the growth project faces additional challenges from those who argue that the peaking of oil and the bursting of credit bubbles are in the process of undermining the very possibility of continued growth (see Heinberg, 2011; chapters 7 and 8 in this book).

In line with much socialist theory, the moral that Trainer draws from this analysis is that the affluence enjoyed in rich countries is built on a global economic system that is, at its core, patently unjust. It is a system that enables the rich countries to take far more than their fair share of the world's resources, while depriving the poorest countries of the resources needed to live even a minimally decent existence. Not only that, rich nations work hard to entrench and maintain their empires using coercive aid contributions, trade power, 'structural adjustment packages', and, whenever necessary, military force (Trainer, 2010a, chapters 5 and 8). For all these reasons, among others discussed below, Trainer concludes that capitalism cannot be fixed or reformed; it has to be replaced. While Trainer is hardly alone in making that claim, the following sections show that he builds upon it in original ways.

⁸ Trainer dedicates very little attention to the issue of overpopulation, which many will consider a significant weakness to his position. He is very aware of the problem, of course, which he builds into his diagnosis of the global situation; and he recognises the importance of stabilising and reducing population. But he could strengthen his position by discussing population issues in more detail. It is worth noting, however, that even if the world's population stopped growing today (at 7.2 billion), the planet would remain dangerously overburdened by high consumption lifestyles, so focusing primarily on consumption has some justification. There is certainly a risk that the population problem gets used to deflect attention away from what is the more fundamental problem of overconsumption, and perhaps this explains why Trainer has largely avoided the population debate so far.

3. The Limits of Technology and Renewable Energy

Before examining the alternative proposed by Trainer, his critical perspectives on technology and renewable energy will be outlined, as his claims on these subjects contradict widely held assumptions. Most people, including many environmentalists, seem to believe that Western-style lifestyles can indeed be sustained and even globalised, provided the world transitions to systems of renewable energy and produces commodities more cleanly and efficiently. This assumption is reflected especially clearly in international political discourse on environmental issues (e.g., UNDP, 2007/8), which consistently pushes the message that we can decouple economic growth from ecological impact, or even that we need *more* economic growth in order to fund environmental protection initiatives and thus save the planet (Beckerman, 2002). Trainer casts considerable doubt on the possibility of any technological ‘fix’ to ecological problems.

3.1 *Technology cannot sustain the growth paradigm*

Trainer’s general point on technology is that the extent of ecological overshoot is already so great that technology will never be able to solve the ecological crises of our age, and certainly not in a world based on economic growth and with a growing global population. Amory Lovins (1998) is probably the best-known advocate of technological solutions to ecological problems, most famous for his ‘factor four’ thesis. He argues that if we exploit technology we could have four times the economic output without increasing environmental impact (or maintain current economic output and reduce environmental impact by a factor of four). But if the rich world continues to grow at 3% per year until 2070, and by that stage the poorest nations have attained similarly high living standards – which seems to be the aim of the global development agenda – the total world-economic output (and impact) could well be as much as 60 times larger than it is today (Trainer, 2010a, 21). If we assume that sustainability requires that fossil fuel use and other resource consumption must be half of what they are today – and the greenhouse problem probably requires a larger reduction than this (Hansen, *et al.*, 2008) – then what is needed is something like a factor 120 reduction in the per unit impact of GDP, not merely a factor 4 reduction (Trainer, 2007, 117). Even allowing for some uncertainty in these calculations, the claim that technological fixes can solve the ecological crises and sustain the growth paradigm is simply not credible. Trainer argues that the absolute decoupling

necessary is just beyond what is remotely possible. The final nail in the coffin of techno-optimists is the fact that despite decades of extraordinary technological advance, the overall ecological impact of the global economy is still increasing (Jackson, 2009, Ch. 5), making even a factor four reduction through technological advance seem wildly optimistic.

3.2. *Renewable energy cannot sustain consumer societies*

Trainer (2007) has also levelled a narrower critique of technological solutions, which focuses on renewable energy. Resisting the common assumption that renewable energy systems can drive growth economies and support consumer societies, Trainer set himself the task of examining the crucially important and largely neglected question of what the *limits* of renewable energy sources might be.

This is not the place to review in detail Trainer's arguments and research. For the facts and figures, readers are referred to Trainer's books and essays (2007, 2010b, 2012a, and especially 2013a and 2013b). But the critical findings of his research can be easily summarised. After examining the evidence on varieties of solar, wind, hydro, biomass, and other kinds of energy sources, as well as energy storage and distribution systems, Trainer concludes the figures just do not support what almost everyone assumes; that is to say, they do not support the argument that renewable energy can sustain consumer societies. This is because the enormous (and globally growing) quantities of electricity and liquid fuels required by consumer societies today simply cannot be provided for by any mixture of renewable energy sources, each of which suffers from various limitations arising out of such factors as intermittency of supply, storage problems, resource limitations (e.g., land for biomass competing with food production), and inefficiency issues. Ultimately, however, the fundamental issue at play here is the cost. Trainer provides evidence showing that existing attempts to price the transition to systems of renewable energy are wildly understated (2012a).

This challenging conclusion, however, only defines the magnitude of the *present* problem. If we were to commit ourselves to providing nine or ten billion people with the energy resources currently demanded by those in the richest parts of the world, then the problems and costs become greater by orders of magnitude. The challenges are exacerbated further by the existence of the 'rebound effect', a phenomenon that often negates the expected energy use reductions of efficiency improvements (Holm and Englund, 2009;

Jackson, 2009, Ch. 4). At times, efficiency improvements can even be the catalyst for *increased* energy consumption – the ‘Jevons’ paradox discussed in Ch. 1 (see also, Polimeni, *et al.*, 2009). Going directly against the grain of mainstream thinking on these issues, Trainer is led to conclude that renewable energy and efficiency improvements will never be able to sustain growth-based consumer societies, primarily because it would be quite unaffordable to do so.

It is of the utmost importance to emphasise that this is not an argument against renewable energy as such; nor is it an argument more broadly against the use of appropriate technologies to achieve efficiency improvements. Trainer argues without reservation that the world must transition to full dependence on systems of renewable energy without delay and exploit appropriate technology wherever possible (Trainer, 2007, 117). But given the limitations and expense of renewable energy systems, any transition to a just and sustainable world requires a *vastly reduced demand for energy* compared to what is common in the developed regions of the world today, and this necessitates giving up growth-based, consumer societies and the energy-intensive lifestyles they support and promote.

4. The Radical Implications of a Zero-Growth Economy

The implications of the foregoing analysis can hardly be exaggerated. If it is accepted that the global economy is already in ecological overshoot, that the poorest nations on the planet have a right to increase their standards of living to some dignified level, that the global population may exceed nine billion within a few decades, and that technology will be unable to solve the various ecological crises, then it would seem that the richest nations must give up the pursuit of continued growth and create some zero-growth or steady state economy. In fact, the extent of the global predicament implies that the richest nations even need to go through a phase of planned economic contraction, or degrowth, before stabilising in a steady state economy of a sustainable scale (Lawn and Clarke, 2010; Kallis, 2011; Alexander, 2012a).

If people were to accept this diagnosis, or something like it, what would that actually mean for the most developed, growth-based economies? Trainer (2011) argues that even those who essentially agree with the diagnosis outlined above, and who accept that the world has indeed reached the ‘limits to growth’, rarely perceive the radical implications that would flow from giving up the growth economy. To be sure, ecological economists have been pointing out the contradiction between the limitless pursuit of

economic growth and ecological sustainability for many decades (e.g., Daly, 1996), and in recent years the critique of growth has gained some momentum (Jackson, 2009). But Trainer maintains that the implications of a steady state economy have not been understood well at all, least of all by its advocates. Most advocates proceed as if we could and should eliminate the growth element of the present economy while leaving remaining structures more or less intact. Trainer provides three main criticisms of this position.

His first criticism is that eliminating the growth element of the present economy, while leaving the rest more or less as it is, cannot be done. This is because the present economy ‘is not an economy which *has* growth; it is a *growth-economy*, a system in which the core structures and processes involve growth’ (Trainer, 2011: 71). It follows, he argues, that ‘if growth is eliminated then radically different ways of carrying out many fundamental processes have to be found’ (*ibid.*). In particular, giving up growth would seem to necessitate changing the fundamentals of the existing finance and banking systems, as Trainer explains:

If you do away with 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 mechanisms for 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 (2011: 77, emphasis in original).

Critics of growth rarely discuss or even acknowledge this issue, and yet it seems fundamental. Abolishing interest payments would touch the very core of growth-based economies, and it is not clear that a zero-growth economy could ever emerge if an interest-based system were to persist (Douthwaite and Fallon, 2011). This is certainly an issue to which progressive economists must dedicate much more attention because people are unlikely to give up the present monetary system until they have a detailed picture of a viable alternative. On a different note, eliminating poverty in a zero-growth economy could not be achieved by continued growth (i.e., by a rising tide lifting all boats), since growth itself would come to an end (Woodward and Simms, 2006). Instead, eliminating poverty in a zero-growth economy could only be achieved by a redistribution of wealth and power, both nationally and globally. Thus, a zero-growth economy must be much more egalitarian than any capitalist society,

past or present. Fortunately, this broad-based redistribution of wealth is likely to produce healthier and happier societies compared to those societies in which wealth is highly polarised (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

Trainer's second major point of criticism is that critics of growth typically proceed as if economic systems were the only or the primary things that have to be fixed. But Trainer argues that the major global problems facing us cannot be solved 'unless several fundamental systems and structures within consumer-capitalist society are radically remade' (2011: 71). For example, and most importantly, there would need to be a radical change in cultural attitudes toward consumption. This is because a zero-growth economy would never voluntarily arise, or be able to function, within cultures generally comprised of individuals seeking ever-higher levels of income and consumption. Accordingly, before growth economics can be overcome, some notion of economic sufficiency must be embraced at the cultural level (Alexander, 2011c, 2013a). As Trainer frankly notes, 'What is required is much greater social change than Western society has undergone in several hundred years' (2011: 17). The point is that a zero-growth economy depends on much more than changing the fundamentals of economic structures. It also implies 'an utterly different worldview and driving mechanism' (*ibid.*: 77).

For present purposes, Trainer's third and final major point of criticism – which again distinguishes his position from those of most other growth sceptics – relates to what he believes is the inextricable connection between growth and the market system. If there is to be no growth, he argues, '*there can be no role for market forces*' (2011: 78, his emphasis), a point he develops in the following terms:

The market is about maximising; i.e., about producing, selling and investing in order to make as much money as possible from the deal, and then seeking to invest, produce and sell more, in order to again make as much money as possible. 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 (*ibid.*).

There are several issues with this analysis that deserve comment, although the first may be a criticism of expression merely, one that is important (for reasons of clarity) but can potentially be easily resolved. When Trainer asserts without any qualification that 'there can be no role for market forces' in a zero-growth economy, and that 'we must scrap the market system', this seems to misrepresent his own position, given that a close reading of his entire oeuvre shows

that his position is much more nuanced. For example, when Trainer talks of ‘scrapping’ the market system, he does not mean that this must be done all in one go, as his language implies. His subtler position is that it would be a long process of phasing down the current economy and building up a new one. Furthermore, in the most complete statement of his perspective, Trainer (2010a) never calls for the abolishment of money *per se* (although he does call for its significant diminishment and reconceptualisation); nor does he deny that people in a zero-growth economy would still exchange goods and services with each other (although, again, he argues that such practices would play much less of a role than they do in consumer societies today and would be driven by different motives). But if a zero-growth economy could and should involve money and formal exchange *to some degree*, then it seems that it does not scrap the market system, as the above passages claim. After all, to purchase or formally exchange anything is to engage in ‘market activity’ (according to conventional usage of that phrase, at least), and there is no reason to think that such market activity is *necessarily* always driven by an ethics of profit-maximisation. Indeed, in Trainer’s vision of a zero-growth economy (described below), market activity would not be driven by an ethics of profit-maximisation, but presumably by some ethics of genuine mutual benefit and concern.

It is important that Trainer refines or clarifies his expression of these points, because his blunt claim that the market must be ‘scrapped’ is not going to gain any support from those of us who are certain that market activity of some form, to some degree, will always have the potential to advance the human situation, even in a zero-growth economy. With some justification, Trainer criticises market activity when it is driven by an ethics of profit-maximisation, which, he argues, is morally repugnant in terms of human interaction, even leaving aside its connection with growth economics. But that seems to be a criticism of the *values* presently driving market activity, rather than a criticism of market activity as such, which could be driven by very different values. My point is that there is no need to ‘scrap the market system’ in order to create a zero-growth economy (Alexander, 2011c); but obviously whatever markets exist in a zero-growth economy would need to take on very different forms.

5. A Friendly Critique of Transition Initiatives and Permaculture

If the world ever manages to create a tapestry of highly localised, zero-growth economies, and by doing so arguably solve the greatest

ecological and social challenges of our times, Trainer believes that it will have to be due to something like the Transition Towns movement (Hopkins, 2008). This nascent movement is primarily a community-orientated response to the dual crises of peak oil and climate change (among other things) and is based on the principles of permaculture (Holmgren, 2002). Although framed in slightly different terms, Trainer and others in the ‘deep green’ environmentalist camp have been arguing for something akin to Transition and permaculture for decades (Trainer, 1985; Trainer, 1995). Trainer therefore justly finds it immensely encouraging to see these movements bursting onto the global scene in recent years. But for all their promise, Trainer worries that these movements need to radically alter their visions and goals if they hope to make a significant contribution to solving the global predicament.

In his ‘friendly critique’ of the Transition Towns movement, Trainer (2009a, 2009b) articulates his concerns in some detail. ‘Everything depends,’ he begins, ‘on how one sees the state of the planet, and the solution’ (Trainer, 2009a: 1). He goes on to argue that if people do not understand the nature and extent of the crises we face, they will tend to misconceive the best responses to those crises, and set about working toward goals that cannot solve the problems. That is his primary concern about the Transition movement. He is worried that there is too much emphasis merely on building ‘resilience’ within consumer-capitalist society, and too little attention given to what Trainer believes is the more ambitious but necessary goal of replacing the fundamental structures of consumer-capitalist society. Setting up community gardens, food co-ops, recycling centres, permaculture groups, skill banks, home-craft courses, local currencies, etc. are all good things, and the Transition movement is doing all of these things, and much more. But Trainer (2009a: 1) contends that it is a ‘serious mistake’ to think these types of activities are enough, on their own, to create a new society. The existing economy, he argues, is quite capable of accommodating these types of activities without being threatened by them, prompting Trainer to speak of ‘the insufficiency of resilience’ (Trainer, 2009a: 1). What is required, he insists, is that Transition adopts a more radical vision, one which involves replacing the core institutions of consumer-capitalism, not merely reforming them or building resilience within them.

Trainer’s ‘friendly critique’ understandably received some serious attention by participants in the Transition movement, including prominent figures Rob Hopkins (2009) and Brian Davey (2009). Although Hopkins (2009: 1) senses that he and Trainer ultimately ‘agree on most things’ in terms of what needs to happen, he did respond to some of Trainer’s concerns in ways that deserve

attention. Most importantly, Hopkins (2009: 1) drew the distinction between ‘what is made explicit in Transition and what is kept implicit’. While Hopkins acknowledged that Trainer is right about the need to replace consumer capitalism, he did not accept that explicitly stating that goal should be a central part of Transition, for the simple reason that most people will be overwhelmed to the point of paralysis by so ambitious a project, or alienated by the language it employs. Hopkins is the most prominent figure in the Transition movement and his advocacy of the movement is a large part of its successes. Ever the diplomat, he masterfully walks the fine line between radical and reformer, and I believe he does this for pedagogical reasons. Whereas Trainer calls a spade a spade – and a revolution a revolution – Hopkins is more circumspect. My sense is that Hopkins and Trainer share a similar vision of the desired end-state, but in the hope of gaining a greater audience (which is obviously a necessary and important goal) Hopkins seems less prepared to state his radical vision quite so openly. This does not imply that Hopkins has a secret agenda that he is hiding from people. The point is simply that when activists for change talk about what needs to be done and how we might get there, we must put our minds to the extremely important question of how best to express ourselves, what language to use, and what means of persuasion best advances the causes at hand. After all, it is no good speaking the truth if it is expressed in such a way that most people are unwilling or unable to absorb the message. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that poor ‘advocacy’ is one of the greatest failures of the broader Green movement to date. At the same time, it is no good being listened to if the message is misconceived. These are some of the complex challenges faced by the Transition movement and the Green movement more generally, and Trainer and Hopkins deserve credit for grappling with them. Unsurprisingly, how best to proceed remains (and may always remain) an open question – one about which reasonable people can disagree.

Brian Davey’s heartfelt response to Trainer’s analysis was more fiery and less diplomatic than Hopkins’, but it raises an equally important point. Like Hopkins, Davey does not so much reject Trainer’s position on what needs to be done so much as he calls for greater realism in terms of the practical challenges faced by Transition. As Davey explains in terms directed at Trainer: ‘it took me years with others to develop a successful community garden project. When I look at your description of all the things that you say the Transition Movement must do I want to scream with frustration’ (Davey, 2009: 1). Davey hastens to add that his is not an ideological objection to Trainer’s critique but a practical one: ‘We are struggling already – the number of people with organisational and social

entrepreneurial skills to set things up is small. There are lots willing to follow but few willing, or able, to lead' (Davey, 2009: 1). Furthermore, Davey laments that Trainer's vast agenda and critique of existing Transition practices 'serves more to discourage than anything else because it tells us all the things that we have to do and that we are already doing, in many cases run ragged with voluntary overwork – is still not enough'. We can be certain that Trainer never intended his message to discourage (Trainer, 2009b), but if that could be its effect then it provides Trainer and other sympathetic critics with some food for thought. At the same time, if it is to fulfil its potential, Transition must welcome constructive criticism and be prepared to discuss its weaknesses and failures.

It is likely that Davey's legitimate concerns could have been ameliorated had Trainer expressed himself somewhat differently from the outset. Trainer's point, which I feel is a valid one, is that existing Transition practices can be easily accommodated within consumer capitalism, and that more is required if fundamental change is ever to eventuate. But by insisting on more radical change, Trainer did not adequately acknowledge the immense practical challenges of such an undertaking (challenges of which he is very aware), and this led to Davey's exasperated reply. In my view, many people in Transition probably agree with something like Trainer's ambitious vision (outlined in more detail below), but the practical realities of realising the project are painfully present to activists at every turn, and so less ambitious projects are undertaken in order to achieve something rather than nothing. This is indeed my experience of the Transition Initiative with which I am personally involved. For these reasons I would suggest that Transition may not actually lack a sufficiently radical vision (or visions); instead, it may simply be that the limited resources and energies presently available to the Transition movement results in actions that seem and are moderate and inadequate, but which are nevertheless necessary building blocks for more ambitious undertakings in the future.

From little things big things grow. That must be the hope the Transition movement clings to as it struggles unsuccessfully (at present) to bring about the enormous changes that are necessary. Without that hope, many people would probably be immobilised by despair. We should always keep one eye on the big picture, no matter how distant or imposing it may seem, which is Trainer's point. But Hopkins and Davey remind us that any big picture will inevitably be comprised of countless, seemingly insignificant brushstrokes, each of which is a necessary part of the whole.

6. Anarchism and The Simpler Way

In this final substantive section I wish to provide some more detail on the new society that Trainer envisions (2010: Ch. 4), as well as outline the strategy he believes is essential to its realisation. No doubt, some will find Trainer's alternative society rather 'utopian' in outlook, but one of the functions of utopian writing is to provide details on alternative forms of lifestyle, in order to inspire movements to bring them into existence (de Geus, 1999; Alexander, 2013b). One could also defend Trainer on the grounds that it is infinite growth on a finite planet that seeks to defy reality, and that *The Simpler Way* is framed to acknowledge reality, not transcend it. In any case, Trainer's goal seems to be more about describing what he considers *necessary* for a sustainable and just society, not what he considers to be *likely*, and that goal ought to be borne in mind when assessing what follows.

6.1 *What would The Simpler Way look like?*

Perhaps the most important feature of *The Simpler Way* economy is that it moves away from the highly industrialised and globalised growth economies we know today, and moves toward small and highly self-sufficient local economies which use mainly local resources to meet local needs. These will be zero-growth economies that are sustained on much lower levels of resource consumption and ecological impact – perhaps 90% lower (Trainer 2010a: 2). This implies that material living standards will be far lower than what is common in consumer societies today – which is an absolutely essential part of any adequate response to the global predicament – but basic needs for all will be met and high living standards will be maintained because people will be living and working cooperatively in enjoyable and spiritually rewarding communities. These lifestyles of voluntary simplicity, therefore, do not mean hardship or deprivation (Alexander, 2012b; Alexander and Ussher, 2012). They just mean focusing on what is *sufficient* to live well, rather than constantly seeking increased consumption and greater affluence.

Although private firms will remain in the new economy, cooperative enterprises will be common too, and, where necessary, financing of appropriate new ventures will be obtainable on zero interest from a community-owned bank. The most important decisions about how the economy should meet the needs of the community will be placed under social governance. Town meetings will be held regularly and committees formed to discuss matters of social, economic, and ecological importance, and a Community

Development Cooperative (Trainer 2010a: 303) will be established to help organise and administer the community's essential goals and ventures, such as full employment and the elimination of poverty. Because overall consumption and production levels will be so greatly reduced from levels common in consumer societies today, the energy demands of this new economy will also be greatly reduced, meaning that renewable energy will easily be able to supply the energy required. The new economy, therefore, will be a post-carbon economy. Aside from renewable energy systems, however, technology would be quite basic – Trainer suggests we imagine something like 1950s technology – but this would nevertheless be more than sufficient for the purposes outlined above.

How would the community's needs be met? Organically grown food would be eaten in season and mainly produced in intensive home gardens and community gardens, as in small farms on the edge of urban settlements. For ecological and social justice reasons, meat consumption would reduce significantly. Permaculture principles and animal labour would greatly reduce the need for agricultural machinery, although Trainer (2010a: 82) anticipates that a small number of motorised vehicles and farming machines would still make sense, which would run on very limited ethanol produced from biomass, or electricity. Surplus production would be sold or exchanged in local markets for other necessary items, or left at the community centre for distribution. Common property – including much land that was once roads or parking lots – would be dug up and redeveloped productively into 'food forests' and maintained by community working bees. The concrete and bitumen could be recycled as building materials and the bitumen lumps could be stacked to create animal pens. The fashion industry would essentially come to an end, and a new aesthetic would develop based on functional, long lasting, and locally produced clothing. Houses would be small and humble but well designed or retrofitted, and they would be more densely inhabited than is common in many Western societies today. Most furniture would be homemade and overall home production of necessary goods and services would increase significantly.

Given the extent of home production and the minimal consumption of material goods, time spent in paid employment would decline dramatically, to as little as one or two days per week, but life would always remain busy and exciting because there would always be so much important work to do. Indeed, Trainer (2010a: 96) argues that in *The Simpler Way* the work/leisure distinction collapses. Furthermore, he anticipates that the cultural significance of things like television and computerised entertainment would decline markedly, or even disappear, and this would leave much

more time for engaging in creative, productive, and more fulfilling activity. ‘There would be little need for transport to get people to work,’ Trainer explains, ‘because most work places would be localised and accessible by bicycle or on foot... Railway and bus production would be one of the few activities to take place in large centralised heavier industrial centres’ (*ibid.*: 93). Another implication of the new circumstances would be that international travel and trade would be rare, due to the greater appreciation and productivity of one’s own locality, as well as the far greater fuel costs associated with travel and shipping in an age of declining petroleum supplies (Rubin, 2008).

Trainer (2010a, 2012b) also presents some interesting calculations regarding the ecological footprints and dollar costs implied by the type of communities described above. While acknowledging that his calculations are not exact, the data he presents (2012b; based primarily on his own practices and ‘ecological footprint’ analyses) suggest that per capita resource and energy use, and GDP per capita, could be reduced by as much as 90% compared to current levels in consumer societies. Trainer notes that it may be that such great reductions will not be necessary, but he presents a case showing that ‘it would be possible and easy to cut our resource consumption and ecological impact to very small proportions of present rates if we adopted the ways discussed’ (Trainer, 2010a: 111).

6.2. *Trainer’s anarchist response to the question of strategy*

The final matter to be considered is the critically important question of how The Simpler Way could best be realised, because it is not enough to merely ‘envision’ a sustainable, just, and flourishing human society. We must figure out how best to get there, and Trainer gives this question of ‘strategy’ due attention (2010a: Pt. 3).

Trainer’s analysis begins with what is essentially a Marxist critique of the capitalist state and proceeds to offer what amounts to a fundamentally anarchist solution. The Marxist line of thinking holds that the capitalist state is essentially an instrument of capital, which functions mainly to promote and secure the interests of the rich and powerful, at the expense of almost everyone else (Marx, 1983). The primary aim of state capitalism is capital expansion, plain and simple. Although framed in slightly differently terms, Trainer is largely sympathetic to this critical understanding of state capitalism, and with good reason. It certainly seems to be the case that governments in capitalist societies (and increasingly elsewhere) are under the undue influence of corporate interests (e.g., Tham,

2010), and treat economic growth as their primary and overriding concern (Hamilton, 2003). Accordingly, appealing to those governments to create a more egalitarian, zero-growth economy seems more or less doomed to failure.

This type of analysis of the state prompted Marx (and the orthodox Left more generally) to argue that radically changing society requires taking control of the state for socialist purposes – by way of violent revolution, if necessary. This is where Trainer parts company with Marxism and shifts to the anarchist camp. While he agrees that capitalism cannot be fixed, he argues that the state is so bound up in the values, structures, and mechanisms of growth that the imperative to grow is essentially a necessary element of *all* states, not merely capitalist states. Generally speaking, Marx and the orthodox Left never considered this to be a problem, because they too were firmly situated within the growth model. After all, they hoped to take control of the state but then distribute the proceeds of continued *growth* more equitably (cf. Foster, 2000, exploring ‘eco-Marxism’). If Trainer is correct, however, and all states are inextricably committed to growth, then advocates of a zero-growth economy should not waste their time lobbying governments to advance their cause. Indeed, as a matter of strategy, he argues that advocates of a zero-growth economy must essentially ignore state capitalism to death by setting about building the alternative economy themselves, without expecting any help from the state (and probably receiving a lot of resistance from it). More radically still, Trainer even maintains that ‘the Green Politics goal of parliamentary solutions, [is] mistaken and useless now’ (2010a: 13), perhaps even ‘counter-productive’ (*ibid.*: 256), on the assumption that the state will never voluntarily dissolve the structures of growth that drive ecological degradation. We have limited time, resources, and energies, Trainer argues, so we should not waste them running for office or even campaigning for the Greens, because the state will be either unwilling or unable to help us. Advocates of zero-growth should just get active in their local communities and begin building the new society amongst the grassroots, here and now. This is the sense in which Trainer positions himself as an anarchist.

A full critical assessment of Trainer’s anarchism lies well beyond the scope of this chapter, but I will offer some probing, cursory remarks. My first point concerns the fact that our lifestyle decisions, including our consumption decisions, always take place within specific socio-structural contexts. That is, they occur within social, economic, and political structures of constraint, many of which are a function of laws and policies created by the state. Those structures make some lifestyle decisions easy or necessary and

others difficult or impossible. Currently, as I have argued elsewhere (Alexander, 2012c), those structures not only promote consumerist lifestyles but they also make oppositional lifestyles of voluntary simplicity very difficult, and in some respects impossible. This type of structural ‘lock in’, which is often subtle and insidious, can suffocate any attempt to create ways of life and social movements based on post-consumerist values, because current laws and structures make the practice of living more simply extremely challenging, even for those who already hold post-consumerist values. This is highly problematic because The Simpler Way and the zero-growth economy it promotes depend on the emergence of a post-consumerist culture. There are certainly structural limits to the ability of personal ‘downshifting’ to affect significant change.

In one sense, this seems to support Trainer’s view that the state is intimately implicated in the growth model – so implicated, it would seem, that it can even function to ‘lock’ people into consumerist lifestyles (Sanne, 2002). There is much to be said in support of this argument, and it casts further doubt on the prospect of governments ever giving up the growth paradigm. Accordingly, as Trainer suggests, perhaps we should not waste our time on trying to persuade our political leaders to do so – just like we would not try to persuade zebras to change their stripes. From another angle, however, the argument casts some doubt on the viability of Trainer’s anarchist strategy, because if people are indeed locked into consumerist lifestyles to some extent, then ‘top down’ structural change may be needed to ‘unlock’ people from those lifestyles. If the structures were changed, different consumption practices and ‘ways of life’ would, or could, emerge. Only then, it could be argued, will participants in a post-consumerist social movement be sufficiently free to create a new economy in the ‘grassroots’ manner Trainer envisions.

One reply to this line of questioning would be to acknowledge that the structure of growth economies can indeed lock people into consumerist lifestyles, but to insist that changing those structures does not require state action, only committed community action. While this reply has some merit, it does not change the fact that existing structures function to oppose the necessary community action. I offer no solution to these unsettled issues. My purpose is only to outline the questions that can be raised when Trainer’s anarchist strategy is viewed through the lens of power.

My second point about Trainer’s strategy concerns his seemingly optimistic assumptions about the prospects for peaceful human cooperation for common good, in the absence of state coercion. This is an issue all anarchists must deal with, for despite the undeniable beauty of their assumptions, many would argue that

there are just too many people out there with strangely configured worldviews and behavioural histories, and that state coercion is therefore necessary to keep these people from imposing themselves on society in oppressive or violent ways. This is a challenge that has a long history in the literature on anarchism (Moreland, 1998), and I acknowledge that anarchists are not without their counter-arguments. But this is not the place to review and evaluate that thorny debate. I merely point out that the debate is ongoing and is unlikely ever to be closed.

I should add, however, that Trainer's vision would seem much less 'utopian' if a case could be made that it is actually in people's immediate self-interest to live simpler lives of reduced consumption and engage in the creative process of building a new society. This may seem like a counter-intuitive possibility in an age that glorifies consumption as never before, but an impressive body of evidence is mounting which suggests otherwise (see Alexander, 2012b). In accordance with ancient wisdom traditions, this research indicates that once our basic material needs are met, getting richer does not contribute much to our overall wellbeing, compared to things like community engagement, social relations, and creative activity. What this means is that most people leading high consumption lives could actually live better on less. This is extremely encouraging news, because if this message ever entered the collective consciousness of consumer societies, it could well spark the cultural revolution in attitudes toward consumption upon which a sustainable and just world relies. That is, if people *en masse* came to see that a simple life is a very good life, the world would change quickly and in fundamental ways.

My final point about Trainer's anarchist strategy builds upon the point just made. Let us optimistically suppose that post-consumerist values were mainstreamed over the next decade, and a critical mass of people began to see the desirability and necessity of The Simpler Way. Let us suppose further that this social movement began building the new society more or less according to Trainer's vision described above. My question is this: Would there not come a time when this social movement was so large and well organised that the state simply could not ignore its demands? And at that time, could not the state be employed to advance the goals of The Simpler Way and facilitate the transition to a sustainable and just world? These are questions that I ask myself in optimistic moods, and in those moods I confess to answering them in the affirmative. After all, if one is entitled to make optimistic assumptions about the possibility of a culture embracing The Simpler Way, it seems equally permissible to assume that our governments might one day be capable of acting in more enlightened ways too. If one is an

anarchist ‘on principle’, this will be unsatisfactory because it involves working with the state (however enlightened it may become); but if one is currently a ‘pragmatic anarchist’ more as a matter of strategy than principle, then this possibility should not be closed off in advance, because strategies might need to change when the world (inevitably) changes.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the key elements of Ted Trainer’s theory of The Simpler Way. Many intricacies of his analysis have necessarily received insufficient attention, and many issues remain to be explored more deeply, including: What form will The Simpler Way need to take in large urban centres, where existing infrastructure is poorly designed from a sustainability perspective and where land for localised food production is particularly hard to come by? How would a transition to The Simpler Way in the rich world affect the global South? And how would existing property rights, corporate structures, and power relations, which currently entrench the status quo, need to change in order to facilitate the emergence of The Simpler Way? Notwithstanding these outstanding questions, my review will be considered a success if it prompts more people to consult, engage, and develop Trainer’s primary texts, where more of the details on his challenging but inspiring vision can be found.

If it is true that the essential factor in the global predicament is overconsumption, the most obvious principle for a sustainable society is that those who are overconsuming must move to far more materially ‘simple’ lifestyles. This is the vision that Trainer has unpacked with considerable rigour and insight; he has also outlined a strategy for its realisation. ‘The task is astronomically difficult, probably impossible,’ he admits (2009: 6). At the same time, he insists that the peaceful revolution required can be joyous and easily achievable, if only people decide that it is what they want. This is the message of radical hope that exists deep within the bleak global picture Trainer so meticulously describes, and it suggests that the revolutionary task is primarily about developing the consciousness needed for a transition to The Simpler Way to take place.

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