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## THE DEEP GREEN ALTERNATIVE *Debating strategies of transition*

*We don't have a right to ask whether we're going to succeed or not. The only question we have a right to ask is 'what's the right thing to do?'*  
– Wendell Berry

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Evidence continues to mount that industrial civilisation, driven by a destructive and insatiable growth imperative, is chronically unsustainable, as well as grossly unjust. The global economy is in ecological overshoot, currently consuming resources and emitting waste at rates the planet cannot possibly sustain (Global Footprint Network, 2013). Peak oil is but the most prominent example of a more general situation of looming resource scarcity (Klare, 2012), with high oil prices having a debilitating effect on the oil-dependent economies which are seemingly dependent on cheap oil to maintain historic rates of growth (Heinberg, 2011). At the same time, great multitudes around the globe live lives of material destitution, representing a vast, marginalised segment of humanity that justifiably seeks to expand its economic capacities in some form (World Bank, 2008). Biodiversity continues to be devastated by deforestation and other forms of habitat destruction (United Nations, 2010), while the global development agenda seems to be aiming to provide an expanding global population with the high-impact material affluence enjoyed by the richest parts of the world

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a lightly revised version of *Simplicity Institute Report 14a* (2015), co-authored by Samuel Alexander and Jonathan Rutherford.

(Hamilton, 2003). This is despite evidence crying out that the universalisation of affluence is environmentally unsupportable (Smith and Positano, 2010; Turner, 2012) and not even a reliable path to happiness (Lane, 2001; Alexander, 2012a). Most worrying of all, perhaps, is the increasingly robust body of climate science indicating the magnitude of the global predicament (IPCC, 2013). According to the Climate Tracker Initiative (2013: 4), the world could exceed its ‘carbon budget’ in around 18 years, essentially locking us into a future that is at least 2° warmer, and threatening us with 4° or more. It is unclear to what extent civilisation as we know it is compatible with runaway climate change. And still, almost without exception, all nations on the planet – including or especially the richest ones – continue to seek GDP growth without limit, as if the cause of these problems could somehow provide the solution. If once it was hoped that technology and science were going to be able to decouple economic activity from ecological impact, such a position is no longer credible (Huesemann and Huesemann, 2011). Technology simply cannot provide any escape from the fact that there are biophysical limits to growth. Despite decades of extraordinary technological advance, which it was promised would lighten the ecological burden of our economies, global energy and resource consumption continue to grow, exacerbated by a growing population, but are primarily a function of the growth-orientated values that lie at the heart of global capitalism (Turner, 2012).

Against this admittedly gloomy backdrop lies a heterogeneous tradition of critical theorists and activists promoting what could be called a ‘deep green’ alternative to the growth-orientated, industrial economy. Ranging from the radical simplicity of Henry Thoreau (1983), to the post-growth economics of the Club of Rome (Meadows *et al.*, 1972; 2004), and developing into contemporary expressions of radical reformism (Latouche, 2009; Heinberg, 2011; Jackson, 2009), eco-socialism (Sarkar, 1999; Smith, 2010), and eco-anarchism (Bookchin, 1989; Holmgren, 2002; Trainer, 2010a), this extremely diverse tradition nevertheless agrees that the nature of the existing system is inherently unsustainable. Tinkering with or softening its margins – that is, any attempt to give capitalism a ‘human face’ – is not going to come close to addressing the problems we, the human species, are confronted with. What is needed, this tradition variously maintains, is a radical alternative way of living on the Earth – something ‘wholly other’ to the ways of industrialisation, consumerism, and limitless growth. However idealistic or utopian their arguments might seem, the basic reasoning is that the nature of any solutions to current problems

must honestly confront the magnitude of the overlapping crises, or else one risks serving the destructive forces one ostensibly opposes.

In this chapter we do not seek to defend, as such, the ‘deep green’ alternative, but rather analyse the most prominent strategies that have been put forth to bring it into existence. In other words, we take the vision outlined below for granted – we assume a deep green alternative is necessary – and critically analyse how such an alternative may be realised. We begin in the next section by outlining the deep green vision with a very broad brush, in order to give the more critical and substantive sections some context. It seems to us that there is some interesting and heartening overlap with respect to the envisioned ‘end state’ of the deep green school, and yet there is fierce debate over how to get there. Our primary interest in this chapter, therefore, is to examine these various theories of transition or transformation – ranging from parliamentarianism to socialism to anarchism – in order to highlight the most important factors at play, and hopefully shed some light on the question of strategy. While we do not expect or even intend to provide answers to this thorny question, the chapter should serve a worthwhile purpose if it helps clarify the debate and bring more attention to the issues under consideration.

## 2. The Deep Green Alternative

It is somewhat misleading, of course, to talk of *the* deep green alternative, or *the* deep green school, when in fact there are really a multitude of deep green alternatives, each of which acknowledges the context-dependency of any form of life. Nevertheless, despite this diversity, there is, as implied above, a significant degree of overlap within the body of radical literature we are examining concerning the desired ‘end state’. For present purposes it is the general agreement that interests us, rather than the matters of detail or substance about which disagreement does, and forever may, exist. On that basis, we will now briefly sketch one vision of the deep green alternative, leaving the disagreement over ‘how to get there’ for examination in forthcoming sections.

At the heart of the deep green alternative is the recognition that a just and sustainable way of life, on a finite planet, must be based on material sufficiency and frugality, not material affluence (Alexander, 2013a). High-consumption lifestyles can never be universalised, even if the global economy were to transition to renewable systems of energy (Trainer, 2012). Steb Fisher (2013) has recently estimated that affluent countries such as Australia must reduce energy and material consumption to 6% of current levels in

order to end the holocaust of species extinction and for humanity to have a good chance of long-term survival. Even allowing for some uncertainty in such estimates, the sheer scale of overshoot suggests that sustainability is not simply about people in consumer societies taking shorter showers, turning off the lights, and composting, necessary though those practices may be. Nor is it simply about transitioning to renewable energy. True sustainability – deep green sustainability – implies embracing a lifestyle of radical simplicity, which exemplifies extremely frugal but sufficient ways of living (Trainer, 2010a). Yes, it is imperative to transition rapidly to economic systems that run entirely or almost entirely on renewable energy. But this means living with much less energy than is typical in developed nations (Trainer, 2012), although most simplicity advocates also highlight the many benefits that could flow from living in less energy and resource intensive ways (Alexander, 2012a). That is, generally it is argued that the radical changes that are required for sustainability would actually be in our interests, if only we were to negotiate the transition wisely, and be open to living very differently than is customary in consumer societies today.

It must also be acknowledged, however, that this vision does not imagine that flourishing lifestyles of radical simplicity could easily arise within existing economic, political, and social structures. Not at all. In order for a sufficiency-based economy to function in desirable ways, a fundamental reevaluation of existing systems and structures is required. Primarily, this involves moving away from a growth-orientated economy and embracing a zero-growth economy which operates within the sustainable carrying capacity of local and global ecosystems. In the over-developed nations of the so-called ‘first world’, this would first involve moving through a phase of planned economic contraction – or degrowth – before stabilising in an economy that had ‘zero growth’ in resource and energy consumption. In the poorer parts of the world, this would involve developing or growing economic capacities until basic needs for all were met, and then those economies too would need to transition to a zero-growth model (Lawn and Clarke, 2010).

What would life look like in a zero-growth economy based on material sufficiency? Obviously, this question would have to be answered depending on context, but some broad comments can be made for present purposes. As much food as possible would be produced locally and organically, in order to minimise or eliminate fossil fuel dependency and build resilience and self-reliance (Hopkins, 2010). This would involve a vast increase in urban agriculture throughout the suburbs, with all growing spaces cultivated, as well as the development of farms on the urban periphery. Another means of reducing fossil fuel dependency would

be to localise most production of goods, and transporting them, when necessary, via electric trains or vehicles, or even returning to the horse and cart in some situations. Walking or cycling would become the dominant mode of transport. Presumably some international trade and travel would still occur, as would some factory production, although the extent of such activities would have to be drastically reduced. Home production and self-sufficiency would inevitably increase. Many industries in existence today would become redundant, such as the fashion and marketing industries, for they would be superfluous in a world not driven by profit-maximisation. Other industries, such as solar and wind energy, would need to expand tremendously and urgently (a manufacturing process which, currently at least, depends on fossil fuels). Houses would be retrofitted to increase energy efficiency, and new houses would be built using mostly local resources, with housing density increasing in preference to further urban sprawl. A significant degree of re-ruralisation may also be required in some contexts. Clothes would first be mended rather than replaced, and necessary tools would be built to last. A great deal more sharing and barter would have to occur to mitigate the challenges of having much less stuff. Reuse, recycling, and conservation would be vigilantly embraced, and in many cases people would just have to do without many comforts and conveniences. But according to this deep green vision, basic material needs would be met, even if people did not have access to much beyond that threshold. Whether it would be necessary to live as simply as the Amish remains an open question, but that type of material culture provides a touchstone for understanding the radical simplicity that may indeed be required for genuinely sustainable living, especially in a world with seven billion people and counting. An Amish material standard of living, of course, need not necessitate an Amish culture or religion. As J.S. Mill (2004[1848]) noted long ago, a 'stationary state' economy need not imply a stationary state in culture or human improvement. While this brief outline probably raises as many questions as it answers, it is hoped that it nevertheless provides some insight into the deep green vision of life under consideration.

### **3. Debating Strategies of Transition: Five Pathways**

Having outlined a general vision of the deep green alternative, we now wish to look more closely at the question of transition; that is, at the question of how to realise the alternative outlined. For it is not enough, of course, to be able to describe the nature of a just and sustainable society. It is equally necessary to consider strategic

issues about how to mobilise communities and destabilise existing power structures for the purpose of bringing such a society into existence. In the following sections we critically examine five theories of transition: (1) the radical-reformism strategy; (2) the eco-socialist strategy; (3) the eco-anarchist strategy; (4) the deep green resistance strategy; and finally (5) a pathway defined more by ‘crisis and response’ than any deliberate strategy for change. Naturally, our examination of these large themes cannot be comprehensive, so readers should treat the analysis as merely an invitation to discuss.

### 2.1 *Radical reformism*

Our economic and financial system... is a tool that we have developed and that reflects our goals and values. People do not worry about the future, but only about their current problems... And when for many people the future does not matter, they will create an economic and financial system that destroys the future. You can tweak this system as long as you want. As long as you do not change the values of the people, it will continue. If you give someone a hammer in his hand and he uses it, and it kills his neighbor, it helps nothing to change the hammer. Even if you take away the hammer, it remains a potential killer (Meadows, 2013).

In what follows we use the term ‘radical reformism’ neutrally, neither as a term of criticism nor praise, but merely to signify a strategy that is based on radical change brought about through radical parliamentary reform. This approach to transition is currently dominant in green circles. As the term suggests, there are two defining elements. It is ‘reformist’ because it does not seek to overturn or replace the basic structure of a market economy<sup>2</sup> or the centralised democratic state. Implicitly or explicitly, this position holds that the deep green transition required could be achieved in

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<sup>2</sup> In what follows, much reference will be made to capitalism and the market system. These terms will refer to a system in which a) there is private ownership of most means of production; and b) a market system through which fundamental economic outcomes (that is *what*, *how*, and *for whom* to produce and allocate) are determined via price signals and exchange, rather than through deliberate social or governmental planning (Fotopoulos, 1997: 5). For a discussion of the blurry lines between market economies and socially planned economies, see Samuel Alexander, ‘Property beyond growth: Toward a politics of voluntary simplicity’. Doctoral thesis, Melbourne Law School. Ch. 2.

and through these institutions that, today, dominate the globe (Fotopoulos, 1997; Harvey, 2005; Robinson, 2011). Often there is little focus on class or elite power, as barriers to transition. Instead, it is believed that, in principle, a peaceful transition to a sustainable world can be achieved by winning political support across the social hierarchy. Commonly there is a call to do away with outdated ‘left’ and ‘right’ distinctions, in order to forge a new form of progressive green politics (Sutton, 2013; Mcknight, 2005). In short, the basic aim, as Terry Leahy argues, ‘is to effect a transition to sustainability without class conflict or a change in the mode of production’ (Leahy, 2013: 13). Nevertheless, the strategy is certainly ‘radical’ in that, of necessity, it seeks a massive shift in the *modus operandi* of today’s globalised neo-liberal capitalism and at all levels of society. As one of the leading advocates of radical reformism, Tim Jackson has put it, paraphrasing Spock from *Star Trek*, ‘It’s capitalism, Jim. But not as we know it’ (Jackson 2009: 202).

One of the central underlying beliefs of radical reformism is what Marxists would critically call ‘idealism’. This is the belief ‘that reality is constituted by ideas, not material conditions’ (Keith *et al.*, 2011: 217). According to this view, ideas and values shape and mold social structures, rather than the other way around. Thus, economic growth is explained in terms of ideology. It is likened to a religion or addiction and consumerism is characterised as a disease of ‘affluenza’ (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). In the epigraph to this section, Dennis Meadow, one the original authors of *Limits to Growth* (1972), provides an example of this view. Here is another example from Paul Gilding:

Our addiction to growth is a complex phenomenon, one that can’t be blamed on a single economic model or philosophy. It is not the fault of capitalism or Western democracy, and it is not a conspiracy of the global corporate sector or the rich ... Growth goes to the core of the society we have built because it is the result of who we are and what we have decided to value (Gilding, 2011: 66).

According to Gilding, economic growth and the debt crisis are not, ultimately, due to the systemic working of capitalism but rather, the values and ideas that citizens have chosen to adopt. It follows that the central task for transition is a cultural revolution – an overturning of presently dominant competitive and individualistic values and ideas – to be replaced by a culture that fosters healthy relationships, community building, and rewards altruism and simple living (Latouche, 2009: 34). This in turn will pressure governments to make the radical policy shifts required for the deep

green vision to be realised (assuming democracies are functioning sufficiently well).

Moves toward shaping this new culture require efforts at all levels of civil society, as well as within business and government. At the household level, individuals and families are encouraged to downshift and simplify lifestyles. There is evidence this process has begun with nationwide surveys indicating a quarter of Australian and British middle-aged adults downshifting in the 10 years prior to 2001 (Hamilton and Breakspear, 2003a; Hamilton and Breakspear, 2003b). In the largest empirical study of the Voluntary Simplicity Movement, it has been estimated that as many as 200 million people, to varying degrees, have begun exploring lifestyles of reduced and restrained consumption (Alexander and Ussher, 2012). This signifies a movement of potentially transformative significance if it ever radicalised and organised itself with political intent (see also, Holmgren, 2013).

At the local, community level, radical reformists promote the expansion of existing social movements such as slow food, permaculture, eco-villages and Transition Towns (Holmgren, 2002; Hopkins, 2008; Gilding, 2010; Heinberg, 2011). Together these movements are beginning the process of re-localising food, decarbonising energy production, and developing the embryo of a new informal economy based on sharing and gifting within neighborhoods, suburbs, and towns. Examples include community gardens, farmers' markets, local currencies, co-housing projects, recycling schemes, and skill sharing networks. Radical reformists generally believe these grassroots initiatives, in addition to building local resilience, can help to generate the values and ideas needed to win support for radical political reforms at all levels of government (Gilding, 2011; Heinberg, 2011).

Within the Transition Towns Movement in particular there is a strong emphasis on not being too prescriptive. Though the transition 'handbook' outlines 12 steps to transition, the focus is to provide guidance on the initial setting up and building of a movement. There is minimal direction given on the actual projects that should be attempted and in what order. Though this has been the subject of criticism (Trainer, 2010a), the movement founders consider it to be a virtue. It allows local manifestations of transition the flexibility to respond to the felt needs and interests of participants, according to context and circumstance. The overall focus is on encouraging ordinary people to take initiative and 'just do stuff' in order to make their communities more sustainable (Hopkins, 2013).

Many radical reformists have begun to think through how grassroots action could influence public policy more decisively. The



Australian-based climate activist Phil Sutton, for example, has drawn up an approach to strategy aimed at winning support for a ‘climate emergency’ policy but which, arguably, could be applied to the broader task of achieving a deep green society (Sutton, 2013). Initially efforts should be made to target local councils, which sometimes have a strong base of green support. The electoral results of Green parties could be used as a rough indicator. In these green-friendly zones, activists should make sustained efforts to win over both local residents and council workers to a climate emergency agenda of rapid decarbonisation, while building social support amongst civil society. Even if only one council adopts this position, they can act as ‘champions... beyond their border, and across the country’ (Sutton, 2013: 24). Eventually, it is argued, this could have a decisive influence on state and federal policy making. In the future, it is thought this same approach could also apply at the global level; coalitions of radical ‘green’ states could influence the outcome of international environmental negotiations (Sutton, 2013: 24).

Eventually, most radical reformists believe state and federal government will need to pursue radical policy change. Here, the ecological economist Herman Daly has been influential. To achieve the necessary ‘degrowth’ in resource and energy consumption,<sup>3</sup> a comprehensive Cap-Auction-Trade system is advocated (Daly, 2013). This would work in a similar way to the Australian Labor Party’s recently implemented (yet soon to be abolished) carbon scheme, though obviously much more comprehensive and with far deeper cuts. Legally binding resource quotas would be placed on resources across the entire economy (Alcott, 2008). The quotas would be ‘owned’ by the government, which would then auction them to firms throughout the economy, giving them a financial incentive to make the most ‘efficient’ resource reductions without

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<sup>3</sup> Some critics point out that we can make a distinction between physical growth and GDP growth. Physical growth refers to an increase in energy and material inputs into the economy, whereas GDP refers to total monetary value of production and consumption. Some believe GDP growth can be ‘decoupled’ from physical inputs through technological change and efficiency improvements (Sutton, 2013). However, given the historically tight relationship between GDP and resource/energy inputs, as well as the deep cuts required in the latter, maintaining GDP growth while initiating degrowth in resource/energy throughput will prove extremely challenging. Nevertheless, degrowth advocates do tend to argue that their agenda for change will be in people’s self-interest (as well as in social and environmental interests), so in this sense degrowth can be considered ‘economic’, even if it implies a contraction of GDP (see Alexander, 2012b).

requiring the state to ‘pick winners’. This overarching policy goal is then supported by additional policy reforms (Daly, 2013; Terry Leahy, 2013; Heinberg, 2011; Jackson, 2009; Hamilton, 2003). There is disagreement and debate among reformists but some of the most commonly proposed policies include:

- Redistribution of wealth via taxation;
- Trade protections to promote ‘green’ industries and regulate damaging industries;
- Reform of International Institutions such WTO, IMF, World Bank;
- Provision of a guaranteed adequate income for all citizens;
- Reduced working hours in exchange for high consumption;
- Banking reforms (e.g., an end to fractional reserve banking and predatory lending);
- Population policies and targets;
- Direct investment in renewables (including subsidies) and ‘green’ jobs;
- Promotion of cooperative businesses and ethical investment.

Reformists are aware that these proposals would require almost unprecedented levels of government regulation – a far cry from today’s globalised neo-liberalism. Gilding, for example, sees a need to go far beyond carbon trading or taxes to reduce carbon emissions as quickly and deeply as the science requires (Gilding, 2011). He calls for a government-mandated phase-down of the coal industry and a ‘massive’ programme of direct investment in renewables (Gilding, 2011: 136-7). Jackson and Heinberg also foresee the need for nationalisation of ‘strategic firms’, particularly the banking sector, so that debt can be cancelled and government can take back control of money creation. Terry Leahy (2013), in a critical review of radical reformism, goes further and argues the above proposals would, in practice, require levels of government control, regulation, and planning that would make it virtually indistinguishable from heavy state-socialism. But on this point radical reformists are likely to disagree. They remain confident that their goals can be achieved, albeit within a heavily moderated ‘market economy’ framework. They explicitly argue that the economy should, to the largest extent possible, remain in private hands with competitive markets determining the allocation of resources (Heinberg, 2011; Daly, 1991). Thus, for Herman Daly, the above measures ‘are based on the impeccably conservative institutions of private property and decentralised market allocation’ (Daly, 2013). Likewise Paul Gilding (2011) is clear that more revolutionary changes are not required:

Is the end of growth the end of markets? The end of capitalism? Most definitely not. We will still need competition, we will still want ideas and innovation to flourish and we will want capital allocated as efficiently as possible. Markets are good at all those things.

Again this is because, for radical reformists, the core problem does not lie *inherently* within the market economy and private production. Rather, the core problem is the culture in which these institutions are embedded. If radical cultural change can be achieved – including among the ‘power elite’ (Gilding, 2011) – then transition will occur, without the need to consider more revolutionary change.

A major attraction of reformism is its non-revolutionary approach. Though within the political class the above policy reforms would be considered ‘extreme’, the adoption of a reformed capitalism nevertheless opens up the possibility of working with business, government, and civil society groups, in order to build support for radical policy shifts. It is, obviously, easier to build mass support for such a vision than try to build support for the even more radical proposals considered below. This is particularly the case with localised movements such as Transition Towns, slow-food and permaculture. These initiatives currently thrive, at least in part, because they offer participants a positive, flexible, and *relatively* non-confrontational approach to achieving the transition.

That said, if a radical reformist movement were ever to build serious momentum and influence, conflict and hostility would seem inevitable. It would be naïve to think governments, corporations, and wealthy citizens would willingly accept the above policy proposals, particularly the imposition of a national ‘degrowth’ policy. Such measures will almost certainly be vigorously opposed, ideologically and by force if necessary, by elite groups and most governments. ‘How,’ asks Leahy, ‘could we possibly suppose that the capitalist class would not resist radical reformism when it is intended to attack every part of their current power base?’ (Leahy, 2013: 21). In Australia, one only needs to look at the ferocious corporate opposition to even mild carbon and mining taxes, to see evidence of what one could expect. Global responses to the Occupy Movement provide another telling example. Confrontation and conflict will therefore be an inevitable part of the transition.

More challengingly, eco-socialists and eco-anarchists, as we will now see, argue that reformism – even if it were vigorously pursued – is inherently incapable of achieving the transition to a deep green society. The eco-socialists and eco-anarchists offer differing reasons for this view. Let us first consider the eco-socialists.

## 2.2 *The eco-socialist strategy*

Millions of people must realize that overcoming the crises and, in the end, ensuring the survival of mankind, are not possible as long as capitalism continues to exist. People have to be convinced of the necessity of a newly conceived socialism (Sarkar, 2008: 5).

Socialists tend to share a common desire to see a society 'based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of the whole community' (Pepper *et al.*, 2010: 33). At present, however, very few socialists – even among those who are concerned about the environmental crises – have adopted the deep green vision. But there are now a growing number of eco-socialists, such as Saral Sarkar (1999), Richard Smith (2010), and John Bellamy Foster (2010), who recognise that today any socialism worthy of the name will inevitably require a challenge to current levels of industrialism and affluence. The work of Saral Sarkar, in particular, is worth highlighting. He is very clearly and boldly expressing the need for a re-conceived eco-socialism that incorporates the essential elements of the deep green vision, such as decentralisation, localism, and simplified living. His ideas will therefore be the prime focus in this section.

All eco-socialists argue that market-capitalism is fundamentally irreconcilable with ecological sustainability (Smith, 2010; Sarkar, 1999;). Capitalist firms enter the market in order to sell commodities in competition with other firms. Thus, to remain viable all firms must constantly re-invest their profits in order to maximise economic expansion. They can do this, for example, by investing in labour-saving technologies, exploiting cheap labour and resources, maximising the sales effort through marketing, and increasing the scale of production, in order to benefit from economies of scale (Smith, 2010). They *must*, in other words, enhance the forces of production. And, unless regulations prevent them, they must do this regardless of any social and environmental 'externalities' created in the process. As a result, eco-socialists argue, there is a 'grow or die' dynamic built into the foundations of the capitalist-market system.

In normal times, growth at the micro level of the firm results in growth across the entire economy. But, as Smith points out, when it does not there will be a recession. And, he notes, 'it's not a pretty sight: capital destruction, mass unemployment, devastated communities, foreclosures, spreading poverty and homelessness, school closures, and environmental considerations shunted aside in the all-out effort to restore growth' (Smith, 2010: 14). We witnessed this very clearly in the wake of the global financial crisis when

governments, of every stripe, used emergency fiscal and monetary action to ‘stimulate’ their economies.<sup>4</sup> Richard Smith concludes that ‘the growth imperative is virtually a law of nature built-into in any conceivable capitalism’ (Smith, 2010, 10; cf. Lawn, 2011). Eco-socialists therefore contend that a capitalist framework cannot be made compatible with a ‘steady state’ economy, let alone a process of degrowth, as required by the deep green vision.

To be clear, most, though not all eco-socialists would see some place for ‘markets’ – in the sense of trade and exchange – particularly among the self-employed, family businesses, and worker cooperatives (Sarkar, 1999). However, these ‘markets’ would have to work under firm regulations and guidelines set by democratically developed local and regional planes and guidelines (Smith, 2010; Sarkar, 1999; Trainer, 2010a). Critics of socialism, of course, would question whether such a non-market economy could in fact be compatible with a truly democratic state (Friedman, 1982).

On the question of what activists should be doing *right now*, however, radical reformists and eco-socialists have much in common. Sarkar suggests that a primary initial task is to build a ‘simple-lifestyle’ campaign to create within growing numbers of people a ‘readiness to sacrifice luxury and comfort’ (Sarkar, 1999: 229). The campaign must be one that is ‘based on ecological arguments, [and] appeals to people’s sense of equality, justice and solidarity with the third world and the interests of the future generations’ (Sarkar, 1999: 229). Eco-socialists therefore agree, up to a point, that achieving a radical shift in values among ordinary people is necessary. For this revolution, Sarkar argues, ‘moral progress is a precondition of success’ (Sarkar, 1999: 266).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Though, as many have pointed out, governments frequently did this in ways which primarily benefitted the large banks and corporations – i.e., by bailing them out or granting loans. The Australian Government was a partial exception, in that their stimulus package gave money directly to ordinary people to spend into circulation.

<sup>5</sup> This, of course, is a significant departure from the theoretical assumption of traditional Marxist ‘historical materialism’. Marxists always believed that a ‘new man’ was required for socialism, however it was thought this would develop *after* the revolution. New revolutionary ideas and values could not become hegemonic *prior* to the revolution because, according to historical materialism, material conditions determine consciousness. This meant socialist property relations had to be achieved before a culture of solidarity and co-operation could become widespread. Moreover, a change in the *relations of production* (i.e., socialist property relations) could not be achieved until the *forces of production* (i.e., technical advance) had been built up. But, as Sarkar

Some eco-socialists would also agree with reformists that, in the short term, liberal-democratic governments must be pressured into making radical reforms. Eco-socialists John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, for example, propose a long list of reforms, similar to those listed previously, which should form the basis of green campaigns (Foster and Magdoff, 2011: 126-130). They argue that making such demands will push capitalism to its limits, leading to tension and conflict and eventually raising consciousness on the need for more far-reaching change in terms of the underlying property system (Foster & Magdoff, 2011). For these reasons there is a strong basis for reformist and socialist activists to work together on environmental and social campaigns, even if significant differences exist about the ultimate nature of the alternative society, including the nature of transformation.

In the long term eco-socialists believe the deep green vision can only finally be achieved through a socialist revolution. They disagree with reformists that a revolution in values and ideas, coupled with parliamentary reform, will be sufficient; systemic economic change away from the fundamental structures of market capitalism is also required. Before this is possible, there will have to be a sustained effort to achieve ‘cultural hegemony’ – that is, an intellectual acceptance throughout civil society – for an eco-socialist perspective. This must begin firstly with a widespread attempt, using all means possible, to de-legitimise capitalism (Sarkar and Bruno, 2008). Sarkar does not believe, at this stage, the priority should be on forming an eco-socialist party. However, if one is started ‘its task should be to strengthen the movement’ (Sarkar, 1999: 228) rather than contest for power. The attempt to gain short-term electoral respectability frequently results in watering down the political agenda. This has been the broad experience of the Greens, with the classic example being the German Greens. In that case, after a long internal struggle, the more pragmatic ‘realos’ won out

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points out, all this has to be rethought in light of the limits to growth. An *eco-socialist* revolution, today, cannot be based on the further development of productive forces: ‘...on the contrary, moral progress is necessary to stop the development of productive forces!’ (Sarkar, 1999: 266). A willingness to accept this will have to become widespread among people in the first world, *prior* to any revolution. But Sarkar does not reject historical materialism entirely; he agrees that the ‘new man’ will not be achieved before the revolution. Instead, he hedges his bets: ‘...the new man will develop in the process of developing the new society’ (Sarkar, 1999: 266). But for Sarkar, unlike eco-anarchists (see below), a vital part of this process will involve taking state power.

over the ‘fundis’ who wanted the party to remain true to its founding values and principles (Biehl, 1993). But, Sarkar argues, compromising to achieve power makes no sense if the central goal of the party, in the long term, is to help build cultural hegemony for an eco-socialist vision. As such, if the party takes part in elections ‘it must be prepared, for many years to come, to be rejected by the vast majority of voters’ (Sarkar, 1999: 228). Only when widespread cultural influence had been attained could a serious attempt be made by an eco-socialist party to win democratic elections. Obviously, we are far from such a situation today.

The difficulties would not end there. Most eco-socialists think the movement will have to be *internationalist* from the outset. This would be particularly necessary given today’s high levels of global economic integration. According to many theorists, globalisation has resulted in the emergence of a global capitalist class, with immense ideological, political, and economic power (Robinson, 2011; Fotopoulos, 2005; Hardt and Negri, 2000). If an eco-socialist party in one isolated country made an attempt on power, it would be highly vulnerable to economic attacks in the form of embargoes, boycotts, and capital flight. Sarkar therefore recommends withholding attempts to win power until ‘the pressure for change in the direction of eco-socialism ha[s] built up in several countries’ (Sarkar, 1999: 230).

A crucial question that arises is who or what would be the agent of this ‘newly conceived socialism’? Which class or group within society can be expected to lead the fight? Traditionally socialists have placed their hopes in the organised working class. But, as Sarkar makes clear, eco-socialism can no longer promise the working class, at least in affluent societies, increased shares of wealth and income, which has, historically, been the *raison d’être* of the union movement. On the contrary, this revolution involves reductions in income and material wealth – though not necessarily quality of life – for first-world workers. Sarkar therefore does not think the working class will play a unique or pivotal role, though of course, like everyone else, they must eventually be won over. He quotes, instead, Erich Fromm: ‘today there are only two camps, those who care and those who don’t’ (quoted in Sarkar, 1999: 230). The ranks of those ‘who care’ could come from all levels of society, apart from private entrepreneurs, perhaps, who must endorse the growth imperative in order to remain competitive.

This view on the working class is hotly contested among eco-socialists. Traditionally, the socialist movement has placed its hope in the working class, as the only social agency with both the *interest* and the potential *power*, to end capitalist exploitation and create a classless society. Ellen Meiskins Wood is typically emphatic: ‘Unless

the class-interests of the working class themselves direct them into political struggle and to the transformation of the mode of production, the socialist project must remain an empty and utopian aspiration' (Wood, 2012: 319). And, for this same reason, most eco-socialists cannot stomach Sarkar's strategic ambivalence toward the working class. John Bellamy Foster is among the many who are putting their hopes in a new 'environmental working class' that would forge alliances with other oppressed groups in response to environmental degradation (Foster, 2013). But even if one is convinced of the strategic importance of the working class, it cannot be denied that for this revolution – the deep green revolution – class *interests* are going to have to be radically redefined. Perhaps, eco-socialists could press the union movement to focus on meaningful and secure work, full employment, and democratic control of the workplace. None of these are secured by today's neo-liberal capitalism, and they are consistent with a viable eco-socialism. But eco-socialism cannot be achieved without material sacrifice. As Sarkar notes, in this revolution first world workers 'have more than their chains to lose, they have their prosperity' (Sarkar, 1999:237).

A consolation, of sorts, is that the case for eco-socialism is most compelling when one considers how an orderly economic contraction or 'degrowth' may be achieved. As we saw above, radical reformists advocate for a gradual reduction in resource and energy consumption through the imposition of steadily lowering resource caps, while allowing markets to continue to determine resource allocation. Eco-socialists point out major difficulties with this scenario (Smith, 2010; Sarkar, 1999). A contraction of materials and energy would almost certainly lead to diminishing profits for firms and therefore reduced per-capita income alongside rising levels of bankruptcy and unemployment. If allocation were left to market forces, lower income groups and unskilled workers would also be hit hardest by rising costs of food and other basic living items. Furthermore, as Richard Smith (2010) points out, environmental and social outcomes, if left to the market, would not necessarily be equitable. The profit-driven growth compulsion would still be operative and, as such, firms would continue to produce 'goods and services we don't need, or goods designed to wear out, or goods designed to become obsolete as fast as possible' (Smith, 2010: 41). This would become intolerable in a context of rising scarcity. In short, a contraction within a capitalist framework would be 'a recipe for chaos and social unrest' (Sarkar, 1999: 219).

Eco-socialists argue this type of transition could never win broad-based political support, particularly among workers. This would only be conceivable if the burden and sacrifices were shared out equally among all, and nobody was left without economic



security. This would require rationing of goods and services, deliberate planning of investment and employment, and price controls. Eco-socialists do not shirk from drawing the politically unfashionable conclusion: the only way to humanely contract the economy is for the democratic state to take ownership of, at least, all large enterprises and comprehensively plan an orderly contraction of the economy (Sarkar, 1999: Ch 6; Smith, 2010).

Sarkar distinguishes between this transition phase and the future eco-socialist society. During the transition, the state, though democratically elected, will necessarily require tough action to push through policies in the face of ‘strong opposition of those who have much to lose’ (Sarkar, 1999: 214). Once the contraction has occurred, however, the new decentralised and simplified eco-socialist economy will be more amenable to extensive democratic input from the broader population, both within firms and local community planning bodies. And people will have a strong incentive to become involved. Everyone will understand that his or her own economic welfare, and local reputation, would depend on making a valued contribution. Ideally, this local dependency will also increase the efficiency of a planned economy and help to avoid the corruption and inefficiency that stifled previous attempts (Sarkar, 1999, Ch. 6).

There are several weaknesses within the eco-socialist strategy. The most obvious is that, after the disappointments of ‘actually existing socialism’ and the rise of post-modern identity politics, the socialist ‘brand’ has taken a battering. In most affluent countries socialist organisations have small numbers and minor influence. And this is the case despite the fact that very few socialists have incorporated the limits to growth into their politics. Sandy Irvine rightly points out that a glance at far left literature ‘suggests that, so far, any greening has been rather skin deep’ (Irvine, 2001: 8). If they did incorporate the limits to growth, in the short term at least, their popularity – particularly within unions – is likely to sink further. In addition, as Pepper points out, there has been a long-running rift, both practical and theoretical, between socialism and the ecology movement that will prove difficult to overcome (Pepper, 1994). Though they are often unaware of it, the ideas, values, and tactics of modern greens, have their roots in the anarchist tradition more than Marxian socialism (Pepper, 1994: 4). As we will see below, contemporary eco-anarchists raise further objections to the eco-socialist transition strategy.

Eco-socialists can point to positive indicators. Recent polls in the US, for example, indicate high levels of support for socialism among the young, increasing significantly since the 2008 global

financial crisis.<sup>6</sup> In Germany, polling suggests over half the population believes socialism is a good idea, but its implementation has failed in the past (Sarkar, 1999: 218). Socialists are also encouraged by the turn to the left across Latin America in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, and Nicaragua. This new brand of socialism articulates a strong concern for the environment, as evidenced by the ‘Rights of Mother Earth’ statement that was issued at the World People’s Conference on Climate Change in Bolivia in 2010 (Foster and Magdoff, 2011). But, while hopeful, none of these trends provide evidence that many socialists have embraced the deep green vision. Still, there is no doubt eco-socialism offers a forthright challenge to deep greens of all varieties: a fair and orderly transition to a sustainable society, they argue, can only be achieved within a state-driven socialist framework. It is a claim that needs to be taken seriously by all those who recognise the extent and urgency of the unfolding crises the world is currently facing.

### 3.3 *The eco-anarchist strategy*

The only realistic approach in creating a new society beyond the market economy and the nation-state... is a political strategy that comprises the gradual involvement of increasing numbers of people in a new kind of politics and the parallel shifting of economic resources (labor, land, capital) away from the market economy. The aim of such a transitional strategy should be to create changes in the institutional framework and value systems that, after a period of tension between the new institutions and the state, would, at some stage, replace the market economy and statist democracy (Fotopoulos, 1997: 282).

Eco-anarchism is one current within the broad school of anarchism. For the purposes of this chapter it refers to those anarchist thinkers who adopt core elements of the deep green vision. Eco-anarchists share much in common with eco-socialists in terms of their critique of capitalism. In most cases they agree that capitalism cannot be reconciled with sustainability. A socialised, planned economy is therefore usually endorsed, though there is considerable debate on the degree to which private property, markets, and money, should be part of a desirable future economy (Trainer, 2010a; Fotopoulos, 1997; Nelson and Timmerman, 2011; Leahy, 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/29/young-people-socialism\\_n\\_1175218.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/29/young-people-socialism_n_1175218.html)

Eco-anarchists, however, share a different *ultimate goal* to eco-socialists in that they want to end, or at least minimise, political hierarchy; that is, the situation in which some have greater power over political decisions than others. This, among other things, leads to their rejection of the centralised state, even in the form of representative democracy. They point to the failure of state socialism as evidence of the inevitable corruption that takes place when political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a centralised state bureaucracy. Furthermore, power, according to anarchists, not only corrupts those who monopolise it; it demoralises those without it. As Ted Trainer stresses, ‘Humans will not have reached social maturity until they have learned to govern themselves’ (Trainer, 2010a: 153). In place of the state, anarchists want a *self-governing* society. This would still involve collective laws, rules, and regulations. However, it would be ordinary people themselves who *directly* determine the key economic and political decisions that affect their lives, through neighbourhood and town assemblies and local committees. Local assemblies should then be federated at the regional and national level where delegates, subject to regular rotation and recall, would be charged with responsibility for representing the wishes of their local assemblies. In other words, anarchists want a *participatory* democracy as opposed to all other forms of ‘statist’ society, whether democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian. It can also be argued that governments have an inherent bias toward growth, insofar as policies depend on taxation. With a larger economy, therefore, there is a larger tax base to fund government policies, making it difficult for governments to promote post-growth economics, especially a policy of degrowth.

But apart from ideological opposition to the state, eco-anarchists offer practical reasons why the centralised state, by its very nature, will be unable to run decentralised and localised economies, which will be non-negotiable elements of deep green society from an eco-anarchist perspective (Trainer, 2010a). These economies will require a high degree of self-sufficiency, using local resources to meet local needs. This will involve a great deal of variation from locality to locality, resulting in a diverse range of rules, procedures, and arrangements. In these novel circumstances, Trainer argues, it will only be ordinary people, at the local level, who will be capable of satisfactorily running their own local economies. Only they ‘will know the situation, the soils, the history, the likes and the dislikes, what will and won’t work there’ (Trainer, 2010a: 153). Distant bureaucrats will not have the knowledge or expertise to do this well, and the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach of a centralised state will not suit the diverse circumstances of different localities.

Neither, argues Trainer, will it be ideal for these new local economies to be run by a few representatives or powerful rulers (Trainer, 2010a: Ch. 6). In conditions of resource and energy scarcity only a society based on high levels of cooperation and collectivism will result in rules and procedures that work out well for all. But, of course, cooperation and collectivism depend on at least the majority of people being content with the running of their locality. This, in turn, will require that everyone has a say over the decisions that impact him or her. Without an inclusive democratic approach, town morale will rapidly decline. ‘Resentful people who don’t own the decisions,’ Trainer quips, ‘are not going to turn up well to the working bees to implement them’ (Trainer, 2010a: 154). According to eco-anarchists, in other words, a truly ecological society will have to be a self-governing society. It will not be run well by powerful representatives, either at the national or local level.

We must, however, separate out the eco-anarchist *goal* of radical self-government – which many today would see as unfeasible – from the eco-anarchist perspective on *transition*. Their ideas on transition are extremely important for all deep greens to consider, regardless of whether the ultimate goal is adopted. The core point made by eco-anarchists – in contrast to the previous two approaches – is that they do not believe it makes sense to take state power, *as a means* of achieving the transition. Even if one thinks the democratic state will have a major role to play in the new society, it will surely be incapable or unwilling to carry *the transition* unless and until a critical mass of citizens have *first* come to support the necessary changes. Moreover, eco-anarchists argue, this will only happen after growing numbers of people have developed the skills and experienced the benefits of self-government, cooperation, sharing, living simply and frugally. This is thought to be the only way political support could be developed for laws and regulations enabling greater household self-sufficiency, the re-zoning of suburbs, development of commons, and, at the national/state level, the necessary planning and contraction of the economy. In other words, if the movement does end up taking state power via elections this will only be as a *consequence* of a long grassroots process of radical change.

For all the above reasons, eco-anarchists advocate a strategy based on ‘pre-figuring’ the new society inside the old. Rather than wait for the revolution to be pushed through by the state, the idea is to start building elements of the new society here and now. Leahy, for example, talks about creating hybrids of the new anarchist ‘gift economy’ that will co-exist alongside contemporary capitalism (Leahy, 2011: 132). Of course, most eco-anarchists are realistic enough to recognise that this process will, inevitably, involve

lobbying councils or NGOs and, eventually, states in order to change legislation and perhaps provide needed funding for local projects. Obviously, no large structural changes could occur without this. But these efforts should be engaged in only in so far as they support *citizens themselves* in creating new local economies, settlements, governing structures, and cultures. The hope is that the new formations will grow and, through a long process, eventually challenge the institutions and values of present-day consumer-capitalism. That is to say, radical change in values and institutions must occur *concurrently*, via the grassroots building of the new society.

Eco-anarchists usually offer specific suggestions on the type of local initiatives that make most sense. Trainer believes the focus should be on the creation of Community Development Cooperatives (CDCs) within towns and suburbs (Trainer, 2010a: Ch 14). The CDCs will attempt to create a new ‘Economy B’ existing beneath the present market economy. Trainer spells out the difference between these economies in stark terms:

We have to build a local economy, not a national or globalised economy; an economy designed to meet needs, not to maximise profits; an economy under participatory social control and not driven by corporate profit; and one guided by rational planning as distinct from leaving everything to the market. This is the antithesis of capitalism, markets, profit motivation and corporate control. Nothing could be more revolutionary. If we don’t plunge into building such an economy we will probably not survive in the coming age of scarcity (Trainer, 2010b).

How could local communities possibly begin to achieve such a momentous and radical change? Eco-anarchists understand that this will take decades of work. The CDCs will be tiny at first, seeking to undertake small, seemingly insignificant, projects. The CDCs could begin by growing food in a community garden, creating tool-sharing systems, baking bread, or repairing old furniture, bicycles, and appliances. Unemployed, elderly, and disadvantaged people would be ideal participants to engage in these activities, as they would have the most to gain and time to offer. The economic activity thus generated could then be linked to a new local currency, with participants earning a share of the produce according to the hours they contributed. Labour credit schemes like this have been used, very successfully, for many years at the egalitarian commune in Twin Oaks, Virginia (Nelson and Timmerman, 2011: Ch 9). Eventually the new economy could use their new currency to begin trading with local businesses within the town or suburb. Trainer wants to stress that the most important function of the CDCs is not

the actual building of alternative ways, at least at first. Rather, projects like these will put activists in the best position to raise awareness on the urgent need for radical change toward a deep green society.

Another eco-anarchist, Takis Fotopoulos, while endorsing such local initiatives, puts far more emphasis on engaging with local politics (Fotopoulos, 1997: Ch. 7). According to Fotopoulos, after a long period of spreading radical ideas, efforts should be made to win local council or municipal elections. If successful, the winning candidate would then rescind and devolve power to local citizen assemblies. The assemblies would then be in a position to give decisive support to a new model of economic development that breaks with the market economy and its growth dynamic. Fotopoulos hopes that such local formations could, eventually, confederate and ‘create the conditions for the establishment of a new society’ (Fotopoulos, 1997: 283).

At this point, one may ask, how does this ‘pre-figuring’ strategy differ, in practice, from the local projects promoted by reformists, such as Transition Towns, LETS, and permaculture? Currently there may be little *practical* difference. Eco-anarchists are supportive of these types of initiatives (Trainer, 2010a; Fotopoulos, 1997, Leahy, 2013; Nelson and Timmerman, 2011). They would have no issue with current attempts to build community gardens, develop co-housing arrangements, initiate sharing and gifting economies and, indeed, for individuals and families to downshift. However, for eco-anarchists, these initiatives will only be of long-term value if they eventually form part of a larger movement for radical change. Presently this is rarely the case. These initiatives are usually only aimed, at least explicitly, at making improvements or adjustments *within* capitalist society, rather than openly seeking to replace such a society. If not set within such a radical vision and programme (i.e., for a deep green society) such initiatives, it is argued, will be easily accommodated by consumer capitalism and will constitute no threat to it (Trainer, 2010a).

Eco-anarchists believe these local initiatives must eventually become part of a global revolutionary movement – though everywhere acting locally – aimed at the achievement of a zero-growth economy embedded within new self-governing and highly self-sufficient communities and economies, emerging from within present-day towns and suburbs. As David Pepper argues, localisation movements and projects for building ecological awareness are valuable but only if ‘set within a culture of non-capitalist values and a clearly radical social change agenda’ (Pepper, 2010: 43). Trainer encourages activists to get involved with local initiatives, but with this bigger picture in mind. They should attempt

to persuade their fellow participants that these projects must form part of a larger revolutionary project (Trainer, 2010a).

It is important to point out, finally, that eco-anarchists are not so naïve as to think this grassroots renewal will occur, on a large scale, simply through a voluntary retreat from consumer society. The vast majority of people will only start to look for alternatives when financial difficulties begin to impact on them directly. But when this happens, people will increasingly be searching for alternatives and a radical local movement must be ready to fill the vacuum in order to have a decisive influence over the course of events. Only if a *pre-emptive* radical economy and culture has been developed, argue eco-anarchists, can we have reasonable hope of avoiding chaotic breakdown and descent into a new dark age.

There are several major criticisms that have been levelled at the eco-anarchist strategy. Many would view the vision for a self-governing non-hierarchical society as hopelessly impracticable and unworkable. Almost all hitherto societies have had a degree of hierarchy and domination, suggesting that this is a deeply entrenched – perhaps unavoidable – element of any ‘complex’ society, whether desirable or not. Many would believe that some kind of coercive state apparatus is necessary to maintain social order. One might accept, for example, the beauty of the anarchist vision of self-government, but have deep doubts about how such a system could prevent anti-social individuals or groups from imposing themselves on society in oppressive or violent ways. The management of regional and national systems, let alone global negotiations, is also frequently argued to require representatives with the power to make decisions, unencumbered by the narrow concerns of local assemblies (Pepper, 1994).

With respect to transition, for reformists, adopting radical ‘anti-capitalist’ and ‘anarchist’ positions will only alienate people who are joining the Transition Towns and related movements. In a debate with Trainer, Rob Hopkins (2009) expressed concern that framing the transition in such terms would put every constituency, including business, government, and workers, offside. The result would be marginalisation and impotence for the movement, which would then achieve nothing of significance. Brian Davey (2009) worries that such a radical agenda risks overwhelming activists, many of whom are struggling to establish small-scale initiatives that, presently at least, seem anything but revolutionary. These less ambitious projects are undertaken in order to achieve something rather than nothing (Alexander, 2013b).

Both reformists and eco-socialists would criticise eco-anarchists for underestimating the importance of the state in an effective transition. This is not just a matter of logistics or the required

political authority. For them, the problems are far too urgent to wait until the unlikely time when a grassroots anarchist movement seriously challenges the cultural, economic, and political landscape. For a crisis of this scale, it is argued, the centralised state – and indeed global institutions – will be necessary to push things through, sadly, often against the will of many. Marxist socialists would raise a concern of the opposite variety. For them such ‘pre-figuring’ strategies are bound to fail because if they ever grew to be a threat to capitalism, the state would use its ideological, economic, and, if needed, military power to crush these movements before they posed a major threat. It would also siphon energy and effort away from the revolutionary project and potentially even weaken the resolve of sections of the community by providing a non-revolutionary outlet. From this view, only a revolution backed by the majority of the working class can hope to succeed.

For eco-anarchists, regardless of whether a radical grassroots transition is likely, it offers us our best chance in a bad situation. And this remains the case regardless of whether one sees a vital role for a centralised state. In their view, the question of taking state power, or indeed campaigning and building political parties, is irrelevant both now and for the foreseeable future. Transition to a deep green society can and will only take place *after* a grassroots process of radical economic, political, and cultural change has gathered momentum. It is only through this type of process that the ‘political will’ could be developed that would persuade the state to pass the laws and enact regulations required for a zero-growth economy, and the radical localisation of the economy. In this sense, the Transition Towns and related movements, whether intentionally or not, are adopting the anarchists’ approach to transition. But, for eco-anarchists, these movements will have to radicalise their goals and vision if they are to play a decisive role when consumer-capitalism begins to break down.

### 3.4 *The ‘deep green resistance’ strategy*

Our actionists are not trying to change consciousness. They’re not trying to get press. They’re not after a new government or a seat at the political table. They are trying to stop the burning of fossil fuels and industrial-scale destruction of the life support systems of their planet (Keith, 2011: 499).

The Deep Green Resistance (DGR) has been a controversial movement arising out of the US and headed by key thinkers such as Aric McBay, Lierre Keith, and Derrick Jensen (Jensen *et al.*, 2011). In terms of political outlook, DGR would share much in common



with the eco-anarchists, though the movement has been criticised by many anarchists.<sup>7</sup> The key difference, and the focus of this section, is their preparedness to advocate for industrial sabotage, in order to ‘bring down industrial civilization’ (Jensen *et al.*, 2011: 109). This is obviously highly controversial terrain and some readers may feel concerned it is being discussed. However, we feel it is important to do so, because advocacy of a more ‘militant’ response is likely to be common when people come to appreciate the gravity of today’s ecological crisis and see the state of political and cultural paralysis.

The fundamental belief underlying the DGR strategy is that there is neither the time nor the will, amongst the vast majority of the population, for a mass movement. Grassroots sustainability initiatives, in the DGR view, will therefore never be enough to stop the ongoing ecological calamity. Lierre Kieth makes no attempt to hide her exasperation with the masses: ‘The vast majority of the population will do nothing unless they are led, cajoled, or forced... there will be no mass movement, not in time to save this planet, our home’ (Kieth, 2011: 26). Arguably, elitist statements such as this profoundly shape the transition strategy adopted.

Throughout the DGR literature, there is also a strong sense of urgency. Waiting for an impending calamity is unacceptable. This will only prolong the inevitable collapse, which will be worse the longer it is drawn out. The desire to stop the ongoing mass extinction of species provides another critical moral incentive for DGR activists. Their clear admonition is to act decisively *now*.

Much of DGR’s pessimism derives from what they see as the liberal assumptions underpinning the environmental movement (Jensen *et al.*, 2011: Ch 3). In the liberal worldview the individual is the focus of transformative action. Social change is believed to come about through a process of rational argument and education, persuading individuals to adopt green lifestyles or campaign for sensible government policy. DGR contrasts this approach with ‘radicalism’, which begins with the group as the basic social unit, into which individuals are socialised. Society is made up of various groups based on class, gender, race, or ethnicity and these are frequently defined by *conflicting* relationships of power and oppression. Of course, as liberals point out, much oppression seems to be voluntarily accepted by the oppressed. But, according to DGR, this is just the perverse logic of oppression; the oppressed psychologically acquiesce in their oppression through denial, accommodation, and consent. Dominating groups use their power – political, ideological, and physical – to oppress, divide and mislead

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, <http://www.anarchistnews.org/content/deep-green-resistance-book-review>.

subordinate groups. Thus, for radicals, *real* social change can only come through organised political resistance, which challenges the power of dominant groups.

DGR believes green activists need to focus on building a ‘culture of resistance’ which, while friendly and supportive, has as its central aim the confrontation and dismantling of ‘systems of power’ which, for them, are the central causes driving today’s ecological crisis (Jensen *et al.*, 2011: Ch 2). No amount of awareness-raising or inspiring examples of sustainable living can take the place of a culture which is systematically focused on resisting the plans and projects of the powerful. But, although building such a culture will be necessary for success, they hold out no hope of more than a small minority of today’s affluent citizens joining.

The movement should be divided into two components: ‘above-ground’ and ‘below-ground’ activists (Jensen *et al.*, 2011: Ch 8). Above-ground activists are to engage in many of the same activities promoted in the previous sections. There is a strong focus on engaging in acts of non-violent direct action, such as blockades, protests, and demonstrations. Importantly they also strongly support the work that has begun, by Transition Towns and others, to build ‘strong local communities that embrace direct democracy, economies of support, universal human rights and the rights of nature’ (Jensen *et al.*, 2011: 500).

However, for DGR these ‘above-ground’ activists are not enough to avert the destruction of the planet in a palatable timeframe. A more militant secretive underground wing is needed, to carry out illegal acts of strategic sabotage against industrial infrastructure, with a particular focus on the fossil fuel industry and transnational mega-corporations. It is pointed out that industrial society is heavily dependent on ‘very fragile infrastructure’ such as the fossil fuel, electricity, internet, and global financial systems (Jensen *et al.*, 2011: 108). Given this dependence, industrial society is very vulnerable to well-targeted attacks – what they call ‘Decisive Ecological Warfare’ (DEW). The authors make clear that they would prefer to disrupt these systems through non-violent direct action. However, given their pessimism about winning recruits – and the moral imperative to act now – militant measures are often advocated. They claim that, even if it were possible, the purpose of these actions is *not* to single-handedly bring down industrial civilisation. Rather they want to create enough disruption to awaken the affluent from their present slumber:

DEW will give the global rich an opportunity to realize the vulnerability inherent in their dependence on industrial

civilization and start rebuilding the resilient communities that is the core project of the Transition Towns Movement (Jensen *et al.*, 2011: 503).

The DGR strategy has strong critics. Most obviously, many would be deeply concerned about the potential direct and indirect harm caused by militant attacks on infrastructure. Apart from the direct harm, the consequences of such action are totally unpredictable, and potentially devastating. Whether DGR activists like it or not, today, most people depend on industrial society for their livelihood, and even mild disruption could have unforeseeable consequences. Implicit in the strategy is a questionable presumption that forcing disruption will jolt people to move in a desirable direction. But given presently dominant individualistic and competitive systems and values – and the fact that even most transitioners remain heavily dependent on the global economy – a rapid descent into chaos and conflict may seem more likely. This is particularly so given DGR activists have given up all hope of building a mass movement that could act as a counter-veiling force against the dominant culture.

In response, some DGR activists would insist that the moral imperative is not to build (an unlikely) mass movement, but to bring down our destructive civilisation as soon as possible. One might, therefore, ask whether there is a moral contradiction built into the DGR strategy. Does it make sense to use violence as a *means* of ending the systemic violence inflicted by industrial-capitalism? Even if such a strategy could be ‘successful’, should we morally endorse it? Can the admirable ends (e.g., preservation of nature) ever justify the destructive means? Maybe they can, but surely there is a threshold, a point at which the chosen methods simply seem too dangerous, too fraught with risk, too ethically dubious, to seriously contemplate? Is not the ‘precautionary principle’ foundational to green politics? This kind of moral reflection seems dangerously lacking in the DGR literature. That said, these theorists and activists would doubtless argue that *not* resisting carries its consequences too.

The eco-socialist Ian Angus argues that recent history suggests militant tactics are unlikely to succeed. The attacks on property carried out by groups such as Earth Liberation Front, Earth First!, and Animal Liberation Front, have failed to further green politics in any positive way. Such tactics are, in general, counter-productive, particularly when they are used in isolation from a mass base of popular support. This is certainly the case with deep greens that, today, certainly cannot claim mass support for dismantling consumer-capitalist society. Angus makes a persuasive prediction about the likely outcome of DGR tactics:

Long before the underground groups achieve any significant size or ability to act, they are infiltrated by police spies and provocateurs and disrupted by arrests. Key activists are imprisoned for years; many more are isolated and demoralized (Angus, 2012).

For all that, DGR does offer a welcome level of urgency and anger to the deep green camp. They remind us that the fate of not just humans but innumerable species rests on whether we can make a relatively rapid transition to a new type of society. They force us to consider the lengths we are prepared to go to, in order to turn the situation around. What will be our commitment? Where is our threshold point for action? Where should we put our energies? One may disagree strongly with the chosen means of DGR, but there is still room to admire their commitment to the cause.

### *3.5 The muddy pathway of crisis, shock, and response*

The first three strategies discussed above could be called ‘ideal’ theories of strategy, which posit transition pathways based on particular political philosophies – democratic, socialist, and anarchist, respectively – and which outline how an ideal transition to a deep green alternative either should or will need to transpire. Such idealised perspectives are supposed to guide action, even though an ‘ideal’ transition is rarely if ever expected to occur. The fourth strategy – based on Deep Green Resistance – could be called a ‘non-ideal’ theory of change, insofar as the actions DGR engage in are a result of the perceived failure of all other strategies for change (coupled with the expectation that those strategies will continue to fail). For present purposes, a final transition pathway to consider is also a ‘non-ideal’ pathway, and could be called the pathway of crisis, shock, and response.

In many ways this final ‘pathway’ could be built into all of the previous perspectives, because none of the theorists considered above (especially the DGR camp) would think that the transition to a deep green alternative could ever be smooth, rational, or painless. Even many radical reformers, whose strategy involves working *within* the institutions of liberal democracy rather than *subverting* or *ignoring* them, clearly expect political conflict and economic difficulties to shape the pathway to the desired alternative (Gilding, 2011). Nevertheless, for those who are deeply pessimistic about the likelihood of any of the previous strategies actually giving rise to a deep green alternative (however coherent or well justified they may be), there remains the possibility that some such alternative could

arise not by design so much as by disaster. In other words, it is worth considering whether a crisis situation – or a series of crises – could either (i) *force* an alternative way of life upon us; or (ii) be the *provocation* needed for cultures or politicians to take radical alternatives seriously. Those two possibilities will now be considered briefly, in turn.

As industrial civilisation continues its global expansion and pursues growth without apparent limit, the possibility of economic, political, or ecological crises forcing an alternative way of life upon humanity seems to be growing in likelihood (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013). That is, if the existing model of global development is not stopped via one of the pathways reviewed above, or some other strategy, then it seems clear enough that at some point in the future, industrial civilisation will grow itself to death (Turner, 2012). Whether ‘collapse’ is initiated by an ecological tipping point, a financial breakdown of an overly indebted economy, a geopolitical disruption, an oil crisis, or some confluence of such forces, the possibility of collapse or deep global crisis can no longer be dismissed merely as the intellectual playground for ‘doomsayers’ with curdled imaginations. Collapse is a prospect that ought to be taken seriously based on the logic of limitless growth on a finite planet, as well as the evidence of existing economic, ecological, or more specifically climatic instability. As Paul Gilding (2011) has suggested, perhaps it is already too late to avoid some form of ‘great disruption’.

Could collapse or deep crisis be the most likely pathway to an alternative way of life? If it is, such a scenario must not be idealised or romanticised. Fundamental change through crisis would almost certainly involve great suffering for many, and quite possibly significant population decline through starvation, disease, or war. It is also possible that the ‘alternative system’ that a crisis produces is equally or even more undesirable than the existing system. Nevertheless, it may be that this is the only way a post-growth or post-industrial way of life will ever arise. The Cuban oil crisis, prompted by the collapse of the USSR, provides one such example of a deep societal transition that arose not from a political or social movement, but from sheer force of circumstances (Piercy *et al.*, 2010). Almost overnight Cuba had a large proportion of its oil supply cut off, forcing the nation to move away from oil-dependent, industrialised modes of food production and instead take up local and organic systems – or perish. David Holmgren (2013) published a deep and provocative essay, ‘Crash on Demand’, exploring the idea that a relatively small anti-consumerist movement could be enough to destabilise the global economy, which is already struggling. This presents one means of bringing an end to the status quo by inducing

a voluntary crisis, without relying on a mass movement. Needless to say, should people adopt such a strategy, it would be imperative to 'prefigure' the alternative society as far as possible too, not merely withdraw support from the existing society.

Again, one must not romanticise such theories or transitions. The Cuban crisis, for example, entailed much hardship. But it does expose the mechanisms by which crisis can induce significant societal change in ways that, in the end, are not always negative. In the face of a *global* crisis or breakdown, therefore, it could be that elements of the deep green vision (such as organic agriculture, frugal living, sharing, radical recycling, post-oil transportation, etc.) come to be forced upon humanity, in which case the question of strategy has less to do with avoiding a deep crisis or collapse (which may be inevitable) and more to do with negotiating the descent as wisely as possible. This is hardly a reliable path to the deep green alternative, but it presents itself as a possible path.

Perhaps a more reliable path could be based on the possibility that, rather than *imposing* an alternative way of life on a society through sudden collapse, a deep crisis could *provoke* a social or political revolution in consciousness that opens up space for the deep green vision to be embraced and implemented as some form of crisis management strategy. Currently, there is insufficient social or political support for such an alternative, but perhaps a deep crisis will shake the world awake. Indeed, perhaps that is the *only* way to create the necessary mindset. After all, today we are hardly lacking in evidence of the need for radical change (Turner, 2012), suggesting that shock and response may be the form the transition takes, rather than it being induced through orderly, rational planning, whether from 'top down' or 'from below'. Again, this 'non-ideal' pathway to a post-growth or post-industrial society could be built into the other strategies discussed above, adding some realism to strategies that might otherwise appear too utopian. That is to say, it may be that only deep crisis will create the social support or political will needed for radical reformism, eco-socialism, or eco-anarchism to emerge as social or political movements capable of rapid transformation. Furthermore, it would be wise to keep an open and evolving mind regarding the best strategy to adopt, because the relative effectiveness of various strategies may change over time, depending on how forthcoming crises unfold.

It was Milton Friedman (1982: ix) who once wrote: 'Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.' What this 'collapse' or 'crisis' theory of change suggests, as a matter of strategy, is that deep green social and political movements should be doing all they can to mainstream the practices

and values of their alternative vision. By doing so they would be aiming to ‘prefigure’ the deep green social, economic, and political structures, so far as that it is possible, in the hope that deep green ideas and systems are alive and available when the crises hit. Although Friedman obviously had a very different notion of what ideas should be ‘lying around’, the relevance of his point to this discussion is that in times of crisis, the politically or socially impossible can become politically or socially inevitable (Friedman, 1982: ix); or, one might say, if not inevitable, then perhaps much more likely.

It is sometimes stated that every crisis is an opportunity – from which the optimist infers that the more crises there are, the more opportunities there are. This may encapsulate one of the most realistic forms of hope we have left.

#### 4. Conclusion

This chapter began by sketching the contours of a ‘deep green’ vision of the alternative society, and then – after assuming the validity of that basic vision – explored various strategies that have been proposed about how such a vision could be realised. While it was not our purpose to defend one strategy over another, it is hoped that the analysis will provoke more debate about which strategy is most likely to succeed. After all, the deep green camp hardly has energy or resources to waste, so it is important that those who broadly agree with the deep green vision think very carefully about how and where to direct their energies. We hope this essay provides some provocation to continue this critical exploration of the question of strategy. There is much to lose and even more to gain.

Despite the often heated disagreements between the various schools of thought reviewed above, we have seen that there is considerable strategic overlap with respect to what actions should be undertaken *in the short term* (with the exception of deep green resistance). Whether one’s long-term vision is radical reformist, eco-socialist, or eco-anarchist, it seems that the most important activities the deep green school should be undertaking today are: (i) attempting to prefigure the deep green alternative in local communities; (ii) educating about the gross unsustainability of limitless growth on a finite planet and the need for a post-growth macroeconomics; (iii) joining with other green/red groups to resist and oppose various forms of unsustainable development; and (iv) showing in theory and practice that lifestyles based on material sufficiency and frugality are both a necessary and a desirable part of any just and sustainable future for humanity. Whatever form the

required revolution ultimately takes, it will only transpire after many more people are involved in such activities. This suggests that a deep green alliance should be formed to facilitate these activities and build upon areas of commonality, rather than factions within the deep green school getting too caught up in their differences about longer-term strategy. In the short term, the deep green school should try to act as one body, and that is the strategic point this chapter leaves readers to ponder.

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