

# INTRODUCTION

*The future is dark, with a darkness as much  
of the womb as of the grave.*

– Rebecca Solnit

We are living through a moment in history when democracy is being threatened in alarming ways on various fronts. For decades the political sovereignty of nation-states has been undermined by a globalising market economy and corporate influence, whereby politicians have dared not interfere with the logic of deregulated ‘free trade’ and profit-maximisation for fear of capital flight. The rule of law has thus become subservient in many ways to the rule of corporations, when democracy requires the reverse. Recent digital innovations have also ushered in an age of surveillance capitalism on an unprecedented scale, such that Orwellian dystopias no longer lie in the realm of fiction. With access to ‘big data’ – that is, vast stores of information about our individual activity on the Internet – politicians (or politically ambitious oligarchs) are now able to hire IT firms to manipulate public consciousness with terrifying sophistication and power. The so-called ‘post-truth’ era has emerged at the same time, in which scientific evidence, logic, and accountability are being dangerously undermined by the likes of Donald Trump, striking another blow to the traditions of scientific and democratic discourse. To make matters worse, consumerist cultures in the West have given rise to citizenries that are broadly apolitical, seemingly happy to leave the job of governance to the economic elites and their political representatives in exchange

for the promise of rising incomes. Democracy is not dead but evidently it is dying, and it is not clear where, when, or even if, social movements of resistance and renewal will emerge that are able to reverse these worrying trends. The hour is dark and a bright new dawn is not guaranteed.

All this is taking place in an age increasingly signified as ‘the Anthropocene’ – the first geological era caused by human impacts on the biosphere. The single-minded pursuit of economic growth has led to the flagrant disregard of environmental concerns, with planetary impacts continuing to intensify as a growing global population seeks to emulate the high-consumption lifestyles celebrated in the most developed regions of the world. Nevertheless, billions around the world remain impoverished while a privileged minority of elites have accumulated levels of wealth utterly beyond any sense of justice or decency. The richest eight men now own more than the poorest half of humanity. Pause for a moment, if you have the courage, and let that statistic sink in. Shouldn’t this make us furious to the point of revolution? Or must we accept this as ‘just the way the world is’? The great multitudes that are marginalised by global capitalism are a dynamite class that must be carefully managed by those in power in order to maintain the established order.

Well-worn appeals to technological solutions, ‘green growth’, and the efficiency of free markets seem coherent in theory – logically consistent within the flawed paradigm of neoclassical economics – yet despite decades of promises about ‘sustainable development’ the biosphere continues to be degraded violently, with dire implications that are in the process of unfolding across the globe. It seems a rising tide is destined to sink all boats. The climate continues to destabilise as fossil fuel consumption, industrial agriculture, and deforestation remain accepted practices; non-renewable resources continue to deplete; peak oil looms; biodiversity is in terminal decline, and the march of Empire continues to reach into the furthest corners of Earth in search of trees, animals, minerals, land, and labour to commodify and exploit. How humanity manages the geopolitical tensions that will inevitably arise as resource scarcity bites harder in coming years

will surely define what shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century ultimately takes.

Despite the fact that the global economy is in the process of committing ecocide, capitalism has a structural imperative to pursue growth without limit. It must grow or the system begins to fray. Moreover, this structural growth imperative is reflected socially in the fetishistic attitudes that have developed in consumer cultures toward money, affluence, fame, and status, as if Kim Kardashian epitomised a life well lived. No matter how rich a society or individual becomes, the dominant strains of political and economic discourse hold out more economic growth and rising levels of affluence as the only conceivable solutions to the problems that persist. Apparently only more growth can solve the problems that growth has caused – a claim made with straight faces by mainstream economists who seem genuinely oblivious to the contradiction at the heart of their worldview. They are like the snakes that are seen eating their own tails, embodying the ideology of the cancer cell.

Nevertheless, the fact that the growth economy has begun to fail on its own terms, every day threatening the onset of GFC 2.0, has still not provoked any broad criticism of the basic goal of globalising debt-ridden consumerism – the only conception of ‘utopia’ permitted within the ideological confines of global capitalism. And it is now trite to repeat the dictum that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Certainly, one is tempted to despair.

One might insist that this lack of imagination is astounding and unforgivable, but as the Parisian graffiti of May ’68 stated: ‘Those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking.’ This may ultimately prove to be the most suitable epitaph to place on the gravestone of industrial civilisation as it continues its inevitable descent in coming years and decades. The challenge for humanity is now the challenge of managing this descent as wisely, compassionately, and creatively as possible, knowing that the transition ‘beyond’ will likely be punctuated with a series of crises as the new world takes form – in one way or another. We should aim for sustainability, of course, but may have to settle for resilience.

As the poet-farmer Wendell Berry notes with characteristic wisdom: ‘We don’t have a right to ask whether we are going to succeed or not; the only question we have a right to ask is: “What’s the right thing to do?”’



In this third volume of my collected essays I continue developing the lines of argument presented in the earlier volumes, *Prosperous Descent: Crisis as Opportunity in an Age of Limits* (2015) and *Sufficiency Economy: Enough, for Everyone, Forever* (2015). I situate my work in that small space in which the systemic critique of capitalism overlaps with a deep green environmentalism. This space is small because most in the environmental movement do not seem to appreciate the systemic need to transcend capitalism, and most Leftist critics of capitalism do not seem to appreciate that ‘growth socialism’ (with a broader distribution of wealth) is no more sustainable than ‘growth capitalism’ (with its highly concentrated distribution of wealth). A small number of us are working on the narrow intersection of these worldviews, where it is recognised that social justice and the severe environmental limits on a full planet necessitate, in the developed world, a degrowth transition of planned economic contraction, informed by the values and visions of democratic eco-socialism, permaculture, voluntary simplicity, and an economics of sufficiency. At the same time, I am often struck by the realisation that the vision of material sufficiency that informs all my work would remain even in the absence of current environmental and humanitarian crises. The good life does not consist in the consumption and accumulation of ever more ‘nice things’. In the end, I believe human beings seek a deeper connection to each other and to nature than what is provided in consumer cultures, and the good news is that this post-materialist form of flourishing does not have to cost the Earth. This realisation is the source of grounded hope that keeps despair at the door.

While I have structured the following chapters deliberately

and feel they are best read in order, each chapter stands on its own well enough, so readers should feel free to jump around depending on interest. Below I provide an overview of the book, through which the key themes and perspectives are introduced.

The opening chapter provides an overview of the ‘limits to growth’ debate and presents a summary case for why, despite the ongoing controversy, there are in fact limits to growth – ecological, energy, financial, and even social limits that are in the process of tightening their grip on the global economy. In making this case I respond to the techno-optimists and free marketeers who continue to assume blindly that technological advancement and pricing mechanisms can save the growth paradigm from itself. Some simple arithmetic demonstrates that ongoing compound growth of the global economy cannot be made sustainable: the degree of decoupling required soon becomes implausible. Accordingly, this chapter proceeds to outline a range of bold policy proposals that would be necessary (though not sufficient) to produce a stable, flourishing, post-growth economy. The chapter concludes by asking some hard questions about the transition to a post-growth economy in an attempt to deepen the understanding of the cultural and political obstacles that lie in the way.

One of the deepest cultural implications of moving toward a post-growth or degrowth economy is the fact that high-consumption, affluent lifestyles must be transcended. There is absolutely no way that our finite planet could withstand all seven-and-a-half billion people living Western-style lifestyles (to say nothing of the nine billion people expected by mid-century), nor are such lifestyles consistent with a transition beyond growth. A consumerist culture both demands and is driven by the economics of growth. Conversely, the only culture of consumption consistent with a degrowth economy is a culture of voluntary simplicity – a culture committed to living better on less. Therein lies the political significance of the voluntary simplicity movement: it must expand, radicalise, and organise in order to provide the cultural conditions necessary for a politics and macroeconomics of degrowth to emerge ‘from below’.

Exploring these issues from a different angle, Chapter Two provides a philosophical rather than political examination of voluntary simplicity from a range of moral and ethical perspectives, including Peter Singer's moral theory, utilitarianism, Kantianism, virtue ethics, Christianity, and Michel Foucault's notion of an 'aesthetics of existence'. Despite the deep differences between these schools of thought, it is shown that there is a remarkable consensus on a key point: in an age of ecological overshoot, global poverty, and consumer malaise, affluent lifestyles are highly dubious from a moral and ethical perspective. Put otherwise, there are compelling reasons to be exploring post-consumerist lifestyles of reduced and restrained consumption, not only for environmental and social justice reasons, but also for the sake of advancing our own happiness and wellbeing, in both the long and short term. The central conclusions are that the ethos of voluntary simplicity should be informing and shaping our social education far more than it does, and that the casual acceptance of consumer cultures should be more explicitly and regularly challenged.

Chapter Three moves beyond the personal perspective of voluntary simplicity to explore the social significance of the permaculture and transition town movements, with a specific focus on urban transformation via grassroots activism. It is now widely accepted that recent decades of urban development, especially in the developed regions of the world, have created various deep problems from environmental and social perspectives. These include poorly designed transport and energy systems, as well as urban sprawl, inefficient building design, and a lack of public, green spaces. These design and development inadequacies are recognised as creating structural constraints that in many ways lock individuals and communities into high-impact, carbon-intensive ways of living. This poses a critically important and increasingly urgent question of how to 'transition' to alternative urban landscapes that facilitate the emergence of less impactful, low-carbon ways of living. Do we wait for governments to solve these problems? Or might we have to get active at the grassroots level and drive the change ourselves? This chapter provides a

critical analysis of the emerging transition towns movement, which provides one of the more promising social movements to emerge during the last decade in response to overlapping energy, environmental, and economic crises. In doing so the analysis acknowledges its debts to the holistic design philosophy of permaculture.

In particular, permaculture theorist and educator David Holmgren – whose work has significantly shaped the transition movement – has been calling for grassroots movements to ‘retrofit the suburbs’. Such a process would involve individuals and communities acting locally – with or without government support – to try to radically transform their urban landscapes by thinking creatively about how to make the best of an infrastructure that is often poorly designed from social and environmental perspectives. Defining activities include attempts to localise food production and connect with local farmers; increase home-based economies; relearn the skills of self-sufficiency; practise frugality and voluntary simplicity to reduce consumption; organise sharing and barter schemes beyond the formal economy; take the energy efficiency of their homes and lifestyles into their own hands; as well as attempt to decarbonise energy use not only through household and community-based renewable energy systems but also by minimising energy consumption through behaviour change (e.g., cycling more and driving less). Drawing on Holmgren’s work, this chapter includes a visioning exercise that describes a transformed urban context looking back from the year 2030. Once more the chapter concludes by considering the obstacles that lie in the way of such a transition.

Chapter Four examines the case for degrowth through the specific lens of climate change, focusing on the most developed regions of the world. Every few months we read about high-profile studies that triumphantly declare that responding to climate change does not have to impact on economic growth (in terms of GDP) and that decarbonising the economy can even be good for GDP. While almost everyone accepts that business-as-usual cannot persist, very few people seem prepared to entertain the

idea that an adequate response to climate change may actually necessitate moving beyond the growth paradigm.

The basic argument in this chapter is that the depth and speed of decarbonisation required for a safe climate is inconsistent with continuous growth in production and consumption. If the wealthy nations are to leave a fair share of the global carbon budget to the poorest nations, then planned economic contraction – or degrowth – is the most coherent economic paradigm for facilitating that climate response within those wealthy nations. Regrettably, this approach does not get a hearing in national or international political discourse – so every year the carbon budget for a safe climate continues to disappear as the world continues to pursue growth without limit. It may be that the time has passed in which we can avoid dangerous climate change, however that is not a call for inaction or despair but a call for bolder and more imaginative responses to this defining challenge of our era. As the narrator implores in the 2009 film *Home*: ‘it’s too late to be a pessimist’.

Chapter Five explores the political and macroeconomic significance of voluntary simplicity (noted in passing above). While voluntary simplicity is generally conceived of as a personal or household living strategy, my position has always been that lifestyle change – necessary though this is – will never be enough to produce a just and sustainable world. Our problems are systemic and thus will need a systemic response. But how is that systemic change supposed to come about? Many are quick to dismiss voluntary simplicity as politically naïve – and there are certainly elements of the movement that are – but this dismissal fails to recognise that a broad societal embrace of voluntary simplicity will be required to provide the cultural conditions needed to drive the transition to a post-growth economy and make it functional and prosperous.

This issue deserves emphasis because it barely gets a mention in the post-growth literature. It is all very well for post-growth and steady-state economists to develop sophisticated macro-economic models that seek to understand how such an economy might function. This is important and necessary work.



But in this literature there has been a failure to adequately draw out the cultural implications of their models, especially in terms of radically reduced and changed consumption practices, and a related failure to recognise that there is unlikely to be a political or macroeconomic transition to a post-growth or steady-state economy until there is a culture of voluntary simplicity that demands it.

Although this chapter is relatively short, leaving many issues in need of further development, its message is important, and serves as a partial response to those who dismiss the practice of voluntary simplicity as politically ineffective. Voluntary simplicity can be defended on various personal, social, and environmental grounds, but it also has a critical political dimension: minimising consumption can liberate people (to some extent) from the ‘work-to-spend’ cycle, thereby carving out more time and energy to get active in our local communities, raising awareness and building a new world from the grassroots up. For this reason I would argue that the most promising revolutionary class today is no longer the Proletariat – the working class that has nothing to lose but its chains – but instead the Voluntariat – the class of people choosing to abandon the pursuit of affluence in order to explore post-consumerist forms of flourishing and non-materialistic sources of meaning and satisfaction, including the hidden joys of grassroots activism.

One of the key barriers to the cultural embrace of voluntary simplicity is the materialistic conceptions of the good life that are so dominant within growth-orientated consumerist cultures. People find it hard to imagine how a ‘simpler life’ of reduced or restrained consumption can be a good life, especially when constantly bombarded with cultural and institutional messages reinforcing the view that ‘more is always better’ and that ‘growth is always good’. Chapter Six seeks to unpack the real-world implications of an alternative, post-consumerist conception of flourishing. The chapter explores how our relationships to food, housing, energy, clothing, technology, money, etc. may need to change on the path to a degrowth society. In doing so, I attempt to describe a radical alternative economic vision based on

notions of simplicity, frugality, moderation, sufficiency, resilience, relocalisation, and mindfulness. This form of economy would be one that has low energy and resource requirements relative to developed economies, but which sufficiently provides for local material needs using mostly local resources, without being relentlessly driven to expand by the growth-focused logic of profit-maximisation. The ultimate goal of the analysis is to provide a deeper insight into how degrowth might be experienced in everyday life. This is important because if people cannot envision the degrowth alternative with sufficient clarity, and see it as desirable, it is unlikely that a large social movement will arise to bring a degrowth economy into existence.

Having presented a critique of consumerism and the growth economy, and spent time defending and envisioning an alternative society informed by notions of degrowth, permaculture, and voluntary simplicity, in Chapter Seven I turn my attention to the question of political strategy. What is to be done to realise the transition needed? In answering this question there are three broad schools of political thought which I consider: first, there is the strategy of bold parliamentary reform within the existing system; second, there is the eco-socialist strategy which seeks to replace the existing system (global capitalism) with varieties of environmentally-aware socialism; and third, there is the eco-anarchist strategy which rejects the tool of the state and seeks to bring about the new society through direct, participatory grassroots activity.

Each of these strategies has strengths and weaknesses and in this penultimate chapter I attempt to negotiate this thorny theoretical space by outlining a new political orientation, sensibility, and practice – a position I call ‘wild democracy’. In a global tide that seems to be drifting enthusiastically toward ecocide and fascism, wild democracy signifies a radical and participatory eco-egalitarian politics that seeks to take root beyond the tired parliamentary distinctions of Left and Right, but also beyond (and yet between) the antagonistic but enriching poles of anarchism and Marxism. As I explain, wild democracy is a localised politics with a global perspective, positioning itself ‘in the wild’

beyond the state and yet, at times, pragmatically engaged with the state. In short, wild democracy is a revolutionary politics without a Revolution, as such – a paradox I will unpack and defend as the analysis proceeds.

This book of collected essays concludes on a rather different note, with a reflective analysis of a real-world experiment in new ways of living and being. The project that is reviewed laid down its roots after an owner of some land in Gippsland, Australia, read my book *Entropia: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation* (2013), which is a work of utopian fiction set after the demise of industrial civilisation on an isolated island in the South Pacific. *Entropia* envisions a radically ‘simple living’ culture and a post-growth economy that emerged after the ‘Great Disruption’, describing a way of life based on material sufficiency, frugality, renewable energy, local economy, appropriate technology, and self-governance. On the final page of *Entropia* I invited any interested readers to be in touch if they wanted to try to establish a real-world demonstration project that somehow embodied the ideas, vision, and utopian ambitions of the book.

Shortly after publication I received an email from an interested landowner wanting to take up the challenge. There were also some limited funds available to get things started. In recent years we’ve been developing the property in collaboration with a broad and evolving community of others, and in June 2016 released a documentary about the project called *A Simpler Way: Crisis as Opportunity*, which I co-produced with Jordan Osmond of Happen Films. Within a few months the film had been viewed half a million times on YouTube (and counting), which suggests that the film is touching on issues that contemporary culture finds worthy of consideration, reaching an audience far beyond what most academics could possibly dream of. In that sense, at least, the film can be deemed a success.

While the film certainly does not provide a blueprint or template for sustainable living that could be applied independent of context (that was never our intention), it does invite people to ask challenging questions about what sustainable consumption really means in an age of severe environmental limits and

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still-expanding human population. The concluding essay of this book provides some theoretical context to the demonstration project and the film, and summarises the evolution of this practical, real-world exploration of radically 'simpler ways' of living.