

## **On degrowth strategy: The Simpler Way perspective.**

Ted Trainer

8.12.2023

Published in Environmental Values, 2024.

### **Abstract.**

The rapidly expanding degrowth literature has focused predominantly on the case for degrowth and its goals but much less attention has been given to how it might be achieved. In addition, the few recent contributions on this issue are open to significant criticisms. The following discussion outlines some of these and attempts to clear the way for a more thorough and effective analysis of possible and plausible degrowth strategy. An appropriate understanding of the alarming extent to which global sustainability limits have been exceeded settles some of the core issues and options. It will be argued that attempting to reform existing governmental policies, working for GND proposals, and pursuing eco-socialist goals and strategies are mistaken projects. A radically different perspective on the situation is outlined, along with its distinctive and novel implications for degrowth goals and strategy. A major implication is that the appropriate frame for the analysis of degrowth ends and means is anarchism.

### **INTRODUCTION.**

The general issue of how degrowth might be achieved has received little attention in the degrowth literature, and this is acknowledged by various contributors. Most of the major statements from within and regarding the movement either make no reference to it or treat it briefly and superficially. (For instance, Herbert, 2018, Mygind du Plessis and Husted, 2022, Hickel and Kallis, 2018, Hickel 2020, Mastini, et al., 2021, Kallis 2015, 2017, Kallis et al. 2018, Kallis et al. 2017, Monticelli, 2022, Vansintjan, Vetter and Schmeizer, (2022).)

Unfortunately at first sight much of the literature can appear to be about strategy since there is often listing of things like reduction of advertising and implementing a basic minimum income, But these are recommended policies or arrangements to be established, and thus are sub-goals to be worked for. They are elements or characteristics of a society that has implemented a particular vision of a “degrown” society, and discussion of them throws no light on what the means for achieving them are. The closest we get to a discussion of strategy for achieving a society with these characteristics is the reference some make to the three-category distinction attributed to Olin Wright (2010), but this is a classification of types of strategy and is no guide to the effectiveness of various strategies or the selection of the best strategies. Vansintjan, Vetter and Schmeizer, (2022) are unusual in noting the difference between policy and strategy.

These statements are usually given as particular, selected definitions or descriptions of a society that has undergone degrowth. That is, they set out a particular author's preferred form or components of such a society. However it is not appropriate to identify degrowth with a particular utopian vision. Several degrowth statements define it in terms of much the same list of elements, such as a minimum wage, work sharing, restriction of advertising, (e.g., (Kallis, 2015, Hickel and Kallis 2018, Vansintjan, Vetter and Schmeizer, 2022, Hickel 2020.) But again these statements only portray the utopian visions of their separate authors and visions can differ greatly.

Degrowth should be defined in the most general and limited terms, focused on reduction of resource throughput and ecological damage, and therefore concern to reduce GDP. This enables a wide variety of visions to be considered and debated as possible or preferred forms which a degrowth society might take. The commonly stated conception involves elements and a world view that is radically different from the degrowth vision that advocates of The Simpler Way have been arguing for almost forty years (TSW, 2023), especially with respect to the magnitude of the degrowth needed, the consequent radical extent of change required in economic, political, settlement and cultural systems, the supreme significance of simplicity, and the implications for transition strategy.

It is noteworthy that most of the items in these lists actually do not necessarily have anything to do with degrowth. Fairer taxes, fairer trade with the Third World, better environmental protection laws, dumping the GDP as a measure of welfare etc. do not require or imply degrowth and all could be implemented without affecting GDP growth.

Therefore, when it is realised that much that seems to be about strategy is not, it is evident that remarkably little attention has been given to the steps that need to be taken to achieve goals and sub-goals. Little thought has gone into questions such as what actions are found to be or likely to be effective, what are the best strategies, what approaches are a waste of time, what are most likely to be effective in these or those circumstances? At this stage there is not likely to be sufficient empirical evidence to enable even tentative conclusions on such questions, but there are grounds for fruitful theoretical discussion of possibilities and probabilities. That is, the consideration of current and historical efforts to achieve social change can throw some light on what might and might not work in the degrowth arena. The following discussion is concerned to explore various theoretical possibilities and probabilities.

### **BUT FIRST. HOW MUCH DEGROWTH IS NEEDED?**

The following argument is that the degrowth literature in general does not reflect an accurate understanding of the global situation with respect to how far we have overshot the limits to growth and therefore the extent to which levels of production and consumption would have to be reduced before we could achieve a sustainable and just world order.

Trainer (2021) takes figures on per capita resource consumption and resource availability and derives the conclusion that sustainable rates of resource

consumption would be around 10% of present rich world per capita rates. If we add the commitment to economic and population growth it is evident that by 2050 for instance the required reduction factor would probably have doubled. Meanwhile resources would have become much more scarce and ecosystems much more damaged, worsening all major global problems especially the probability of resource wars.

Few participants in the general sustainability discussion seem to be aware of these magnitudes. Reductions of this order could not possibly be achieved without extreme and radical change in almost all aspects of society. Most obviously a new economic system would be needed, one which could provide a satisfactory quality of life to around 10 billion people despite something like a ten-fold reduction in rich world GDP per capita. But it will be argued that the most profound changes would have to be in ideas, attitudes and values, that is in culture.

The common response to this case is to assert the “decoupling” thesis, the claim that recycling and technical advance can enable the GDP to go on rising while resource and ecological impacts are kept down to sustainable levels. In other words, there is no need for reduction in “living standards” or GDP because “tech-fixes” can resolve the problems continuation of consumer-capitalist society generates. But heavily documented reviews have recently invalidated this claim. Hickel and Kallis (2018), Parrique (2019) and Haberl et al. (2020), referring to over 800 studies, conclude that growth in GDP is not being and is not likely to be accompanied by reduction in resource and ecological impacts.

Current thinking about the form a degrowth society should take does not reflect this understanding of the situation, of the magnitude of the required reductions or of the coercive implications for social structures and functions. The general impression given is of a society basically similar to those in rich countries today though probably significantly more modest and responsible. Usually no major change is envisaged in cities, industrialisation, the financial industry, travel, settlement patterns, international trade etc. Some even doubt that any reduction in GDP would be needed. Hickel (2020) says, “...degrowth is not about reducing GDP”. But if anything like a factor 10 reduction is needed then there must be transition to a very and radically different kind of society, with the following characteristics.

### **THE SIMPLER WAY VISION.**

The foregoing perspective on the global sustainability and justice situation deriving from basic limits to growth analysis determines the Simpler Way account of the form a society that has undergone sufficient degrowth must take. The following elements constitute its set of sub-goals to be debated alongside those noted above.

- Most people would live in small, highly self-sufficient local communities. largely independent of national or global economies, devoting local resources to meeting local needs, with little intra-state let alone international transport or trade. This means transition from globalised to localised systems.

- Far simpler systems, infrastructures, procedures etc. Local economies eliminate most need for transport, heavy industry, global trade networks, cities, sewers, big dams, power stations and bureaucracies.
- Mostly local economies that are not driven by profit, market forces or growth but are deliberately and rationally organised to meet needs, and ensure rights, justice, welfare and ecological sustainability, provided well for all people. They would for instance eliminate unemployment and provide all with a valued livelihood. National economies would have undergone radical degrowth to stability. No attention would be given to the GDP.
- People in the small communities taking cooperative and participatory control over their own local economies and development, via voluntary committees, working bees and town meetings. Yet most small farms and firms could be privately owned.
- Thus a much reduced role for the centralised state, and a high level of local control over the small remnant “state” apparatus.
- Caring, cohesive, cooperative communities, prioritising the welfare of citizens and ecological systems.
- People who understand the need for these ways and who strongly desire to adopt and practice them. This means valuing cooperation and collectivism rather than individualistic competition. Above all it means willingly choosing and valuing frugality and not being concerned with material wealth, luxury, possessions and affluence. Deriving life satisfaction from non-material sources.
- These far simpler lifestyles and systems do not imply any need for reduction in socially-useful high-tech research or medicine etc.

This is not a wish list. The argument is that a sustainable and just world cannot possibly be achieved unless there is transition to a radically simpler way of this kind. There could be considerable variation within this frame of course but the foregoing principles are being claimed to be mandatory, non-negotiable.

The reasons why this general form can achieve the necessary reductions are illustrated by the study of egg supply carried out by (Trainer, Malik and Lenzen, 2019.). The dollar and resource costs of eggs supplied via the usual supermarket path were found to be around 100-200 times those of eggs supplied via backyards and community coops. The latter localised path eliminates the need for large amounts of transport, chemicals, marketing, refrigeration, bureaucracy, paid work forces, computers and expensive personnel, fertilizer production, packaging, “waste” removal and soil-damaging agribusiness production of poultry feed. Manures moved to gardens via methane digesters help to replace fertiliser imports while producing energy, thus contributing to the recycling of a more or less fixed quantity of community nutrients and the elimination of any need for sewer systems. The application of such Permaculture and related principles in all aspects of settlements

design enables compounding reductions in resource and ecological costs while multiplying synergistic benefits in terms of social cohesion, solidarity and resilience.

The general validity of these reduction claims is evident in various studies. Lockyer (2017) found that the Dancing Rabbit ecovillage in Missouri had per capita rates for resource consumption around 5-10% of the US average. The study "Remaking settlements for sustainability" (Trainer 2020) explored application of alternative principles and technologies to the possible restructuring of an outer Sydney suburb, deriving possible areas and yields. It was found that the suburb could be almost sufficient in food production and able to devote several thousand person hours per week to community maintenance and culturally enriching activities.

Another study explored "How resource cheaply we could live well" using records of per capita consumption on a frugal and partly self-sufficient homestead in the Sydney region. (Trainer 2022.). Again very low rates of materials and energy consumption were evident. Electricity use for instance was under 1% of the Australian household per capita average.

The argument here has been that the enormous reductions required can be achieved but only via transition to the kinds of settlements and lifestyles sketched above and labelled The Simpler Way. If this is so then equally radical and coercive implications follow for thinking about transition strategy, and these depart markedly from those evident in the degrowth literature.

The foregoing commentary points to the failure of current degrowth thinking to attend to, let alone stress, three major themes that are central in the Simpler Way perspective; viz., the magnitude or the change needed, the enormous conundrum thus set, and above all the need for far simpler lifestyles and systems.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT STRATEGY.**

The first thing to be recognised here if the foregoing analysis is at all valid is the stunning enormity of the task. We are confronted by a daunting "degrowth conundrum". Degrowth of the magnitude argued above means phasing out, writing off, scrapping, most of the present amount of factories, corporations, transport, trade, investment, industry, financing, and profit-making. It is about ceasing, eliminating, most of the producing and consuming going on. And this in an economy, society and culture that are fiercely and blindly committed to constant and limitless increases in production and consumption.

Over 350,000 people depend on the mining of coal in Australia today. What is to be done with them, and the towns they live in? They can't be moved out of coal mining and into other jobs in the economy, because the point of degrowth is to cut down the amount of work and producing that is going on. How are they going to get the goods they need if they can no longer earn money in mines or factories to buy goods sold in the global economy?

The most obvious consequence is that capitalism cannot possibly move in the degrowth direction. It is a growth system. Its fundamental nature is about investing capital to accumulate more capital to invest in additional productive ventures. If

growth even slows the system sickens. The few who own most of the capital constantly look for investment outlets for their ever-increasing volumes of capital. They have no choice about this; it is grow or die. If a capitalist doesn't try to take or generate more sales opportunities than his rivals will do so and drive him bankrupt. Capitalists are trapped in capitalism like everybody else.

The existence and magnitude of the conundrum receive almost no recognition in the degrowth literature. Vansintjan, Vetter and Schmeizer, (2022) are unusual in noting that "... large areas of production and consumption will need to be dismantled." But most accounts often calmly state vast and highly problematic utopian proposals (such as debt cancellation) without any sign of trepidation in the face of the overwhelming difficulties. The implicit reassuring assumptions are usually that at worst only slight reductions will be sufficient and existing institutions will be capable of organising them. The literature shows little or no sign of shock or despair at the magnitude of the task we are confronted with.

This understanding means that the path to a solution must be framed in terms of enabling people who presently have to produce, sell, buy and consume a lot to live satisfactorily, to transition to lifestyles and systems in which they do not have to. The Simpler Way makes that possible and it is being claimed here to be the only way to solve the problem. The focal concern in the discussion of degrowth strategy should therefore be how The Simpler Way might be achieved. But before exploring that, the inadequacy of the present discussion of degrowth strategy needs to be considered.

#### **NOTES ON CURRENT DEGROWTH THINKING ABOUT STRATEGY.**

The foregoing analysis of the global situation and the required social form has been necessary in order to set the context in which strategy must be considered. It establishes a perspective that few within or without the degrowth movement take, and it yields distinct, unrecognised and profound implications.

Given that most of the discussion that might appear to be about means is actually about goals, and that most literature is descriptive and not analytic or evaluative, there is in the literature relatively little of substance remaining to consider. There is considerable reference to strategy but relatively little analysis of it, or assessment of potential, or giving of reasons as to why a preferred option might work. Most merely identify approaches or describe various projects, without attempting to explore how effective they are, the causal logic that is assumed whereby action is expected to have degrowth effects, the circumstances in which the approaches function and whether these limit generalisability. There is little evaluation or assistance for the task of deciding which strategies the movement should focus on. At this stage, there is probably too little empirical evidence to derive confident conclusions on such issues, but it is possible to analyse logic, assumptions and plausibility, which is what the following discussion does.

This lack is evident in for instance the recent lengthy work entitled Degrowth and Strategy. How to Bring About Social Ecological Transformation (Barlow et al., 2022). It provides a long discussion of the concept of strategy and then presents (valuable) descriptive accounts of many projects that can be regarded as instances of degrowth. These are of considerable interest but do not throw much light on the

subtitle, '... how to bring about social ecological transformation' (Koch, 2022b is an exception). The same can be said of The Future is Degrowth (Vansintjan et al., 2022) which again describes various initiatives but gives little attention to why various strategies work or provide assessment or guidance or discussion of the value or plausibility of various options. Some within these volumes and others do favour, endorse or recommend various categories of strategy, for example, Bärnthaler (2023), but do not offer much in the way of supporting reasons.

However, much more important than the lack analytic or evaluative discussion is the more or less total failure to focus on the profound significance of the above account of the extent of The Simpler Way vision Implications for thinking about strategy. This rules out much current thinking regarding goals and means; strategy has to be considered in terms of how to get to radically simpler lifestyles and systems.

### **Erik Olin Wright's categories**

[Various works](#) value Erik Olin Wright's (2010) three factor classification of approaches, which can be interpreted as, working for change within existing systems via their institutions, building alternative systems within existing systems, and radical/revolutionary direct effort to scrap and replace existing systems. However this is only a simple classification of types of strategy and offers no guidance as to which if any of these kinds of action are likely to be effective.

Deleted: Both the above works and others

Formatted: Font: (Default) Arial, Font colour: Text 1

### **Reform effort within the system.**

Little more needs to be said about this category in view of the above discussion of the magnitude of the conundrum and how entrenched growth structures and beliefs are. Most current degrowth advocacy is for policy changes that are assumed to be capable of implementing made within and by existing systems. But the foregoing discussion of the global limits predicament rules this out.

Advocates for a Green New Deal typically proceed as if the task is to get existing political institutions to adopt new policies, without calling for significant if any change in those basic systems. This is commonly implicit within degrowth literature, for instance where shorter working hours or fairer taxes or redistribution of income are policies proposed for governments to adopt. Where relatively minor change is required this might make sense, but if as has been argued above, existing political, economic and cultural systems inevitably generate the major global problems and by nature are incapable of ceasing to do so, this strategy would seem to be incapable of bringing about radical system replacement.

Consider again the magnitude of the degrowth required, the absence of ideas for dealing with the degrowth conundrum, the dependence of capitalist and working classes alike on continued growth, and how deeply entrenched capitalism is; current discussion throws little light on how working to achieve reforms within such an existing system can contribute significantly to getting rid of it.

However, it will be argued below that these initiatives can in fact be very valuable *indirect* contributions to system change, but only if framed and organised as devices intended to raise awareness of issues going far beyond the venture in question. That is, they must be explicitly designed and run to increase recognition of the need for

fundamental and radical system change. At present most of them are not conceived in this way. This theme will be elaborated on below.

### **“RUPTURAL” STRATEGIES.**

This category can be thought of as including projects intended to confront, disrupt and disobey, such as Extinction Rebellion, and especially those intended to overthrow, notably those based on Marxist theory. The former group would not seem to be driven by any clear and convincing strategic thinking of significances for degrowth. However the general “socialist” group focuses on elaborate theory with respect to goals and the means intended to achieve them, and aspects of it are endorsed by various contributors to the degrowth literature. The following discussion summarises reasons for concluding that socialist ideas on both goals and means are now seriously mistaken and of little if any value for degrowth strategy. This case has been detailed in (Trainer 2022.) and will only be outlined here.

From The Simpler Way perspective socialists are correct about the need to scrap capitalism. It is by definition driven by growth, market forces, profit maximisation, and private ownership of capital. These elements are incompatible with the above vision of a sustainable and just social form enabling a high quality of life for all the world’s people. However that vision is also incompatible with the standard socialist account of post-capitalist society, and it rules out the standard socialist assumptions about the strategy for achieving it.

Firstly regarding goals, socialists have traditionally held this to be to take control of the industrial system from the capitalist class and to devote it to enabling all to rise to high ‘living standards’. This ‘productivist’ strand has recently led some to argue strenuously for the ‘eco-modernist’ quest to achieve ‘fully automated luxury communism.’ (Phillips, 2014; See also [AQ6] Sharzer, 2012 and Bastini, 2019). Various recent ‘Eco-socialists’ recognise that in view of resource scarcity and ecological impacts, a satisfactory post-capitalist society would need to moderate consumption but none of the following theorists come to terms with the magnitude of the reductions required: Albert on ‘Parecon’ (2003), Kovel (2007), Lowy (2015), 018), Bellamy-Foster (2011), Sarkar (1999), Vettese and Pendergrass (2022) and Smith (2016). Nor does the account of ‘Inclusive Democracy’(1997) put forward by Fotopoulos recognise it. When the magnitude of the overshoot is focal it can be seen that the revolutionary goal cannot be anything like ‘normal’ rich word ‘living standards’ and ways.

Above all, there is little recognition in the socialist literature that the good society cannot be an affluent society. (The eco-socialist Nayere does see this; 2021). A socialism which maintained commitment to economic growth and high ‘living standards’ would still accelerate us towards ecological collapse.

In addition, the core assumption in socialist thinking about post-capitalist society is that it would be highly centralised. It is taken for granted that the state has to be the dominant element in society. But simpler way communities cannot be run from the centre. This is not primarily due to the logistical impossibility of state bureaucracies making decisions for enormous numbers of small communities. Crucial for satisfactory local economies and polities must be thinking, discussion, planning,

decision-making, implementation and monitoring by conscientious citizens within highly participatory and consensus-seeking arrangements. The (small, remnant) 'state' can only be a facilitating agency under the control of federated towns and regions. Many current state functions will no longer be necessary and most governing will have been devolved down to the local level. Most important is the fact that the ultimate prerequisites for a satisfactory post-affluence society are cultural. They are to do with ideas, values and dispositions. These can only emerge from specific local grass-roots conditions and experience and cannot be given, taught, imposed or enforced by the state no matter how powerful or benign it is. It can be argued that Marx's greatest mistake was his failure to grasp the significance of culture. He analysed primarily in terms of economics, politics and power and gave little attention to the significance of culture for the nature of the good society or for the means for achieving it. The revolution only required of the working class that workers become united against the ruling class. Avineri (1968) points out that they would still hold ideas and values to do with competition, work discipline, individualism and acquisitiveness, and still be willing to work for a boss in alienating conditions. These elements were assumed to be gradually remedied in the long transition from socialism to communism. However, the advent of an era of limits and scarcity has fundamentally changed the situation. Given the above account of the global predicament and the way out of it, the required new society cannot be achieved unless there is first a profound cultural revolution establishing radically different understandings, values and dispositions. It should be evident that the advent of the limits to growth predicament makes this revolution unlike any previous one. It sets goals contradicting some of those taken for granted by socialists. The following argument is that it also rules out socialist strategy. Socialist revolutionary strategy can be summed up as, '... take state power'. (This is the at least implicit goal in Koch's, 2022a discussion of strategy, in Bourdieu, 2014a, 2014b; Gramsci, 1999; and Poulantzas, 1978). That might have been the overriding concern in earlier times, but now it is not. It would not be remotely possible for the state to run numbers of small sustainable settlements, and it could not establish them in the first place. Again, they can only emerge from lived experience at the grassroots level whereby people learn from the conditions they are living in that the new attitudes and practices are essential. They must be motivated by intrinsic, willingly accepted new ideas, values and dispositions. Governments cannot create or impose these cultural elements. Thus profound cultural change must gain great momentum long before capitalism can be swept aside. Kropotkin and Tolstoy understood this (Marshall, 1992: 372). Thus, socialists greatly overestimate the power of the state for the purposes of the kind of revolution shown to be needed by the simpler way perspective. They argue that being in control of the state would enable implementation of the new ways, but those ways could not be implemented unless the radically new culture had first come into existence. The socialist would argue that socialist control of the state would enable the state to facilitate the cultural transition. But this would be feasible only if those in control of the state held the new world view, and that could not be the case unless the government had been elected by citizens most of whom had come to hold that world view long before the election. Again, this shows that the cultural revolution has to come first and therefore that it is a serious mistake to prioritise taking state power. Clearly, the cultural change would be the real revolution, enabling probably smooth change in social structures, power, functioning etc. The left in general has failed to appreciate this, although Gramsci's discussion of hegemony and the 'integral state' could be said to have

moved in the right direction. D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) recognise this. This discussion would seem to indicate that 'ruptural' strategies are not of significant value to the present degrowth movement. At this point in time, it would seem to be highly unlikely that they could achieve anything, probably being blocked more by culture than by class power. In addition, they would probably be irrelevant if the required cultural revolution succeeded. As that took place most present state functions would be taken over by the local level, and participatory democracy at that level would be making most decisions and using referenda and federations to deliver directions to the remaining state bureaucracies stripped of their power to make or enforce policy decisions. This would be not so much a taking of the state as a gradual shrinking and conversion of it, and stripping it of its power, converting it to an executive agency under the control of the local communities. (See further below.)

### **'Interstitial' approaches to change**

Wright's 'interstitial' category seems to be in need of significant modification. It seems to include two quite different forms. The first involves attempts to gradually replace elements in society with alternatives until a new society has been created. This category includes Transition Towns, Eco-village, Voluntary Simplicity, Slow Food and other movements. They might best be thought of as 'System Replacement From Within' strategies.

Marxists regard such effort as naive, fundamentally mistaken and counter-productive, especially given the power of the capitalist class and the lengths to which it is prepared to go to deal with threats. They say capitalism benefits from the availability of these 'feel-good' alternative options that defuse the concerns of discontented people and distract their energies into futile quests when effort should be going into confronting and getting rid of capitalism.

These initiatives are in principle predominantly if not entirely desirable and admirable, being for some of the basic elements required in a degrowth society, but the strategic causal links are not explained. How are these replacement efforts going to get rid of the need for growth, stop market forces and the profit motive determining our fate, eliminate socially damaging investment, provide livelihoods for mining workers and towns, solve the global debt crisis and liberate poor countries from bondage to the global neo-liberal economy, etc? Why won't they just lead to a grossly unsustainable and unjust society in which many desirable things like community gardens have been established? How is the formation of a community garden likely to increase discontent with capitalism? The initiator of the Transition Towns movement explicitly discouraged discussion of 'political' involvement or indeed discussion of strategy; he advocates that we '... just do stuff' (Hopkins, 2013). The adoption and demise of the Stroud alternative currency would seem to show the importance of thinking carefully about the causal chains associated with the stuff we are contemplating.

Again, the problem is the failure to examine the causal chains that various strategies involve. Advocates of the above-mentioned approaches do not explain how system change is going to eventually result from these initiatives, and it is unlikely that it would.

One difficulty in this interstitial approach noted by several (including Barnthaler 2023; Chertkovskya 2022; Herbert 2018; Kock 2022b; Probst 2022) is set by the contradiction between working with the current governing system and the ultimate goal of getting rid of it. However it is argued below that the apparent contradiction might be overcome by recognising that reform effort working within the system early in the campaign might contribute, but opposition to the system might be the best strategy late in the campaign. This is how Marx regarded the reforms being achieved by workers to do with rights to vote and to form unions. But then everything would depend on whether the right revolutionary structures and forces were created later on the prepared ground. In general, current degrowth and GND thinking provides little indication of how reformative policy achievements such as an alternative currency or fairer wages are going to help to get rid of a system that for instance treats labour as a commodity and permits capitalists to dump people into unemployment if a profit cannot be made from employing them. Typically, no causal link is given between the achievement of the better wages and the scrapping of a system with a built-in determination to keep wages as low as possible. (Koch 2022b does note the possibility of reform effort contributing to system change.) However, it is argued below that a causal link could be provided by explicitly using reform projects not to achieve reforms in the short term but to raise awareness of the need for eventual system change. The distinction is crucial and is discussed further below.

Members of the second group that seems to exist within Wright's 'interstitial' category are not concerned to change society; their goal is to set up, or preserve, an alternative society within or beside the old, independent of and opposed to it. They are not interested in changing the existing system; they seek to ignore it, except when it attacks and has to be fought against. The Zapatistas provide an example but there are literally millions of people in similar movements (Barkin, 20212), including the Campesino, Ubuntu, Swarj and Chikukwa movements and one might add the Catalan Integral Cooperative (Trainer, 2018b) and the Rojavan Kurds (Trainer, 2018a). Leahy's accounts (2009, 2018) of the African Chikukwa initiative compare the futility of goading peasants to compete on the international food export markets with the development of highly self-sufficient permaculture villages designed to meet immediate needs.

Barkin (2022) stresses how remarkable are the achievements of this wide range of initiatives within the poorer countries. They constitute a large and novel revolution and its significance has received little recognition. Over the past two decades, there has been a variety of theoretical works and advocates generally arguing for this orientation. These include [AQ8] Apfel-Marglin, (1998: 39); Benholdt-Thomsen and Mies (1999); Bookchin (1980); Gelderloos (2022); Korten (1999: 262); Mies and Shiva (1993); Monticelli (2022); Pepper (1996); Quinn (1999: 95, 135); Rai (1995); Randers (2012); Relocalise (2009); and Rude (1998: 53).

An appropriate label for this strategy is 'Turning Away'. For very large numbers in poor countries, it would seem to be the right strategy. It is supported by the rise of 'post-development theory' which provides strong reasons why conventional development theory and practice are a form of legitimised plunder and should be abandoned.

However, the conditions enabling and energising these movements are quite different from those which people in rich countries experience. The people involved are cohesive and unified in their aspirations, bonded by tradition, location and histories of repression, without experience of or attraction to Western consumer ways. Therefore, the frequent reference to these movements in the degrowth literature would not seem to provide the rich world with useful strategies. Yet there are lessons to be learned, especially to do with necessary conditions such as the importance of solidarity, experience of difficult circumstances and struggle for survival, recognition of the need for local self-sufficiency and not being seduced by material wealth. These are among the ideas and values which Simpler Way transition theory regards as necessary for transition. The Catalan Integral Cooperative is a remarkable application of the 'turning away' strategy. Thousands are involved in running alternative supply and service systems, including food distribution centres, employment agencies, medical provision, tertiary training and legal and other professional services, motivated by a fierce determination to have nothing to do with the market or the state.

An implication of the 'turning away' strategy can be stated as, 'Don't fight capitalism; ignore it to death'. There are issues over which fighting against it is appropriate, but at this point in time working for degrowth is not one of them. The system is (a) far too deeply entrenched, (b) supported by most people and (c) well into the process of getting rid of itself.

#### **HOW THEN MIGHT THE TRANSITION BE ACHIEVED?**

Following is an outline of core themes in Simpler Way transition theory, which departs markedly from current degrowth thinking on transition. (For a more detailed account see TSW, 2020.) First the situation needs to be understood. The key elements from the simpler way perspective are:

- The seriousness of the global predicament is not generally appreciated, especially concerning the magnitude of the change required. As indicated above, something like a factor 10 reduction in rich world per capita resource consumption is required. If this case is more or less valid, reform is ruled out; there must be replacement of basic economic, political and cultural systems.
- The problems are too big and too urgent to be solved. For instance there is probably less than a decade left to deal effectively with the climate problem. (Levin, 2018, Steffen, 2020.) Ecological and social difficulties in the Middle East could terminate petroleum supply within a decade (Ahmed, 2017.) In that time span the fracking industry is likely to be in rapid decline. (Hughes 2016, Cunningham 2019, Whipple 2019, Cobb, 2019.) Energy return on energy invested values are declining. Many believe that the accelerating debt problem generated by financialisation cannot now be defused. Hudson (2022) shows how historically debt has destroyed whole empires and has now reached unpayable levels.
- We are heading for a time of great troubles, a global breakdown that could be terminal for humankind. There is no possibility of avoiding this now. The two

basic causes are the tightening of the limits to growth noose, that is the many accelerating difficulties due to resource scarcity and ecological damage, and secondly the dissolution of social cohesion due to increasing inequality, debt and consequent immiseration of discontented masses. Impatience with democracy and attraction to fascism are increasing.

- The basic causes of the global predicament are not recognised by elites, governments or publics. The right responses cannot be made if the situation is not understood. Elites, middle classes and masses mostly take for granted resource-intensive conceptions of “progress”, “living standards” and “development” and have no interest in transition to simpler lifestyles and systems.
- These factors determine that this society is incapable of transforming itself rationally and voluntarily into a sustainable and just form. Ruling elites dependent on, and incapable of questioning, growth and market forces do not recognise that capitalism is the primary cause of the big problems or understand what to do to resolve them. Their response is perverse, that is, they strive to fuel the growth fire, to shore up capitalism knowing that the goal must be to “get the economy going again”.
- Capitalism is in the process of self-destruction. As Marx saw, its contradictions will eventually destroy it. Numerous analysts argue that it is generating difficulties that will lead to catastrophic breakdown in the global system, including Hudson, 2022, Mason 2003, Korowicz, 2012, Morgan, 2013, Kunstler, 2005, Collins, 2018, Greer 2005.
- The best outcome would be a Goldilocks depression that is not so savage as to eliminate any hope of reconstruction but severe enough to force people towards the above alternative. That is not the most likely outcome but it is the one to be worked for.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGY**

The foregoing statements of the nature of the global situation and the required transition lead to implications for appropriate strategy more or less contradicting mainstream degrowth and Marxist thinking.

The core argument has been that the profound transition required cannot get far unless there is widespread adoption of a radically new consciousness or culture, which recognises the need for extreme degrowth, embraces the above simplicity vision and is positively, willingly committed to working for the transition. At this early stage, this means the supreme strategic priority must be ‘awareness raising’, as distinct from badgering governments to implement policy changes or trying to take state power. This involves a kind of ‘turning away’ and focusing on attempting to help people to see why extensive degrowth is necessary and why this means eventually profound system change, and above all that this is about liberation towards a sustainable, just and enjoyable new society.

There are many ways that the task can be advanced, most obviously by raising the issues wherever there is an opportunity, especially by writing addressed to academic and popular audiences, and by mentioning the issues in everyday conversation. Following is a category of approaches that at first sight might appear to be within the reform or replacement domain that would seem to be especially valuable.

It was argued above that just creating another ecovillage or community garden, or calling for new housing or tax policies, will probably make little or no contribution to radical system change. But such actions could easily do so if they were designed primarily for educational purposes, that is, as devices to communicate the new vision. For instance, visitors to the community garden could be confronted by many information boards, displays, take-home literature, dioramas representing the way the neighbourhood could be remade, and especially by participants eager to explain the need for fundamental system change, and how things such as community gardens will be part of the required new society. At present, things like community gardens are only about the possibility of enjoyable activity and rarely if ever is it about the need for revolutionary global change.

This could easily be remedied, by repurposing to focus the venture on communicating the big picture. Many agencies and projects could easily add that perspective to their current activities, explaining how their concern to save a forest or opposed a mine is part of the essential revolutionary project. (This theme is elaborated in Trainer, 2022b). Unfortunately, this is not being done at present. The intention underlying most initiatives such as community gardens is to enable enjoyable and beneficial gardening etc. experience, not to contribute to the formation of the required new world view. However, the arena with the most effective potential has to do with the Transition Towns initiative. Central in the revolutionary process will have to be the transformation of existing towns and suburbs into the kind of settlements outlined above. But there is again a need to make the above vision and goals far more prominent than they are now within that movement, and to go far beyond 'just doing stuff'. Most effective would be the development and circulation of accounts of towns that have made the most impressive progress towards taking collective control of their fate, showing how such towns can defuse global sustainability and justice problems while having significant quality of life benefits.

There are also research projects in this domain that could make a significant contribution, such as having a small team live in a struggling rural town to quietly work out what the general orientation to the key themes seems to be and whether a few of the locals might be interested in setting up a 'future of our town' discussion group. Guest speakers or film nights could sketch the reasons for thinking about fundamental system change and options for the town. The process should clarify what ideas and attitudes local people typically hold and the ways they might be encouraged to explore a simpler way path. A few ventures of this kind might lead to fairly confident impressions as to what works and what doesn't, enabling accumulation and interpretation of experience leading towards the compilation of a continually updated

guidebook. Videos on the process and on impressive towns could be used to prompt more towns to follow.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The foregoing discussion has been concerned to argue for a particular approach to degrowth strategy deriving from the simpler way perspective on the global situation. This has involved selected reference to contributions within the degrowth literature, not to carry out a general critical review but to indicate the merits of the claims being made for the present analysis. A major concern has been to provide causal reasoning, offering plausible explanations of how and why options being put forward might work. Most current discussion of strategy does not go beyond stating preferred options, without giving much in the way of reasons for their likely effectiveness. Little attention has been given to this kind of examination in previous discussions of strategy. Above all, the argument has been that focusing on the simpler way perspective is crucial and has coercive implications for degrowth and strategy.

Consequently, it has been argued that some popular approaches are not likely to be of value, and that at this early point in time within the degrowth campaign the most appropriate one involves turning away from the dominant system in order to focus on building the understandings and values, the new culture, that must become widespread before any progress to the required structural or policy change becomes possible.

The main strategic concern should be to focus effort on persuading people to adopt a simpler way vision, especially through the development of practical ventures designed for this awareness raising purpose. This element can easily be added to many existing campaigns and movements, by simply noting how their efforts to save a forest or block a mine connect with the ultimate system change goal.

There is no guarantee such an approach will succeed. The coming time of great troubles could eliminate any chance of success, but the best option is to try to ensure that enough people with the right vision are able to survive it determined to build alternative ways. The coming breakdown might rule out all positive possibilities but it will provide powerful incentives for cooperative, self-sufficient and frugal localism.

Socialists are likely to be especially discontented with this analysis, firstly because it contradicts their fundamental faith in centralisation, and secondly, because its main advice is not to fight directly against the system. Ignore capitalism to death as it self-destructs. Do not waste time pleading for currently impossible utopian policies, or trying to take state power. If all goes well there Implications for strategy Conclusions will never be a need to take state power because the state will be radically transformed as communities take functions away from it and leave it with mostly service tasks, and subservient to local decisions.

The foregoing considerations have elaborated an anarchist 'prefiguring' strategy, that is, one focused on building elements of a post-capitalist society here and now before the old one has been eliminated. This might appear to contradict the above argument that 'interstitial' strategies of the replacement kind are not likely to achieve fundamental system change. But everything depends on the purpose of the prefiguring. The purpose should be, not primarily to increase the number of post-revolutionary arrangements on the ground towards the day when these have replaced the old ways, but to establish 'educational' devices and agencies.

Thus, the fact that many community gardens, eco-villages and Transition Towns now exist is of great value, despite mostly being about replacement. All that is needed is to gear them primarily to the awareness raising task. Unfortunately, this is not being done at all extensively at present.

The coming time of troubles will encourage or force people towards cooperative frugal localism as governments and the global market system increasingly fail to provide for them. This is happening in cities like Detroit. But country towns are in the best position to build viable ways. In time, the grass root initiatives will take functions and power away from the centre, for instance, as towns set up their own cooperative farms and service providers, employment agencies etc. as the Catalan Integral Cooperative has done. They will federate with each other to organise regional light industry, R and D, training and advisory services geared to their local conditions.

Thus, in time governing would increasingly shift from the centre, although some bureaucracies would remain to coordinate things such as national communications, railways and research. The state will therefore not have been 'taken' so much as transformed into an agency that is under the control of the settlements, including small cities, and that exists primarily to service them.

It has been argued that this vision of the required new social form, and of the path to it, which are both anarchist, is not a preference or a matter of choice. Communities with very low footprints must have highly self-sufficient basically cooperative economies geared to needs, and these cannot function well unless they are focused on the welfare of all, practising self-government via participatory democracy and enjoying a high level of social cohesion. There can be little place for centralised agencies or power in establishing or running such communities. Citizens cannot be ruled by the centre to be conscientious, caring, responsible and willingly frugal. More distant issues up to national level must be dealt with by essential anarchist procedures such as federations and conferences which take proposals back down to town meetings for decision.

However, the argument has been that a crucial element must be added to the traditional anarchist recipe, viz., simplicity of lifestyles and systems.

One of the merits of the path that has been argued is that it envisages a transition that could be entirely peaceful. Another is that it enables us to

implement and enjoy here and now aspects of the better world we are working for, whereas 'ruptural' strategies can promise only struggle and danger, at least in the near future.

A final merit is that one could argue that the anarchist vision is the correct 'end of history'. For at least the last 8000 years, most humans have suffered domination by government, typically in the hands of a tyrant. Graeber and Wengrow (2022) describe societies that avoided the trap of accepting being ruled, and puzzle over why the West got stuck in it. Perhaps the coming collapse of affluent, growth-obsessed, fossil-fuelled societies will give us a chance to escape it once and for all.

Albert, M., 2003. *Life after Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Ahmed, N. M., 2017. *Failing States, Collapsing Systems*. Dordrecht: Springer.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-47816-6>

Appfel-Marglin, F.A., 1998. *The Spirit of Regeneration; Andean Culture Confronting Western Notions of Development*. London: Zed Books.

Avineri, S., 1968. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139171410>

Bardi, U., 2011. "The Seneca effect: why decline is faster than growth." *Cassandra's Legacy*. August 28.  
<https://cassandralegacy.blogspot.com/2011/08/seneca-effect-origins-of-collapse.html>.

Barlow, N., et al., Eds., 2022. *Degrowth & Strategy: how to*

bring about social-ecological transformation. Mayfly: Degrowth Vienna.

Bastini, A., 2019. *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. London: Verso.

Bellamy Foster, J., 2011. "Capitalism and Degrowth: An Impossibility Theorem".  
[https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-062-08-2011-01\\_2](https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-062-08-2011-01_2)

Monthly Review, 62, Jan.

Benholdt-Thomsen, V., and M. Mies, 1999. *The Subsistence Perspective*. London: Zed.

Bookchin, M., 1980. *Towards an Ecological Society*. Montreal: Black Rose.

- Cobb, K., 2019. "The wheels come off shale oil." Resilience. 11th Aug.
- Collins, C., 2018. "Catabolism: Capitalism's Frightening Future." Our Place in the World. November.
- Cunningham, N., 2019. "The EIA Is Grossly Overestimating U.S. Shale." Global Research. OilPrice.com, 12 November.
- Dale, G., (2021), "Karl Polanyi, the New Deal and the Green New Deal", Environmental Values, Number 5, October 2021, pp. 593-612(20)  
<https://doi.org/10.3197/096327120X16033868459485>
- D'Alisa, G., and G. Kallis, 2020. "Degrowth and the State" Ecological Economics. March 169, DOI: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106486.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106486>
- Duncan, R. C., 2013. "Olduvai Theory; Heading into the gorge." The Social Contract Theory Journal Winter, (23), 2.
- Fotopoulos, T., 1997. Towards an Inclusive Democracy, London, Cassell.
- Gelderloos, P., 2022. The Solutions Are Already Here. London, Pluto.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv28vb1wq>
- Greer, J.M., 2005. "How Civilizations Fall: A Theory of Catabolic Collapse."  
[https://www.ecoshock.org/transcripts/greer\\_on\\_collapse.pdf](https://www.ecoshock.org/transcripts/greer_on_collapse.pdf).
- Haberl, H., et al., 2020. "A systematic review of the evidence on decoupling of GDP, resource use and GHG emissions, part II: synthesizing the insights", Environmental Research Letters, 15.  
<https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab842a>
- Herbert, J., et al., 2018. "Beyond Visions and Projects: The Need for a Debate on Strategy in the Degrowth Movement", Degrowth.de, November 5.
- Hickel, J., 2018. "The great challenge of the 21st century is learning to consume less. This is how we can do it." World Economic Forum, 15th May.
- Hickel J. and G. Kallis, 2018. "Is Green Growth Possible?" New Political Economy, April. DOI: 10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964>

Hickel, J., 2020. "What does degrowth mean? A few points of clarification" Globalisations. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1812222>  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1812222>

Hickel, J., 2022. Less Is More. Heinemann: London.

Hudson, M., 2022. The Destiny of Civilisation. Counterunch.

Hughes, D. 2016. "Tight Oil Reality Check." Post Carbon Institute. Resilience. Dec. 15.

Kallis, G., 2011. "In defence of degrowth", Ecological Economics, 70, 5, 15th March, 873-880.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2010.12.007>

Kallis, G., 2015. "Yes, We Can Prosper Without Growth: 10 Policy Proposals for the New Left", Common Dreams. 28 Jan.

Kallis, G., 2017. "Socialism Without Growth", Capitalism Nature Socialism. DOI: 10.1080/10455752.2017.1386695  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1386695>

Kallis, G., et al., 2018. "Research on Degrowth", Annual Review of Environment and Resources. May 22.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325492725\\_Research\\_on\\_Degrowth](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325492725_Research_on_Degrowth)

Korowicz, D., 2012. Trade: Financial System Supply-Chain Cross-Contagion: A study in global systemic collapse. Metis Risk Consulting & Feasta.

Korten, D.C., 1999. The Post-Corporate World. West Hartford: Kumarian Press.

Kovel J., 2007. The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World. London: Zed Books.  
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350251007>

Kruger, O., (2019), The Paradox of Sustainable Degrowth and a Convivial Alternative", Environmental Values Volume 28, Number 2, pp. 233-251.  
<https://doi.org/10.3197/096327119X15515267418548>

Kunstler, J., 2005. The Long Emergency; Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century. New York, Grove/Atlantic.

Leahy, T., 2009. Permaculture Strategy for the South African Villages. Palmwoods: Qld., PI Productions Photography.

Leahy, T., 2018. Food Security for Rural Africa: Feeding the Farmers First: Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351134156>

Lehtonen, T., and P. Heikkurinen, (2022), "Sufficiency and Sustainability: Conceptual Analysis and Ethical Considerations for Sustainable Organisation", Environmental Values, Volume 31, Number 5, October 2022, pp. 599-618(20)  
<https://doi.org/10.3197/096327121X16328186623878>

Levin, K., 2018. "According to New IPCC Report, the World Is on Track to Exceed its "Carbon Budget" in 12 Years." World Resources Institute, October 7.

Lockyer, J. 2017. "Community, commons, and De-growth at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage." Political Ecology 24, 519-542.  
<https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20890>

Lowey, M., 2018. "Why Ecosocialism: For a Red-Green Future", Great Transition Initiative, December. <https://greattransition.org/images/Lowey-Why-Ecosocialism.pdf>

Marshal, P., 1992. Demanding the Impossible: The History of Anarchism. London: Harper Collins.

Mason, C., 2003. The 2030 Spike: Countdown to Catastrophe. London: Earthscan.

Mastini, R., G. Kallis and J. Hickel, 2021. "A Green New Deal without growth?," Ecological Economics, vol. 179.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106832>

Mies, M. and V. Shiva, 1993. Ecofeminism. Melbourne: Spinifex.  
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350219786>

Monticelli, L., Ed., 2022. The Future is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics, Bristol: Bristol University Press,. Ch. 15.

Morgan, T., 2012. Perfect Storm: Energy, Finance and the End of Growth. Tullet Prebon.

Mygind du Plessis, E. and E. Husted, 2022 "Five Challenges for Prefiguration Research: A Sympathetic Polemic", Ch. 15 in Monticelli, L., Ed., The Future is Now. Bristol, Bristol Univ.

Parrique, T. et al., 2019. Decoupling Debunked. European Environmental Bureau. July. <https://eeb.org/library/decoupling-debunked/>.

Parrique, T., 2019. The political economy of degrowth. Economics and Finance. Université Clermont Auvergne [2017-2020]; Stockholms Universitet. ffNNT : 2019CLFAD003ff. fftel-02499463f

Pepper, D., 1996. Modern Environmentalism. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Phillips, L., 2014. Austerity Ecology and the Collapse-Porn Addicts; A Defence of Growth, Progress, Industry and Stuff. Winchester UK: Zero Books,

Quinn, D., 1999. Beyond Civilization. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Rai, M., 1995. Chomsky's Politics. London: Verso.

Rammelt, C. (2020), 'The Spiralling Economy: Connecting Marxian Theory with Ecological Economics', *Environmental Values* Volume 29, Number 4, August pp. 417-442.  
<https://doi.org/10.3197/096327119X15747870303881>

Randers, J., 2012. 2052: A Global Forecast for the Next Forty Years. New York: Chelsea Green.

Relocalise, 2009. <http://www.postcarbon.org/relocalize>.

Rude, C., 1998. "Postmodern Marxism; A critique." *Monthly Review* November, 52-57.  
[https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-050-06-1998-10\\_5](https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-050-06-1998-10_5)

Sarkar, S., 1999. Eco-Socialism or Eco-Capitalism? - A Critical Analysis of Humanity's Fundamental Choices. London: Zed Books.

Sharzer, G., 2012. No Local: Why Small-Scale Alternatives Won't Change The Worl., Zero Books.

Smith, R., 2016. Green Capitalism; The God that Failed. London: Institute for Policy Research and Development.

Steffen, W., 2020.. "Labor's climate policy is too little, too late. We must run faster to win the race." *The Conversation*. February 24.

St-Onge, E., 2015. "Senegal transforming 14,000 villages into eco-villages!" <https://valhallamovement.com/senegal-launches-program-transition-14000-traditional-villages-ecovillages/>

Trainer T., (2021) Degrowth: How much is needed? *Biophys Econ. Sust.*, **6**, 5. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41247-021-00087-6>

Trainer, T., (2022), "Why I am not a socialist", *New Politics*, 16<sup>th</sup> June. <https://newpol.org/why-i-am-not-a-socialist/>

Trainer, T., (2022), "How Resource-Cheaply Could We Live Well? ", *real-world economics review*, issue no. 99, 64 – 79.

TSW (2023) *The Alternative*. <https://thesimplerway.info/TSWMain.htm>

Vansintjan A., A. Vetter and M. Schmeizer, 2022 *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism*. New York: Verso.

Vettese, T., and D. Pendergrass. (2022), *Half-Earth Socialism*. London: Verso.

Whipple, T., 2019. "Peak Oil Review". 4 November. [Peak-Oil.org](http://Peak-Oil.org).

Wright, E. O. 2010. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London: Verso.