Commons, Libraries & Degrowth

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The Real Tragedy of the Commons

For the vast majority of homo sapiens' 200,000 years on this Earth, the 148.9 million km² of land were open to all. Of course, some areas were significantly more habitable than others, but pockets of communally held lands and immense wildlands stretched the whole landscape. People lived communally and managed the lands they inhabited communally, in some form or another, whether they were sedentary or nomadic. Until a few centuries ago, custom-based and communal systems of land use existed across the globe.

And yet, when it comes to the question of the production and distribution end of the consumption of goods and services, when it comes to the question of how we organise the land we inhabit and the resources therein, economics, we're presented with two paths: privatisation or nationalisation. The capitalist or the State. Economics textbooks typically hold tables tabulating the pros and cons of capitalist enterprise and state ownership:

Private ownership is seen as beneficially competitive, though capitalism naturally trends toward monopoly as the reinvestment of capital ever raises the cost of entry. Nationalisation is celebrated for protecting national resources from foreign exploitation, despite maintaining local exploitation. Private ownership is extolled for its immunity to political influence, yet capitalists and politicians, when they aren't one and the same, work hand in hand to meet their shared interests. State ownership may maintain the accessibility of essential services, as with healthcare or education, but that which it gives, it is just as capable of taking away, or limiting through means tests. Private ownership supposedly keeps taxes low, yet the wealthy benefit the most from said low taxes, while the cost of living escalates for the average person, and while state ownership may raise the standard of living in the nation through the revenue it generates, much of that wealth still concentrates at the top. Both privatisation and nationalisation typically maintain a short-term, myopic view of success: capitalists are focused on the immediate fiscal year and generating profits for their shareholders, while politicians are focused on their political career and what quick publicity gains they can make within the electoral cycle. Both nationalisation and privatisation accept as a central tenet that power must remain in the hands of the few over the many.

This critique isn't meant to be exhaustive or detailed, but it is meant to provide a cursory illustration of the limitations this dichotomy leaves us with; between a rock and a hard place. We can certainly debate which is worse, and personally, I believe privatisation is much worse, but the reality is that whether the land and resources are held in the hands of a capitalist or a bureaucrat, the masses of working-class people are alienated from control regardless. Furthermore, under the global capitalist status quo, there is no real separation between the capitalists and the state. It is one smooth criminal…I mean one smooth machine.

Side tangent: when people attempt to criticise communism by pointing to the environmental disasters under nationalisation in 'state socialist' projects like the USSR, defenders of state socialism typically retort with arguments that outline the unacknowledged benefits of those projects, buried by Cold War era propaganda. But the issue is that nationalisation was never the aim of communism in the first place. The Bolsheviks may have made that bastardised understanding of communism globally notorious after crushing alternatives and you can extoll all the positive outcomes of those projects and ignore all the negatives if you'd like, but the reality is that the aim of communism is to socialise, not nationalise, the means of production. I know these terms have been used as synonyms because far too many purposefully treat the government and its

people as interchangeable, but they couldn't be more different. To nationalise industry means to give it to the nation-state and make it obedient to the wishes of those in charge of government, whereas to socialise industry means to give it to the society, to the workers themselves, making it subservient to the direct will of the people. The aim of anarchism and communism is the direct popular control and management of resources, not government ownership.

I digress. The problem is that we're presented with two sides of the same coin. Any mention of the commons, of social ownership in the true sense of the term, is relegated to the greatly deplored tragedy of the commons, which, despite being thoroughly dissected decades ago, despite being contradicted by millennia of human existence, endures in some circles as a justification for why no matter what, the people themselves cannot manage the land and resources.

Check the scenario. Commonly owned pasture, every local herdsman can graze their cattle. The idea is that a herder, acting in isolation, would try to take advantage of the additional short-term individual benefits gained by introducing more than his allotted number of cattle to the common pasture, despite the damage that overgrazing would cause to the whole, and if all herders made this individually rational economic decision, the commons would most definitely be depleted or even destroyed, ending all their livelihoods. The term 'tragedy of the commons' was first coined by white supremacist, eugenicist, and Neomalthusian ecologist Garret Hardin in 1968, who popularised the scenario with a focus on human population growth, the use of the Earth's natural resources, and the welfare state. He bemoaned the 'overbreeding' of particular races, classes, and religions and deplored the welfare state for supporting said overbreeding.

Hardin's assertions had the neo-classical economics' baked-in assumption that these farmers were necessarily atomised, unorganised and unable to recognise certain disaster and change their behaviour accordingly. They required enlightened elites, whether capitalist or bureaucrat, to step in and ameliorate the situation. The popularity of his article rose in tandem with the widespread implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1970s, and his arguments were cited heavily by those who wished to privatise nationalised industries and eliminate long-standing communal institutions.

The so-called tragedy of the commons did not actually reflect historical or current practice; the free-for-all, destructive hypothetical proposed by Hardin was incongruent with the carefully managed, long-enduring commons of reality. The reality is that under capitalism, property is not valued for itself or for its utility, it's valued for the revenue it produces for its owner, and if that capitalist can maximise their revenue by destroying that property, they have the right to do so. The reality is that under capitalism, we can see that a person's desire for profit outweighs their interest in their community's long-term survival, but that perspective cannot be universally projected. It's a perspective born out of and strongly incentivised by capitalism. In contrast, communal ownership incentivises the protection and maintenance of common resources for future generations, similar to the Seven Generations principle of sustainability in the constitution of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

The rich and powerful will continue to use the 'tragedy of the commons' to justify their theft, destruction and enclosure of the commons and communal life, because, without the commons and the community bonds that maintain them, we have no other recourse but to sell our labour to those rich and powerful to survive. That's why land and liberty, tierra y libertad, has been so common a revolutionary demand. But how did we get here? What happened to our commons? How did this theft occur? How has the potent alternative present in the commons been so wiped from our collective memory?

It goes back to the feudal concept of land ownership, the age of European colonialism, and of course, the rise of industrial capitalism. The king of England, for example, owned all the land in feudal England but bestowed titles for pledges of loyalty to powerful members of the nobility that allowed them to rule over large estates. These lords leased the land they were given to aristocrats, who also leased parts of their land as payment, for military aid, or for rent. This rigidly hierarchical system of obligation between landed lords and their tenants or vassals reinforced the monarchy's ability to stake a claim on the land in their kingdom. However, at the bottom of this system were the peasants, who did all the actual work on the common land on the lord's estate. Many were generationally serfs; legally prohibited from leaving the land they cultivated without their lord's permission. Lords may have come and gone, but their bondage to the land was basically forever.

After the Magna Carta, the Black Death, the Crusades, and all the other dramas that brought feudalism into decline, the nobility initiated a process of privatisation that laid the groundwork for early capitalism through acquisitions, settlement, and enclosure of the commons. But even though revolutions and reforms came and went and most of us have gotten rid of our inbred kings and queens and their right to rule, the concept of sovereignty over private parcels of land and the feudal relationship of landlord and tenant has endured to this day, exported globally through European colonialism.

Despite this violent and antisocial theft of our access to even the means of subsistence, some commons have survived and thrived, though they operate within the constraints of the State and the global capitalist status quo. Still, there is a lot we can learn from them when it comes to how to manage the commons.

Why have they succeeded where others have failed in maintaining their commons? All efforts to organise collective action, including the commons, must address a common set of problems: how to supply new institutions, how to solve commitment issues, and how to maintain stability. It's not easy. And yet some individuals have created institutions, committed themselves to following the rules they've come up with together, and assessed their own and others' conformance to the rules in order to maintain the stability of their shared commons. Again, why have they succeeded where others have failed? External factors seem to play a significant role. Some have more autonomy than others to change their own institutions while others have change happen too rapidly for them to respond and adjust. Regardless, people try their best to solve the problems they face, despite their limitations. What factors help or hinder them in these efforts is a matter of careful study if we wish to succeed in organising and running our own commons.

But first, we need to clarify some definitions.

The commons are based on a common-pool resource or CPR, which is a natural or man-made resource system that benefits a group of people, but provides diminished benefits to everyone if each individual pursues their own self-interest. We must draw a further distinction between the resource system and the resource units produced by the system. Resource systems include forests, groundwater basins, irrigation canals, lakes, fisheries, pastures, and even infrastructure like windmills and the internet, while resource units consist of whatever users appropriate from those resource systems, such as cubic metres of lumber harvested and water withdrawn, tons of fish harvested and fodder grazed, kilowatts generated and network bandwidth used. It's also important to maintain the renewability of a resource system by ensuring that the average rate of withdrawal does not exceed the average rate of replenishment.

The term 'appropriators' refers to those who withdraw resource units from a resource system, like a fisher or farmer. Appropriators may use the resource units they withdraw, like residents powering their homes or farmers watering their crops, or they may transfer the resource units for others to use, such as a logger sending lumber to a hardware store for sale. Those who arrange for the provision of a CPR through financing or design are providers, while producers are those who actually construct, repair, and sustain the resource system itself. Providers, producers, and appropriators are often all the same people.

Appropriators who share a CPR are deeply intertwined in a tapestry of interdependence. Acting selfishly and independently will usually obtain less benefit than they could have had they collectively organised in some way. The process of organising enables us to coordinate and change our shared situations to obtain higher shared benefits and reduce shared harm.

Some of the commons institutions that endure today are as old as over a thousand years, while others are a few hundred at most. They exist alongside the personal property of the appropriators involved, such as their crops and livestock, but have remained at the core of these communities' economies for generations. They have survived droughts, floods, wars, pestilences, and many major economic and political changes. From the alpine meadows of Torbel, Switzerland to the 3 million hectares of Japanese forest to the irrigation systems of Spain and the Philippines, these projects have evolved over time in response to experience and circumstance. None of them are perfect demonstrations of anarchy or anything, nor are they necessarily the most 'optimal' by some metrics. But they are successful in establishing a level of autonomy and resilience in the people involved in them, and they've managed to carefully maintain the ecology of the regions they inhabit.

These institutions exist in different settings and have different histories, yet they simultaneously share fundamental similarities. Unpredictable and complex environments combined with engineering and farming skills combined with a predictable population over an extended period of time. These fairly egalitarian communities have developed extensive norms that define proper behaviour, involving honesty and reliability, allowing them to live without excessive conflict in a deeply interdependent environment. The perseverance of these institutions is due to the seven, and in some cases eight, key principles that Elinor Ostrom outlines in Governing the Commons:

First and foremost, the commons need clearly defined boundaries. Those involved should have a clear sense of the exact structure and characteristics of the resource system itself—whether through generationally preserved folk knowledge or extensive scientific study—as well as who is involved in withdrawing from and sustaining it. Secondly, the appropriation and provision rules of the commons must be compatible with local conditions. In order to maintain the renewability of a common-pool resource, there need to be some restrictions in place. Thirdly, those involved in the commons need to have collective decision-making power over the commons. They should be the ones that come up with and modify the rules of the commons when needed. Not external authorities. However, it's not enough to collectively come up with rules, there has to be a commitment from those bound by them to stay bound by them, even when temptations arise. Shared norms regarding behaviour and reputation concerns can help, but you also need the fourth and fifth principles established in some form to effectively maintain social harmony.

The fourth principle is monitoring, which is the process of continuously evaluating the conditions of the CPR itself as well as the behaviour of the appropriators. Through this process, individuals learn what rules work and what rules don't, and they're able to keep each other accountable. In these sorts of situations, opportunistic people may be tempted to take advantage of the trust

present in the group, so the fifth principle necessary for successful commons management is the practice of accountability through graduated sanctions. Empathy should be maintained throughout the process, of course, but infractions definitely vary in severity. In some situations, when infractions are temporary deviations or unthreatening to the survival of the CPR, tolerance can be high, but in other situations, when the livelihood of the entire community is at stake, things cah be so easy. The sixth principle is the presence of conflict-resolution mechanisms. Humans are gonna human. We make mistakes, we have disagreements, and there needs to be some sort of means of discussing and resolving conflict in a healthy and effective way. The seventh principle is the freedom to organise. In some places, people have a lot more autonomy to self-organise free of state control than others. Our aim of course is the abolition of the state entirely, but in the meantime, having a government that does not encroach on these projects, especially in their fragile early stages, helps tremendously. The eighth and final principle for successful commons management involves nested enterprises. It's basically the same principle as the anarchist confederation. Bottom-up organisation that maintains power at the local level while coordinating larger scaled commons at the regional level and beyond.

With these principles in place, based on the experience and case studies of several existing institutions, I believe we can effectively govern the commons. But how do we get started? The creation of new institutions can sometimes be quite easy, and other times quite difficult. The costs involved are going to vary depending on the resource system you're trying to bring under common control and it can be difficult to get past the early stages of organising due to burnout, apathy, and lack of commitment. But it's best to view this process as a process. It's incremental, not abrupt. We'll need people involved, creating and acting upon visions to transform their local situation for a better future. We'll need systems thinking to best evaluate the circumstances we're in so that we can chart the best course of action. We'll need to adapt to hiccups and disruptions that will inevitably occur during this building process, and we'll need to confront and work to uproot systems that get in the way. And we'll need the courage to keep going no matter what.

The commons are an important foundation upon which a new, free society will be built. As I mentioned before, I think existing commons projects have been limited by the circumstances of global capitalism, but I think the values that underlie the commons can be expanded far more than they have been thus far. The commons that exist today are primarily based on agriculture, but we can also introduce the principles of the commons to housing cooperatives, utility cooperatives, and expansions of the library concept. Imagine transforming neighbourhoods and apartment complexes into truly social institutions that cooperate to build, maintain, and provide housing as an irreducible minimum to all. Picture libraries run by communities that are able to provide all the tools, appliances, and equipment necessary for shared living in a solarpunk future. The wealth of this planet should be shared by us all and the real tragedy of the commons is the loss thereof to the elite few. All power to all the people. Peace.

We Need A Library Economy

I've spent a lot of my time on this platform criticising the world we live in today. From the illness of imperialism that has spread itself worldwide to the education system that conforms young minds to the oppressive institution of work as we have conceived it to all the other systems

and ideologies and histories that have constructed the here and now. I get asked all the time, what do you propose? What is the alternative? How would it work?

And while I've spent some time discussing ideas for solutions in the past, I know I have a lot more to say, much more than this work intends to cover. At the same time, I want people to understand that I am just one piece in the puzzle. I alone cannot reconstruct a new world from whole cloth. It will take a combined effort to knit together a more inclusive, more cooperative, and more liberated tapestry of life.

When it comes to the economy, I've spoken before about my belief in the commons as a foundation upon which a new, free society should be built. The commons is an institution for social ownership that enables a community or network of communities to collectively manage and sustain natural or man-made resource systems, such as forests, pastures, fisheries, wind farms, housing, and even the internet.

For many people, despite how common the commons have been as an institution in human economies throughout history, it can be difficult to think about how it might possibly work. I cover the basic principles for successful commons management in my work on the commons, but it may help to think of the commons as a library of everything.

The library has been a long-standing institution in our society, but we may not stop to think about how radical a concept it is in comparison to the other dimensions of the modern day. When every other aspect of life has become fair game for the all-consuming appetite of capital, the library has surprisingly endured as an almost proto-socialist element, a glimmering beacon of what could be in the realm of what is. This isn't to deny the corrupting influence of hierarchy on the way that libraries currently exist, but it's still so marvellous that this millenia-old institution, despite its sometimes spotty history when it comes to inclusivity and accessibility, now acts in many places to valiantly defend those principles and provide a space for learning and being in an otherwise hostile world.

The history of libraries first began with efforts to organise collections of documents. From archives of cuneiform script in the temples of Sumer in 2600 BCE to the over 30,000 clay tablets from the Library of Ashurbanipal established in the 7th century BCE in Nineveh, these libraries stood the test of time to protect commercial records, archival documents, scholarly texts, and early works of literature, such as the epic of Gilgamesh. Ancient libraries sought to collect knowledge, learn from it, and use it to make life better. Unfortunately, most were kept to an elite, literate class, which guarded and disseminated important advances in agriculture, architecture, medicine, art, manufacturing, war, and more. Almost every major civilisation has built libraries, some so large and legendary that their memory lives on to this day; Tibetan Mayan, Indian, Mali, and other civilisations held repositories of knowledge from far and wide. The 10th-century library of Caliph al-Ḥakam in Cordova, Spain, boasted more than 400,000 books and the world-famous Library at Alexandria in Egypt held as many as 700,000 documents, now lost due to the fire. But many of Alexandria's documents were kept elsewhere and preserved. The same cannot be said for the libraries destroyed by conquistadors and the human libraries that carried generational knowledge of oral history that were slaughtered by colonial empires. A true tragedy.

Libraries have been burnt and built as people seek to erase and rewrite history. They have been suppressed and expanded with the ebb and flow of political temperament. At one point, transcription was a holy act, while at another it was democratised with the invention of the printing press. As literacy in the population grew, people began to realise the benefits of having publicly accessible hubs of knowledge, and libraries became commonplace worldwide. I believe most peo-

ple would agree with the idea that we have a responsibility to maintain and share knowledge freely, and libraries have played a hand in upholding that principle up to today. Libraries have begun to provide a variety of services in the realm of not just access to knowledge but also access to materials and training and a social space uncorrupted by the demands of consumerism.

With the rise of the internet came a vast expansion in the utopian potential of the library. After all, the internet could revolutionise access to whatever we could want or need from humanity's well of common heritage. As a species, we could step up to new heights. And yet, the internet has been sabotaged. Just as the true tragedy of the commons was the loss thereof, the true tragedy of the internet has been its fall from grace. It was the chosen one, and it has been corrupted by digital enclosure and privatisation, the rise of tech monopolies, and the forced implementation of artificial scarcity upon the abundance it could provide.

But I refuse to let go of the vision. I refuse to discard the unrealised possibilities of the library concept. If we believe that free access to humanity's heritage of knowledge is a right all humans inherently possess, can we not also recognise the right to free access to other essentials of human flourishing? If you don't mind entertaining this thought experiment, let's take a moment to explore what could be the foundational concepts of a library economy.

In The Ecology of Freedom, social ecologist Murray Bookchin spends a lot of time exploring three key concepts: usufruct, the irreducible minimum, and complementarity. These concepts are foundational to any cooperative, caring, and egalitarian society, but particularly to what Bookchin called 'organic society,' which consists of the egalitarian tribal societies that can be found in much of human history. These societies lacked social hierarchy, as in institutionalised systems of rank based on status distinctions, and as such, lacked domination, in the sense of both dominating people and dominating what Bookchin called 'first nature', the natural, ecological world. Our modern society is part of 'second nature' which is the human world.

Beginning with the first essential concept for a library economy, usufruct refers to the freedom of individuals or groups in a community to access and use, but not destroy, common resources to supply their needs. This is as opposed to the limitation of access based on exclusive ownership. Libraries allow you to access and use books when you need them, and encourage all of us to be good stewards of the books we borrow, taking care of it when we have it and returning it when we're done, because it belongs to all of us and should be readily available for use.

Imagine this principle applied to libraries of decor, libraries of furniture, or libraries of tools. Perhaps you would borrow cushions, couches, and paintings to suit one interior design taste for a few months before switching it out and trying a new style. You might borrow a shovel from the tool library to get a permablitz done one weekend and return it when you're done so someone else can use it when they need it. Alternatively, you can keep it for as long as you want to use it. All without having to produce excessively or leave stuff wasting away in storage. If we want to live sustainably, we need a library economy. We need an economy based on usufruct that incentivises producing enough lasting, durable stuff that everyone can share and use when they need it, instead of producing around planned obsolescence and excess, wasting crucial time, energy and resources. A library economy would be an essential component in a move towards degrowth, an economic theory we'll be exploring in the next work.

The second essential concept for a library economy is the irreducible minimum, which is the guaranteed provision of the means necessary to sustain life, the level of living that no one should ever fall below, regardless of the size of their individual contribution to the community. This includes access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, education, and healthcare. Libraries as

they exist now provide free access to knowledge, but knowledge is only one component of an individual's and a community's self-actualisation, which a library economy should be organised to help reach. Libraries of consumables like food, drugs, and toiletries may be difficult to imagine, which is why in addition to libraries of things, a library economy should also have dispensaries of necessities.

Farming cooperatives, in collaboration with cooking collectives, could work to ensure the entire community is provided with a range of healthy food options from the local and regional gardens, farms, and food forests. The popular assembly could organise with building cooperatives to establish a range of housing options to accommodate the needs of each and every member of the community. An emphasis on slow fashion, by a broad and diverse network of designers and tailors, as opposed to fast fashion, would ensure that everyone's wearing clothing that lasts in the styles that they like.

A library economy would require a vast reorientation of our priorities from the centrality of capital and competition to the centrality of humanity and cooperation, which brings us to the final core concept for a library economy: complementarity. Some people are abled, some people are disabled. Some people are bakers, some people are shoemakers. Some people will farm and some people will sing. People will have a say in how they labour and how they leisure. None of them need to be defined by or limited to the things that they do, but all should find joy or satisfaction or accomplishment in the things that they do for the sake of doing them. Together, we will have all the bread, shoes, veggies, and songs we could ask for. And for the things that no one enjoys, as I said in my work on a post-work society, we can find ways to rotate, gamify, or transform the tasks that need doing to make the drudge less drudgerous. A library economy should be based upon a complex social ecosystem that fulfils the many necessary roles a society needs filling. Complementarity is a way of looking at non-hierarchical differences within a society as something generative, where each person contributes a small part to an outcome greater than the sum of its parts.

Complementarity can be found within communities, ecologies, technologies, and even typical libraries, both in the relationship between libraries and their patrons and in the roles that libraries fulfil, such as research, information architecture, and collection management. Our approach to nature must similarly be based in complementarity. Rather than maintaining an antagonistic, dominating relationship with first nature, we should strive to find a complementary melding of first and second nature, generating a third nature that is reciprocal and sustainable.

At the beginning of this year, I asked you to recognise the importance of imagination in politics. Now imagine what a world based on a library economy would look like. Perhaps it would draw some inspiration from the 5 Laws of Library Science, first conceived by Indian librarian S. R. Ranganathan in 1931.

The first law is that books are for use. Things are meant to be used, not hoarded. Made accessible, not shut away. Preservation and storage are important, Ranganathan himself noted, but more important than that is that consideration is paid to access-related issues, such as location, hours of operation, comfort, and the quality of service. The second law states that every person has their book and the third law declares that every book has its reader. Applied more broadly, this means that we should strive to develop a broad collection of things, whether furniture, decor, books, vehicles, or housing that would serve a wide variety of needs and wants, no matter how niche, understanding that those sorts of accommodations are generative of an abundant life.

The fourth law says that we should try to save the time of the user. Libraries require a lot of coordination and effort to maintain, even more so if we intend to apply their concepts upon broader society. Thus, it is vital that we develop systems, services, applications, workflows, guides, and frameworks that allow us to most efficiently manage the resources of the libraries, allowing us to do more with less. Lastly, the fifth law reminds us that a library is a growing organism. The aim of a library economy should never be to rigidly establish itself and continue as is. A library economy must be dynamic, ever-growing and evolving in both the quality of the collections held and services provided and in the quantity of those who are effectively served. The project is never complete.

As wonderful as a library economy may sound to me and others, certain concerns may arise. Shawn and Aaron at Srsly Wrong had to respond to quite a few of them in their exploration of the library economy idea, so I'll be borrowing a bit from their responses. People have asked "if this system will make us dependent on others," and the answer is that you're already dependent on others. Others have asked "how we would provide for everyone?" but we need to recognise that we actually do have more than enough technological capacity to meet people's needs. It's just not distributed fairly and our priorities aren't in the right place yet, but that can change.

One of the major objections seems to be that "I like owning things, I don't want to have to borrow everything I want to use and return things all the time." Which is fair enough. And nothing about the library economy necessitates that you give up all your personal possessions or else someone's gonna come for you and confiscate it. For most of the stuff that would fall under the library economy, I believe that as long as you respect the principle of usufruct, not destroying the stuff you're using and wasting valuable resources, you can keep it as long as you need it. As the system matures, we'll be able to refine it further so that everyone benefits fairly.

Another concern is "how we would deal with the inherent scarcity of certain things?" If demand for certain services or vehicles or whatever the case may be exceeds supply, it's up to the community to organise how they'll distribute those things. With some discussion and deliberation, I believe we could come to an agreement on booking times or wait lists with a priority scale that analyses the level of need. Keep in mind that when it comes to the question of "who administers this system?" The answer is that we all do. We all have a say in the decisions that will affect us. The guidelines developed for this system will be developed in the halls of the popular assembly, experimenting with new ideas and ways of doing things that may push democracy to its limits. Certain roles may be delegated to cooperatives to handle the more nitty gritty aspects of administration, such as daily upkeep and organisation. But together we can figure out a way to make this system work to everyone's benefit.

Visualise, if you will, pockets of library economies that redefine their regions, connect with one another, and spread worldwide. Library economies that share and trade amongst themselves across great distances, understanding the value of variety. Library economies based in reclaimed distribution centres and warehouses so that everyone across every community can access whatever tools, materials, appliances, and other things they need. Spaces opened up on campus grounds, in community centres, and wherever we can find a foothold for workshops, kitchens, and even popular assemblies. Cooperatives coming in agreement with their communities to determine the best uses of our common pool resources. People joining together to re-establish a free and open internet, with streaming, reading, and everything else on demand, without the abstract barriers of copyright legality, so that all can enjoy and adapt the digital and cultural commons.

All of us organising to simultaneously decrease wasteful production and consumption while ensuring that all have dignified access to the necessities of life.

We can start taking steps today to lay the foundation of this vibrant society. To shift the dominant social relationship from conflict, hoarding, and competition to caring, sharing, and cooperation. It'll take time and likely multiple iterations, but alongside our other efforts toward liberation, it'll all be worth it in the end, because we will all get to enjoy real abundance like never before. As the great philosopher Cicero rightfully said, "If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need." All power to all the people.

Peace.

How Degrowth Can Save The World

Our world is dying.

Or more accurately, it is being killed.

Fish populations and marine ecosystems are collapsing rapidly as the consequences of industrial activity, such as eutrophication, global warming, ocean acidification, and aggressive overfishing wage scorched earth style warfare on marine life. Forty percent of the planet's soil, so rich and life-giving, has been decimated and degraded by industrial agriculture into lifeless dirt, 100 times faster than it can regenerate itself. Our avian, mammalian, reptilian, insect, and amphibian populations have dropped by more than half since 1970, and a quarter of all species are at risk of extinction. Collapse has been upon us for a long, long time. The flooding in Jakarta, in Pakistan, in India, and elsewhere and the drying rivers around the world are exemplary of that fact. We have known the cause, yet little has been done to solve the problem.

Why?

It is an undeniable fact that the primary responsibility for this collapse falls squarely on capitalism. Our overreliance on fossil fuels, our unfettered and uncritical embrace of our sprawling industrial supply chains, the disinformation campaigns surrounding the compounding issues that contribute to collapse, and the lobbying efforts of fossil fuel corporations are all symptoms of this economic system, built on the concept of private ownership of the means of production. Capitalism observes one constant, prime directive: growth. Historically, from enclosure to colonisation to the slave trade, the process of appropriation has been what fuels growth. It is no different today, where capitalism continues to demand constant expansion, pulling ever-increasing quantities of nature and human labour to fuel that expansion. Technological innovations have played a major role in the extraordinary acceleration of growth, because new technologies have enabled capital to expand and intensify the process of appropriation. And we continue along this trajectory, with ever-increasing levels of industrial extraction, production, and consumption for the sake of it, with no discernable endpoint. This system runs on the destructive ideology of growthism.

Thinking of growth as a damaging ideology may seem strange at first. Plants grow. Animals grow. People grow. But while it's true that growth is a natural part of life, it never goes on and on. Organisms grow up to a certain point and then maintain a healthy equilibrium. Growth for its own sake is cancer logic—it's deadly. And yet that sick logic is exactly what the capitalist economy relies on. There's no such thing as too much growth, too much money, too much stuff. Every economy, every sector, every industry is expected to keep growing their economy, keep growing their GDP, no matter what, on an exponential curve.

This isn't just caused by greed, as some people assume. In fact, capitalism structurally incentivises negative human attributes like greed, feeding into people's flawed perception of human nature. There are structural imperatives to growth that capitalism maintains. Let me explain. Capitalists own capital. Duh. Whether it's real estate, factories, machinery, intellectual property, financial assets, or the money they use to make more money. But capital that is stagnant is capital that is losing its value. So they look for things to invest in so that they can grow their capital. They seek out companies that have growing profits year after year so that their capital will grow year after year. If that growth slows down, they pull out and look elsewhere to invest. Companies that fail to grow will lose their investors and collapse, so companies do everything in their power to maintain growth so that they can maintain their investors, regardless of how much havoc they wreak upon the world. After all, if you don't grow, you die. And if any barriers prevent that growth, you do everything in your power to dismantle and destroy them.

Environmental protections are barriers, so capitalists lobby against them. Labour laws are barriers, so capitalists fight against unionisation. Protectionist policies are barriers, so capitalists get imperial powers to fight on their behalf. The commons were a barrier, so they were enclosed. Indigenous populations were a barrier, so colonisers tried to wipe them out, and when that became a barrier, they supplemented the labour force through the Atlantic Slave Trade. All of these acts of violence opened up new frontiers for appropriation and accumulation, all in service of capital's growth imperative.

These days, we measure a country's "successful" pursuit of capital's growth imperative through GDP or Gross Domestic Product, first developed by the American economist Simon Kuznets in 1934 after the Great Depression devastated the economy. He developed an accounting system that would reveal the monetary value of all the goods and services produced in the economy in one metric. But even Kuznets was careful to emphasise the flaws in GDP because it doesn't care whether an economic activity is useful and sustainable or damaging and destructive. GDP is coupled with energy and resource use, so as it continues to grow, more energy, resources, and waste are churned out every year, devastating our world.

You can poison rivers and decimate ecosystems while the GDP goes up. You can use child labour and abolish retirement to make the GDP go up. GDP provides no indication of the costs associated with its rise, no indication of the pollution, sickness, social despair, and death that fuel its rise and push us over the brink of safe planetary boundaries. And it also provides no indication of the beneficial activities that aren't tied to monetary value. Self-sufficient communities aren't nearly as profitable as communities that are reliant on capitalists for everything.

And yet, after the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, this flawed metric became enshrined as the primary indicator of economic progress. When the OECD was established in 1960, its primary objective was to promote policies designed to achieve the highest sustainable rate of economic growth, and they didn't mean sustainable in the ecological sense. The goal was to keep growing, indefinitely. And when growth began to slow down in the 70s and 80s, because high wages, strong labour protections, and access to health and education made labour too expensive for capital to maintain high rates of growth, those barriers had to be bulldozed, by the rise of neoliberalism. This rise took place not just in the West, but all across the global South, where Western powers intervened in the newly independent countries that had been trying to recover from centuries of colonialism. Structural adjustment programmes forcibly liberalised the economies of former colonies, leaving them open for the exploitation of foreign capital, which takes far more resources and money out of these countries than they put in.

These countries are also often blamed for the bogeyman of overpopulation, the supposed real cause of climate catastrophe. But the global population is on track to stabilise, and even potentially decline. Not to mention, we know what it takes to stabilise a population: reproductive freedom, education, and access to proper women's and children's healthcare. In every single historical example of population stability under capitalism, material use continues. The real issue lies in consumption, not population.

To blame the populations of countries in the Global South for the consequences of growthism and capitalism is to compound a gross injustice. As hurricanes batter our islands, heatwaves scorch our farms and our cities, and floods and wildfires sweep through our countries, the damage being inflicted upon the Global South has been truly apocalyptic in scope and extremely disproportionate to what we have contributed to the planet's current trajectory. We are all suffering as a result of the enforcement of capitalism and growthism on a global scale and we all have a role to play in the transition away from the systems responsible and the healing of the Earth that will need to occur. But the blame does not fall on all of us equally. Especially not when the globe-spanning supply chains that feed into the high rates of consumption in the Global North leave human and ecological casualties in its wake on a daily basis.

We know exactly what needs to be done in order to avoid near-total environmental collapse: we need to cut global emissions in half in less than a decade and reach net zero before 2050, massively scale down total energy consumption and transition to renewables, completely revamp our urban and suburban infrastructure to eradicate car dependency, localise our supply chains as much as possible, reestablish millions of square kilometres of marine and forest ecosystems, completely overhaul industrial agriculture, and of course, end capitalism.

There is no green capitalism. There is no salvaging this planet under capitalism. Capitalism with renewable energy and electric cars is not a solution. We're not going to "decouple" growth in GDP from ecological annihilation. If we treat renewable energy the same way we treat fossil fuels, to power continued growth in extraction and production capacities, because "oh, is clean energy," we will continue to expand, fill our landfills, wreck our soils, raze our forests and fisheries, and decimate the biosphere.

Cobalt, copper, neodymium, silver, indium, dysprosium and lithium are all critical ingredients in renewable energy, and if we continue along the trajectory of growthism, we will require an explosive increase in mining, which will not only exacerbate our consumption of already limited rare earth metals but will also drive ecological collapse and perpetuate inequality. Cobalt mining in the Congo is keeping the people down to a state of slavery and lithium production in the Andes has deprived farmers of the water tables necessary to irrigate their crops and poisoned nearby freshwater ecosystems. Following the ideology of growthism will only make these situations much worse, giving rise to "clean energy" companies just as violent and destructive as their fossil fuel forebearers. Nuclear is no solution either, considering the time it takes to get new power plants up and running and the dangerous vulnerabilities that nuclear power plants have to extreme weather conditions, a staple of our current and future climate. Don't get it twisted, we do need technology and improvements in technology in the fight against ecological breakdown, but not when that technology serves to feed a growth-oriented economy.

We simply cannot keep growing our economies, i.e. raising our GDP, i.e. increasing our energy demand, while trying to heal the planet, and capitalism cannot survive without constant, exponential growth. It keeps us trapped on this death treadmill of growth with the threat of recession. That's why, despite knowing exactly what needs to be done to avert total apocalyptic

catastrophe within our lifetimes, very little has been done. On the contrary, capitalists and politicians are relying on growth to somehow save us. Growth that will create innovations that will make growth "green," or at the very least allow us to counteract our destruction with geoengineering. Our rulers would rather attempt to manipulate the atmosphere, block out the sun, and change the chemistry of the oceans than give up their pursuit of growth. Even if, and that's a big if, geo-engineering schemes could work, they wouldn't change the fact that constant growth in material use cannot last forever. And geoengineering schemes will not work.

One of the primary methods of geoengineering proposed has been BECCS, or "Bioenergy with carbon capture and storage," featuring prominently in the IPCC's 5th assessment report and in many governments' approaches to reducing emissions. The problem is that BECCS alone will not work to solve the other issues we're facing regarding the planet's crises, it faces the same issues with the damaging extraction and depletion of rare earth minerals that renewables face, we don't know if BECCS is actually capable of sucking up 15 billion tons of CO2 every year, and we don't know if we can even build the 15,000 new facilities around the world that it would require to maybe possibly work in time to make a difference. With so much at stake, it's not a gamble we should be willing to make.

Yet it's a gamble so many have been willing to make because it embodies the same arrogant logic that got us into this mess. The hubristic mindset that treats our Earth as a mere arrangement of materials that can be conquered and manipulated to our whims. As something we are separate from and exist above. It's a manifestation of the ideology of dualism, which arose alongside the system of capitalism and the ideology of growthism to conquer the planet.

We're taught to think of ourselves, of humanity as separate from nature. The philosophical lens of dualism, developed and used by the likes of Francis Bacon and René Descartes, places humans as subjects with spirit and mind and agency, while nature is an inert, mechanistic object for us to lord over and manipulate as we see fit. For capitalism to succeed, it not only needed to strip us from the land, but also to strip us of more holistic ways of seeing the world. Capitalism had to see the downfall of animism. It had to render the Earth as a mere stock of resources for the taking.

Animistic ontologies see no fundamental divide between humans and the rest of the living world. On the contrary, they recognise a deep interdependence with the land, the water, the flora, and the fauna that constitute the Earth, in some cases even regarding them as kin. And when you view the non-human creatures and places in the world as your relatives, it fundamentally changes how you behave. It prompts you to enter into a relationship of reciprocity, not domination. Animism has been disparaged as primitive, but the fields of biology, ecology, and psychology have come around to recognise that all of us, from the microorganisms in our gut that help us digest our food to the plants that heal our wounds to the trees that network over large distances underground, are all part of a planet that operates like a living superorganism. Nature is not out there and apart from us; we are deeply intertwined within it. The story of animism and dualism is worthy of its own exploration, but for now, I just want to highlight that the dualistic philosophy bears some responsibility for the hubris that has led to our ecological crisis.

We need to recognise that we do not need the ideology of growthism to flourish as a species. We do not need capitalism to improve the welfare and life expectancy of people across the planet. In fact, the long rise of capitalism caused immeasurable suffering and deprivation. Capitalist propaganda extols the prosperity it has allegedly brought to humanity, yet for the vast majority of the history of capitalism, economic growth didn't improve welfare, it worsened it. Enclosure,

colonisation, and slavery, the foundation of accumulation that fuelled capitalism's rise, all spread human suffering and created artificial scarcity, which capitalism continues to depend on in order to push desperate people into the labour market to be exploited so that their basic needs could be met.

The real source of the recent rise in human welfare came from improvements in sanitation, healthcare, education, vaccinations, and safer living conditions, all improvements which do not require capitalism. You don't need a high GDP per capita to achieve high levels of human welfare, you just need to establish institutions that prioritise meeting people's needs. The default assumption that growthism promotes is that growth is good for everyone, but in reality, the vast, vast, vast majority of economic growth only benefits the rich. Over the past 40 years, 28% of all new income from global GDP growth has gone to the richest 1%. And that's just income. Half the global wealth is in the hands of the 1%. It's time to shift our perspective from that of capital to that of life. From the welfare of capitalism to the welfare of the living world. To recognise that what we've come to consider growth is primarily a process of our eventual destruction.

We need to move away from the ideology of growthism. We need to dismantle the system of capitalism. We need to shift our priorities. We need degrowth—a planned, collectively organised restructuring of the economy and downscaling of energy and resource use to transition the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just, and equitable way. The term degrowth has gotten some flack due to its potentially negative connotations of poverty and deprivation, similarly to how the term anti-work has been received as a dismissal of any form of labour. The English term degrowth arose out of the first international degrowth conference in Paris in 2008. In French, they use the term la décroissance and in Italian, la decrescita to refer to a river going back to its normal flow after a disastrous flood. While I believe it is important to present ideas in a way that challenges dominant cultural norms and it's best to use the established terms when introducing the ideas in this context, hence why I use the terms anti-work and degrowth, in both cases, I care very little about the label and far more about the substance, so I would gladly advocate for a post-work, post-growth library economy.

The aim is to build a new economic system. An economy that is under the direct control of all involved in it. An economy that is organised around human flourishing instead of around endless capital accumulation. An economy that is distinctly ecological and distinctly human. Rather than operating within an economic system geared toward creating constant need and filling that need by producing for profit, we can shift toward an economic system geared toward meeting needs by producing for use, which will drastically scale down on total energy use.

However, there is a necessary caveat to this objective. There are many parts of the world that live far, far below planetary boundaries and do actually need to increase their energy use in order to meet human needs. I believe movements in the imperial core must work in solidarity with movements in these places to give reparations in the form of resources and labour where requested to support the people in these places as they work to meet their needs and develop a better path to a healthier, more caring economy and ecology. The colonised people of this world do not need to follow the same destructive roadmap as the places we consider "developed" in order to flourish. To quote the Martiniquan intellectual Frantz Fanon:

"We must find something different. We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe. […] So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something [other than] such an imitation."

The onus is primarily on the Global North and other countries that have exceeded planetary boundaries to scale down energy consumption. But how do we build it? How to degrow? Think about all the energy it takes to extract, produce, and transport everything in this world. Think about all the inputs and outputs that run this global capitalist economy. It's quite the energy-sucking behemoth, and it has been organised around one purpose: fuelling economic growth. We need to take on this behemoth and change how it works fundamentally. To slow it down and bring it in line with the limits of the biosphere. It sounds difficult, because it will be, but a few relatively simple guiding steps will put us on the right track. Here's a small part of what it will take to establish a post-work, post-growth library economy:

First, we need to put an end to planned obsolescence. Household appliances, computers, tools, furniture, and other products have been designed under capitalism to break down and require a new replacement after a relatively short period of time in order to increase profits. Planned obsolescence actively stifles the innovations we need to make the things we need last longer and prevents us from being able to repair instead of replace our stuff. By putting an end to those deliberate manufacturing decisions and developing long-lasting, modular products, we can greatly reduce our material and energy use worldwide.

Next, we need to gut the advertising industry. Most advertising simply serves to generate social divisions, highlight class divisions, and manipulate people into consuming stuff they don't need. It's constant psychological warfare. It's no secret that I hate it. Everywhere you walk, everywhere you scroll, everything you watch and listen to, it's all trying to sell you something. It's constant noise and it's bad for us. Get rid of it. Shut it down. Thanks to the internet, we can search for information about the things we need without ads, and in fact, ads make the search experience much worse. There are some beneficial ads, such as PSAs, but we really don't need most ads. Tear them down and watch consumerism perish.

Another step we can take is to shift from ownership to usufruct. One of the three foundational concepts in my work on the library economy was the concept of usufruct, which refers to the freedom of individuals or groups in a community to access and use, but not destroy, common resources to supply their needs. For example, rather than each individual in a community of a hundred people owning an electric drill, we can keep three or four electric drills in a tool library to effectively serve everyone's need for a drill when they need it. When we get rid of car-dependency, we can share the few electric vehicles we manufacture to serve needs that cannot be filled by bikes or by our newly-transformed public transportation systems. And so on and so forth.

Another way to reduce energy and material use is to transform our agriculture systems. The way we currently feed the world is unequal, inefficient, environmentally degrading, and energy wasting, especially when current patterns of consumption lead to up to 50% of all the food that's produced in the world being wasted each year. We cannot keep treating farms like factories. It is incoherent with the demands of the living world. We can either rapidly scale down to more localised permaculture- and regenerative-based agricultural systems, supported by nearby communities through cropsharing and supplemented by urban gardens, hydroponics, cultured meat, and aquacultures OR we can continue as we going with the old agriculture systems until we run out of fossil fuels, our soils are all dead, and the population starts succumbing to the greatest famine the planet has ever seen. It's our choice. I for one will be advocating for and trying to build food autonomy in my area as much as possible and fighting for whatever it takes to cut

down on waste so that we can rewild more farmland and sequester more carbon to recover the Earth.

Lastly, we need to scale down or get rid of certain especially destructive industries. Agriculture was just one example, and even within agriculture there are certain particularly harmful offenders, such as the beef industry, which is responsible for the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. Getting rid of the beef industry alone would liberate over 28 million square kilometres of land, almost the size of Africa, and cut down on nearly 20% of annual emissions. Factory farming as a whole is very environmentally destructive. We need to cut down on meat consumption and ideally replace it with cultured alternatives as much as possible.

The pandemic has already shown us which industries are actually essential. The fossil fuels industry, the arms industry, and the private jet industry, all need to go. Obviously. The automobile industry and commercial airline industry have to slim down drastically.

We can reduce all of these industries and more, thereby reducing the flows of material goods, thereby reducing the stocks that support those flows like factories, warehouses, and trucks, thereby reducing the amount of energy and infrastructure required to produce, maintain, and operate all of it, all while directing our efforts and energy toward things that actually improve human welfare. These steps to scale down total energy use should be taken by a broad range of affinity groups and especifist organisations in mass movements, popular assemblies in communities, and unions of all varieties, not waiting for the state but going beyond it. Some of these steps may be achieved by concessions won from the state, but let those concessions fuel us to go further still, not slip into the complacency of electoralism, until we are in direct control of all the spheres of our lives.

Workers cooperatives, councils, and unions can collaborate to transform, reduce, or eliminate their respective industries, freeing more and more people of burdensome, unnecessary, and bs jobs. We need a quantitative and qualitative shift in work. Quantitatively, we need to cut down on the amount of work being done, by a significant margin, because most work today is simply useless, if not actively damaging, and unnecessarily time-consuming. We don't need the 40 hour work week. Qualitatively, we need to take the activities we enjoy and need to do to promote human welfare and self-organise them, through cooperatives and other groups, in ways that promote self-actualisation and community. We don't need bosses. The whole concept of full employment, which is impossible to achieve under capitalism, would be turned on its head. No one would necessarily be "employed" in the traditional sense, but through flexible self-organisation everything that needs to get done gets done while people are free to engage in caring, learning, socialising, exercising, crafting, building, creating, and everything else.

This kind of post-work, post-growth library economy can only function through the establishment of an irreducible minimum, which is the guaranteed provision of the means necessary to sustain life, the level of living that no one should ever fall below, regardless of the size of their individual contribution to the community. This includes access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, education, healthcare, internet, and transportation organised through the commons by affinity groups and popular assemblies. The commons can only succeed through collective decision making power; we cannot outsource this revolutionary transition to government agencies, corporations, or parties. Without a renewed access to the commons, a reversal of the enclosure of common wealth and creation of scarcity that allowed capitalism to rise to prominence, we cannot achieve a post-growth economy. The abundance of the commons are an antidote to the growth imperative. We can use community land trusts (CLTs), food and clothing banks, libraries

of things, and cohousing cooperatives to lay the foundation of those commons as our social revolution is building its momentum.

It's important to emphasise the social aspects of this revolution. Not only will we be liberating ourselves from the growth imperative in the economic sphere, but we will also be liberating ourselves from the ways that the growth imperative has shaped our technologies, education, identities, institutions, and even our cultural norms and values. Our mindsets will need to shift, our relationships are going to evolve, and while such a necessarily rapid transition may be disorienting for many, I believe it will be a worthwhile shift.

Believe it or not, the Earth can recover. Scientists have found that across ecosystems, it takes an average of only 66 years for a forest to recover 90% of its old-growth biomass. That's within many of our lifetimes. In some cases, the transformation has even happened in less time. Rainforests in Costa Rica were able to regrow in as little as 21 years, pulling an extraordinary amount of carbon out of the atmosphere. If we act quickly, we can see change sooner than we think. Through degrowth, we can open and expand spaces for healing, recovery, and repair.

So to summarise, my interpretation of degrowth or post-growth, is essentially an anti-capitalist idea that challenges the dominant growth imperative and prompts a planned, collectively organised restructuring of the economy and downscaling of energy and resource use to transition the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just, and equitable way. Degrowth means a reduction of production and consumption in the Global North and liberation from neocolonial exploitation in the Global South so that we can self-determine an ecologically sustainable path to human flourishing. Degrowth means decolonisation of lands, of people, and of our minds. Degrowth means the creation of open, connected, steady-state, and localised library economies. Degrowth means the establishment of autonomous bodies of democratic decision-making in all spheres of life. Degrowth means an economy and a society that sustains the natural basis of life. Degrowth means striving for a self-determined life in dignity and abundance for all. All power to all the people.

Peace.

Andrewism
Commons, Libraries & Degrowth

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