



The Politics of Post-Growth

Andrew Dobson

Green House is a think tank founded in 2011. It aims to lead the development of green thinking in the UK.

Politics, they say, is the art of the possible. But the possible is not fixed. What we believe is possible depends on our knowledge and beliefs about the world. Ideas can change the world, and Green House is about challenging the ideas that have created the world we live in now, and offering positive alternatives.

The problems we face are systemic, and so the changes we need to make are complex and interconnected. Many of the critical analyses and policy prescriptions that will be part of the new paradigm are already out there. Our aim is to communicate them more clearly, and more widely.

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Green House Post-growth Project

Everyone agrees that we are in the midst of a massive financial and economic crisis. We have suffered the biggest crash since the 30s, and it may get far bigger yet. How ought this ongoing crisis to be understood, and resolved?

There is the mainstream view: we have vast government deficits, and stagnant economies. We have a dire need for economic growth – and a deep-set need for austerity, bringing with it massive cuts in public services.

But what if that diagnosis, which reflects mainstream wisdom, is all wrong? What if the crisis that we are currently experiencing is one which casts into doubt the entire edifice of capitalist economics that sets growth as the primary objective of all policy? What if the fight between those who say that without austerity first there can be no growth and those who say that we must invest and borrow more now in order to resume growth is a false dichotomy – because both sides are assuming ‘growthism’ as an unquestioned dogma?

The aim of the Green House Post-growth Project is to challenge the common sense that assumes that it is ‘bad news’ when the economy doesn’t grow and to analyse what it is about the structure of our economic system that means growth must always be prioritised. We need to set out an attractive, attainable vision of what one country would look like, once we deliberately gave up growth-mania – and of how to get there. And we need to find ways of communicating this to people that make sense, and that motivate change.



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Introduction

Fifty years ago, the then-Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, is supposed to have said that a week is a long time in politics. Right at the other end of the scale we find Colin Tudge, biologist and writer, writing that, 'we cannot claim to be taking our species and our planet seriously until we acknowledge that a million years is a proper unit of political time' (1996: 120). Tudge is right that the first step we need to take is to free ourselves of short-term thinking. He is also right to focus on the past rather than the present, at least in the first instance. This is because when one is in the middle of an epoch, it is all too easy to think that the world has always been this way, and that it will continue on more or less the same path, more or less for ever.

Our conviction in Green House is that this is dangerously wrong. The past 250 years have been an era of exception, rather than of normality, and we believe that this era of exception is coming to an end, with potentially calamitous – but also potentially liberating – implications.

Why 250 years? Why exceptional? And why is it coming to an end? Because 250 years ago is approximately when we began to live off stored sunlight, in the form of fossil fuels - particularly coal. Until then, broadly speaking, human societies lived off the flow of energy available from the sun on a daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal basis. Some stored sunlight was used - burning wood from trees, for example - but this was short-term storage involving a few decades at most, the lifespan of a tree. But once we began to mine and burn coal, and, about 100 years later (the middle of the 19th century), to extract petroleum, we were reaching millions

of years back into the energy storehouse.

Everything we have done over the past 250 years has depended on the plants and animals converted into fossil fuels over millennia. Every time a car engine is switched on we are burning compacted plants and animals, millions of years old. A common question to ask is when will these fossils fuels run out? But perhaps the more important thing to see is that they began to run out as soon as we started using them, because they are finite and nonrenewable. And so, we believe, is the lifestyle that they have powered.

This is the starting-point for the post-growth project. The era of exception is coming to an end. Growth, the unexamined assumption that underpins our current political settlement, is nearing its sell-by date - and for good reason. Mainstream political parties typically base their election hopes on economic success, by which they mean economic growth. They might therefore aim for an annual growth rate of, say 2.3%, but let's remind ourselves that 2.3% growth per year means an expansion by a factor of 10 every 100 years, so in 200 years the economy would be 100 times bigger than it is now. In politics measured by the week, 2.3% growth per annum might just about make sense, but measured by the generation it certainly doesn't.

And our claim is that it doesn't work anyway.

What is growth for? What is the economy for? What is politics for? These are questions we have forgotten to ask ourselves. Assuming they are not ends in themselves, they must serve some purpose. Perhaps we won't go far wrong if we answer that they are

the instruments of human flourishing, or more mundanely, of making us happy. Is growth working, according to this criterion? According the Office for National Statistics, GDP (measured by Gross Value Added industry of output) has grown by a factor of five since 1955 (ONS, 2014). So are we five times more content? By way of an answer, economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald noted in a famous paper that, during a period of unprecedented prosperity from the early 1970s to the late 1990s, 'Reported levels of happiness have been dropping through time in the United States ... and ... life satisfaction has run approximately flat in Great Britain' (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004: 1380). Past a certain point, growth doesn't seem to work. As the French theorist of degrowth, Serge Latouche, puts it, 'If growth automatically generated well-being, we would now be living in paradise' (2009: 22). So it's not the economy, stupid. In fact, as Blanchflower and Oswald put it, stating what some of us might regard as obvious, 'One of the interesting conclusions, from the economist's point of view, is how influential non-financial variables appear to be in human welfare' (2004: 1371).

In what follows we take it for granted that the era of economic growth that

has dominated our political and social horizons for the last 250 years is coming to an end. The question for us is whether the inevitable transition to a post-growth world will be unplanned or planned, catastrophic or benign. We argue that certain conditions are necessary for the transition to be benign, sustainable and just. We need to work to ensure that those conditions are present now, and every departure from them, or every delay in securing them, will make it less likely that the transition will be benign, and more likely that it will be catastrophic. The economic crisis that began in 2008 is a powerful reminder of what happens when growth declines in a precipitate and unplanned way: 'We know that simply contracting the economy plunges our societies into disarray, increases the rate of unemployment and hastens the demise of the health, social, educational, cultural and environmental projects that provide us with an indispensable minimal quality of life' (Latouche, 2009, p8). The challenge that faces us is not to try to return to the status quo ante by pursuing policies for growth, which in the long term are doomed to fail, and in the short term result in growing levels of inequality and environmental degradation, but to plot a path to benign degrowth. That is what we aim to do here.

Utopianism and realism

Green politics' relationship with the future is complicated. The temptation to pour all our hopes and aspirations into the new society on the other side of growth is immense. Political ecologists certainly consider themselves to be part of the tradition of 'progressives' who believe that the future can be better than the past, and that the future beyond that can be better still.

But the conditions for this belief have changed enormously – some would say to the point where it just doesn't make sense to think like that anymore. Old-style utopianism could rely on the myth of plenty: it was just a question of arranging things such that everyone had access to it. So although Marx (1873: 13) always claimed he wasn't a utopian (I don't 'write receipts [recipes] for the cookshops of the future'), he still felt that the nature of communist society was inexpressible in contemporary language. This is because human beings under capitalism and under communism would be different, and the productive power of capitalism would only be fully realized once released from the shackles of class warfare. Communism promised a social and economic world unlike anything humans had ever experienced before – qualitatively and quantitatively different from the one we presently live in. This is utopianism at its most Promethean – and very much a child of its growthist time.

This utopianism had, and has, its counterpoint: conservatism. Conservatives are opposed to what they would regard as impossibilist change, that is, change that takes

account of neither the imperfectibility of humans nor the limiting conditions under which change must take place. According to one theorist of utopias, Krishan Kumar, the anti-utopian temperament 'presents itself as the sum of ripe old human wisdom, a storehouse of cautionary but essential truths about human nature and human strivings distilled from the collective experience of mankind'. (Kumar, 1987: 103). This of course reminds us of the so-called 'father of conservatism', Edmund Burke, but it also has its echoes in some kinds of political ecology.

As the rest of this post-growth project shows, green politics speaks the language of limits, with the obvious anti-utopian connotations that this conveys. But there's a vital distinction to draw here: between malleability of the human *condition* and malleability of human *practices*. We believe that the human condition is fixed while human practices are not. Political ecologists do not possess the 'pessimistic and determinist view of human nature' which is common to anti-utopians (Kumar, 1987:100). We argue that there are (more or less) fixed limits to production, consumption and waste, but we have a utopian sense of what is possible within those limits. It might seem curious to speak of realism and utopianism in the same breath, but this is what political ecology does. Ecologism is the ideological embodiment of the idea that freedom is the recognition of necessity. Green utopias, in other words, demonstrate that 'hard-headed realism' (Kumar, 1987:110) can be as much a part of the utopian, as of the anti-utopian, sensibility.

Trajectories: the importance of today for tomorrow

Part of this realism consists in seeing that what we do now will affect what we can do in the future. Naïve utopians believe that anything is possible, any time. Realist utopians know that making the wrong choices now could set us on a trajectory that might make the future bleak rather than bright. There are certain conditions that make an attractive future more likely, and this future will be more likely the sooner we get those conditions in place.

There are real dangers here. We know what the world beyond growth could look like, and it even has a name: Detroit. Once the fourth largest and most productive American city, home to Henry Ford's first mass-produced motor car, Detroit's population has declined from 2 million to 900,000, it has 70,000 abandoned buildings and a crime rate that includes over 1,000 shootings per year. So shocking and astonishing is contemporary Detroit that chroniclers and photographers flock to it to record its decline and fall into ghostly grandeur in a genre of representation that has come to be called 'ruin porn'. The city is also the scene of small experiments in post-growth self-reliance, and there is much we can learn from them. But the big challenge is to scale up these experiments, and make them the norm rather than the exception.

Detroit is what unplanned degrowth looks like, and there are other examples too, such as the catastrophic decline in living standards for vast numbers of ex-Soviet citizens once neo-liberal economic shock therapy was visited upon the country after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It's also worth

remembering that some people have done very well out of the collapse of the Soviet so-called 'Empire'. Vast fortunes have been made by individuals keen to cash in the wealth stored up in state-owned enterprises. Unplanned degrowth has not been a catastrophe for everyone in Russia and the other constituent countries of the ex-Soviet Union, and nor would it be a catastrophe for all if degrowth was unplanned at a global level. Some people would do just fine on the other side of growth, even if we got there in an unplanned fashion. In fact, as Naomi Klein has shown us in *The Shock Doctrine* (Klein, 2007), catastrophe provides 'disaster capitalists' with the opportunity to make large amounts of money out of the suffering of others.

All this suggests that it's a mistake to think of the politics of post-growth as if it is independent of the politics of today. There is a real risk that if we don't get the preconditions for a just, democratic and sustainable post-growth politics in place today then we will end up with a global Detroit, with the poor and vulnerable picking over the rubbish tips while the wealthy and powerful live protected lives in gated communities run by private protection agencies. This chapter is about those preconditions, and is therefore a chapter about the present as much as the future. As Serge Latouche says, 'We must start today, think in terms of stages and not lose sight of our goal' (2009: 77).

And time to get these preconditions in place is getting shorter. We are used to thinking of having a finite amount of time to get our climate policies sorted out or run the risk of catastrophic climate change. Now we need to start thinking in the same way about the political and social preconditions for

living in the post-growth world that is inevitably coming our way. On one account we have about 30 months left, starting in October 2012, to get on carbon-constrained footing that will keep the global temperature rise to below 2°C. Other accounts (Stewart and Elliot, 2013) suggest that this is already a pipe-dream and that 2°C is anyway too great an increase, but the

point here is to focus on the idea of *trajectories*. We need to get used to the idea of having a finite amount of time left to get the political preconditions in place for planned degrowth. And just as the window of opportunity for climate change mitigation is narrowing, so are the opportunities for embedding the political preconditions for planned degrowth.

Democracy

But if it's true that what we do today will affect what it is possible to do tomorrow, it is also true to say that what has happened in the past affects both the present and the future. The point of this is to say that scenarios for the future must take historical context into account. There is a real and legitimate worry that once growth stops we will all be at each other's throats, and this is indeed the trope that dominates apocalyptic fiction, where utopian visions of the future are much less common than their dystopian counterparts. But these treatments are often *ahistorical*, ripped from context, and inclined to forget that democracy – to name just one example – is a historical achievement (in theory if not in practice) which cannot, and will not, simply be 'forgotten'. Put differently, imagining a post-growth world in the absence of the historical experience of democracy is very different to imagining it with the benefit of that experience. The eventual nature of postgrowth society will be coloured in part by historical experience. The good news, then, is that we have democracy in our locker of historical experience, and this makes it more rather than less likely that it will survive whatever strictures post-growth brings with it.

The bad news is that the historical experience of democracy is by no means a guarantee that it will be a part of post-growth life. John Christopher (Christopher, 2009) in his intelligent novel, *The Death of Grass* (first published in 1956), warns of what could happen. In a classic apocalyptic trope he tells the story of what happens when a virus that kills all species of grass sweeps the world. A group of people in England trek across the country towards sanctuary in the Lake District as law and order collapse. One

of the characters, John, says near the beginning, 'The thing all you adult, sensitive people must bear in mind is that things are on your side at present – you live in a world where everything's in favour of being sensitive and civilized. But it's a precarious business' (Christopher, 2009: 20).

Precariousness is the point. John is the outsider 'realist' at the beginning of the novel, criticized for his apparently selfish reaction to the plight of others, but conditions move the rest of the group in his direction. Some of the most revealing dialogues take place in relation to that classic cosmopolitan testing-ground of whether distant strangers should count equally in the moral balance as close friends and relatives. Later on another character, Roger, says, 'We're in a new era ... or a very old one. Wide loyalties are civilised luxuries. Loyalties are going to be narrow from now on, and the narrower the fiercer' (Christopher, 2009: 49). On this account the 'wide loyalties' of which Roger speaks are a temporary achievement, with a beginning and an end. Of all the casualties in *The Death of Grass* (and there are plenty) empathy and the behaviour that stems from it is the most prominent, as well as the most interesting from our point of view. Christopher charts the collapse of this sentiment under the stresses of resource scarcity, and the fear is that the relative scarcity of the post-growth society is an enemy, as Karl Popper might have it, of the open society.

All this suggests that there is absolutely no guarantee that the post-growth world will be cosmopolitan, democratic and so on – some would argue that life will be much more like it is in Thomas Hobbes's 'state of nature', 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (1946: 82). But the best

lever we have at our disposal to ensure that it is an affirming world is our experience of it in the past and the present – an experience, let's not forget, that is regarded as so precious that it has often been fought for. This experience needs to be widened and deepened in the here and now so as to maximise the chances of it being part of a post-growth future.

But is democracy compatible with the demands of a post-growth world anyway? It will be argued (it has been argued) that 'rule by the people' is incompatible with post-growth necessities because 'the people' will not accept those necessities voluntarily (Ophuls, 1992). And it is always possible to point to non-democratic societies which appear to have been more or less sustainable. But the historical record shows that (relatively) democratic societies can put policies for sustainability in place too. The UK government's Climate Change Act, with all its flaws, is widely cited as a good example of sustainability law-making. No doubt if it came out of China we would be referring to it as an example of what non-democratic states can do, and democratic states can't do. In truth there is little to be gained by tossing example and counter-example back and forth: sustainability may be compatible with both democratic and authoritarian regimes, but a *just* post-growth society is only compatible with the former. This is because democracy speaks to that most fundamental of human demands: autonomy. And if our autonomy is to be circumscribed in any way, then we want to be party to the decisions that make it so. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau said, "obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom" (1968: 65).

This is especially the case for principles that are effectively taken out of everyday democratic control by being enshrined in a constitution. It is very likely that the post-growth political world would be underpinned by a series of constitutional institutions and principles which, while not beyond democratic control, would have the relatively untouchable character that all constitutional arrangements have. In her account of the contours of *The Green State*, for example, Robyn Eckersley (2004: 244) refers to,

[t]he constitutional entrenchment of an independent public authority – such as an environmental defenders office – charged with the responsibility of politically and legally representing public environmental interests, including the interests of nonhuman species and future generations.

These kinds of interests are only occasionally taken into account at present, if at all, and to give them constitutional protection will look to some like a restriction of freedom of all kinds. Thus, my Green House colleague Rupert Read's proposal (2012) for a constitutional presence for Guardians of the Future must attract democratic assent and legitimation. It would be fatal to impose it by fiat: it simply wouldn't work for long.

Overall, just as with climate change so with post-growth politics: some starting points and subsequent trajectories make it more likely that we will succeed in achieving a just and peaceful life on the other side of growth than others. At present in most countries, and certainly in the one in which we live, the UK, the political and social indicators are all heading in the wrong direction. So what are these starting-points and trajectories?

Equality

Two features of late capitalism at its most ‘pure’ stand out from all the rest: rising levels of inequality and an ideological attack on the public sphere (indeed on the very idea of ‘the public’). Both of these are incompatible with a soft landing on the other side of growth. They are neither part of the solution now, nor would they be a feature of post-growth politics and society. The reasons for this are as follows. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have shown that more equal societies are not only better for the poor and vulnerable (we have always known this) but for everyone else too. In the words of the subtitle to the American edition of *The Spirit Level*, ‘why greater equality makes societies stronger’ (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Across a whole range of issues – mental health, teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, child wellbeing, big prison populations, sense of community, environmental sustainability – more equal societies are more successful societies. Above all, as a matter of principle, equality is the default position for societies in which growth has come to an end. Ask people how a finite-sized cake should be divided among a finite number of recipients and they will generally answer: ‘equally’. On the other side of growth the cake will be more obviously finite than it appears at the moment, and the normative force behind the equality idea will be correspondingly greater. This is what we mean by equality being the default position for a post-growth society.

Let’s stress that this is a normative position. The *actual* distribution in a post-growth society could be radically unequal, and people in the future might well succumb to massive inequalities in the goods that make for a flourishing

life. This kind of post-growth society is very possible – some would say even very likely. But this is precisely the point for arguing for equality *now*, in the conviction that cementing it in mindsets and practices in the present will make it more likely to survive the transition to post-growth. In addition to this normative idea, why might we argue that equality is essential to a benign post-growth world? Because inequality fosters the mind-sets that are essential to fuelling the consumption that fires the engine of growth. Under current conditions we are encouraged to measure our prosperity by comparing it with the material conditions of others. Celebrity culture and lifestyles of the rich lived out in public create a culture of envy, and induce an aspiration to match it, or at least get close to it. The fact that this aspiration is impossible to achieve is both its strength and its fatal weakness. From the growthist point of view this impossibility is perfect, because the finishing tape recedes into the distance: no matter how fast we run we have to keep on running. From the point of view of preparing for post-growth, though, inequality is a disaster, as every step we take on the journey of accumulation leads us further away from the desired destination.

Historically, growth and inequality have been partners in a macabre dance of reciprocal legitimation. Inequality is regarded as necessary for growth (if people are equal, why would anyone bother to work?), and growth is used to quieten the voices of those asking for more equality by holding out the promise of an ever bigger cake, some crumbs from which will surely find their way into the mouths of the less fortunate. On the other side of growth the music that drives this dance has been switched off. There is no possibility of a bigger cake, so

inequality is not needed as an engine for its production, nor is the bigger cake available as a palliative for inequality. As Rupert Read, Ruth Makoff and Phil Hutchinson (forthcoming) put it:

Using financial and material incentives as a primary economic driver – which is essential to an inegalitarian world – will place a strain on the system under limits to growth, since people are encouraged to focus on increased consumption as a measure of progress. The kinds of motivations that are being encouraged belong to the system dynamics of a growth-based economy. But where there are limits to growth, these motivations cannot be continually

satisfied, so actors and structures within the economic system will always be pushing up against the overall limits. It requires constant regulation and proliferation of rules and enforcement to mitigate against this, that actors will be continuously seeking to overcome and find loopholes.

In the post-growth world, in other words, inequality has lost its function, the conditions that help to legitimate it, and the motivations that follow from it. In terms of preparedness, societies that embark on a trajectory of equality now will be in a better position to deal with a post-growth world than those that do not.

The Public Sphere

The next precondition for benign post-growth is a flourishing public sphere. Today's neo-liberal ideologues are determined to expunge public space from our physical and mental maps. The history of land and its accessibility has historically been cyclical, and at present we are going through a period of accelerating privatization. Common land gave way to the 'enclosures' of the 18th and 19th centuries and large tracts of the countryside and the city became off-limits. As the 19th century progressed, these restrictions to public access were called into question and control of parts of cities, in particular, were handed over to local government control. Although this process was not at all even, as city corporations themselves enclosed common lands and curtailed customary rights, the growth of local government in this period is itself a significant factor as a 'repository' for these reclaimed spaces. There is a virtuous relationship between local government and public space in that both are 'owned' by the public, both are more than the sum of their constituent parts, and the more we have of one the more we are likely to have of the other. In this light, the current bonfire of local government capacities is another indicator of how far and how fast we are heading in the wrong direction if we want a soft landing on the other side of growth.

The Victorian settlement held good until some 30 years ago when post-industrialism took hold of cities across the country. Re-development was put in the hands of private companies or so-called public-private partnerships, and hard-won public spaces little by little returned to a state of enclosure, with over 1000 gated communities across the UK (Minton, nd: 6) by the early 2000s. We can illustrate some of

the consequences of this modern rush to enclosure with an anecdote. In March 2008, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears (New Labour), noticed that as Britain's urban areas were hosting ever-busier crowds of daytime shoppers and nighttime revellers, the number of 'public conveniences' available to meet their needs was insufficient. Something had to be done. The solution Blears proposed is instructive (Pickard, 2008). Pubs, cafés, restaurants and shops are to be paid by local councils to allow the public in to use their toilets. This is a kind of private-finance initiative (PFI) in reverse: one in which public money is diverted to private enterprises so that they can provide what is indisputably a public service.

The alternative seems obvious: to spend the money on refurbishing and maintaining public toilets, without the private go-between. So why wasn't this the first option of a minister whose remit covers the health of 'communities'? Because it is, according to a crude cost calculation, less expensive to pay the private sector than invest in the public sector. The problem here, and the insight it can generate, is that the notion of 'cost' and 'expense' being employed is an impoverished one that fails to recognise the value of public space, and its analogue, the public sphere, itself. Many of the things we most cherish, including the environment that sustains us, are 'common-pool resources'. Common-pool resources are subject to the 'free-rider problem': namely, that people can't be excluded from benefiting from the resource, and therefore have no self-interested reason for keeping it well-maintained. In fact, their self-interest lies in relying on other people to maintain it, while they spend their time doing other things.

There are a number of possible solutions to the free-rider problem. Most of them focus on trying to prevent free-riding through a combination of threats, inducements and sanctions (fines and rewards). It is less common, and more interesting, to focus on those who don't free ride. Why would anyone work to maintain a public resource from which they could benefit equally well without doing so? The answer lies in the commitment of those people to the idea of the public realm where the common-pool resource is located.

This suggests a different type of solution to problems like climate change, motivated by a mind-set ('commoning') that will be crucial to benign post-growth. The most familiar solutions tend to be written in the language of commerce and contract, according to which self-interested people will only act for the common good when it's in their interest to do so. So tradable permits combined with a cap on emissions, for example, are proposed as a way to guarantee lower overall emissions. But from the point of view of the free-rider problem, tradable permits are part of the problem rather than part of the solution - because they reinforce the frame of mind that leads to the problem in the first place. It will always be in the free-rider interests of carbon-traders to set the cap too high and the price of carbon too low, which is exactly what happens all the time, and why the European Emissions Trading Scheme is so ineffective and in such disarray.

An alternative frame of mind is needed – one which seeks to maintain the integrity of the common-pool resource because of its public benefit, not because of some private, excludable benefit that might accrue to the individual. This is an explicitly non-

contractual approach to collective social action, and one which runs counter to the popular and apparently unassailable 'I will if you will' campaign for pro-environmental action.

A different social logic is required: 'I will even if you won't'. This seems utterly illogical from the point of view of commerce and contract; but it is entirely rational when it comes to the kind of politics that the post-growth world will require. Elinor Ostrom, Economics Nobel Prize Winner for 2009, has convincingly demonstrated a 'third way' between state, and private, based management of the commons, the conditions for which are high levels of trust and reciprocity among those who work them and live with them (Ostrom, 1990 and Wall, 2014). Political trust and reciprocity are best learnt where they are most needed: action (and resistance) in the public arena. The positive circularity is obvious: we need trust and reciprocity for the effective management of what we hold in common, and what we hold in common is the 'training ground' for learning trust and reciprocity. Once our common-wealth declines, so does the opportunity for learning the habits and practices that its effective management requires. Every gated community, every sponsored roundabout, every outsourced public service is a step backwards as far as a benign post-growth world is concerned.

This is where the idea of the public realm plays such an important role. The idea is not so much that public services are always and necessarily better than ones provided by the private sector, but that the public sphere is where members of a society learn what a common-pool resource is and how to look after it. It is where people develop non-contractual habits,

and learn how to cope with free-riders without falling into the trap of believing that the only solution is privatised ‘incentivisation’ – which just makes the problem worse. Taxes, fines, exemptions, rewards, private-finance initiatives, individual learning contracts, council-house sales, declining library budgets, ‘nudging’, and – yes – the demise of the public convenience, all point away from the public towards the private, which is precisely the wrong direction. It might seem a long way from public toilets to the politics of post-growth. But Hazel Blears’ favouring of the privatised solution to the problem of public conveniences is bad news not just for late-night revellers but also for the preconditions for a benign and

fulfilling post-growth life. It reinforces the brutal assault on the idea of the public realm which has been such a marked feature of life in Britain over the last thirty years. Yet without this idea, and a commitment to its protection and what it represents, a society's ability to prepare itself for the post-growth world is severely damaged.

So the post-growth world, in which sharing and sociality will be at an absolute premium, requires the immediate defence and expansion of the public sphere and the public realm. This is the training ground for the habits and practices of a benign post-growth life.

Localisation

In the post-growth world, hyper-connectedness in the form of air travel (or ‘hoisting 180lbs of human flesh 30,000 feet into the air and 4000 miles across the ocean every time you want to talk to someone’ (Monbiot, 2013) won’t be possible. Indeed, as the amount of energy available to us in carbon-based forms declines, *any* form of transport based on such energy will go into precipitous decline. So the forms of life available to us will be much more localized than they are today. This is likely to be true even of apparently less impactful forms of non-local life such as virtual communication. Resource use, both materials and energy, by the IT sector is extremely high, and is unlikely to be sustainable over the long term – some reports suggest, indeed, that the IT carbon footprint is approaching that of aviation (e.g. Seneviratne, 2013). One possibility would be to share hardware at the user end, but the infrastructure required to keep global communication going even at present levels would be ecologically very costly.

It is worth reminding ourselves who is doing all this travelling anyway. Even in relatively wealthy societies hyper-connectedness in the form of actual physical movement across large distances in a short space of time is the privilege of a small number of people. Most flying and long-distance train travel is done by the A and B social classes, and much of this is on expenses and tax-deductible. And from a planet-wide perspective, the percentage of the global population that is hyper-connected is even smaller, and is far outweighed by the number of people whose lives are, and will only ever be, local. The idea, embodied in the headlong planning and construction of airports and high speed

rail links, that all these local lives could ever become hyper-connectedly and physically global, is a fantasy. We should be planning now for the more localized living that will be a feature of the post-growth world. But once again the indicators are pointing in the wrong direction: governments are prepared to spend billions on ‘planes and trains (such as the estimated £50bn on HS2 in the UK), and nothing on the infrastructure required for local production and consumption. A government with imagination would look at the nascent experiments in localized post-growth living, such as the Transition Town movement, and put its weight behind learning the lessons of these experiments and enabling them to be more widely practised.

Localisation is important for post-growth for two reasons. First, in the post-growth world, production and consumption will be brought closer together. This reduces the ecological impact of sustaining a flourishing life, which is vitally important in itself. It would be a mistake to see this as just putting up with necessity, though, and this takes us to the second reason. The real tragedy of the bonfire of local government that has taken place under the present government is that the capacity for decision-making has been taken away from local people. While this is anti-democratic, is it also anti-ecological because as production and consumption get closer together, the people best placed to make decisions over resource use are those who know the lie of land – literally and figuratively. Localisation therefore makes sense ecologically as well as democratically.

Post-growth decentralization is not the same as small-state fanaticism. The current vogue for ‘localism’ (as opposed to localization, which is a

necessary condition for benign postgrowth) is born of an ideological antipathy to the state which has its roots in laissez-faire economics and a preference for the private sector over the public sector as a deliverer of services. Conservative councils, such as Barnet in north London, have experimented with the idea of ‘Easy Councils’, in which local government representatives and officials become little more than commissioning agents. (The Barnet experiment came to an end over a £1.3 scandal involving a security firm caught secretly filming residents attending a housing meeting; Butler, 2011). Localism is also often a cover for the takeover of public space by the rich and powerful, cloaked in the terms of progress and development. This ‘hollowing-out’ of the state has the effect of driving all responsibility downwards, whether the levels at which this responsibility is then supposed to reside (including individuals and households) have the means of fulfilling their obligations or not.

When this bonfire of the state apparatus is accompanied by slash-and-burn cuts in local government funding, the result is predictable: weak and vulnerable people, and ‘unproductive’ services, go to the wall. Generally, the importance of the state as a guarantor of basic levels of prosperity and security is not especially widely recognised until its failure affects those who are not usually voiceless or vulnerable. As the UK was battered by an unprecedentedly violent series of storms in the early months of 2014, parts of south-west England have been under water, and entire villages have become uninhabitable. But it was not until relatively affluent areas along the middle reaches of the River Thames began to suffer the same fate that the

state and its agencies rolled more fully into action. Suddenly, after removing benefits from the poor, the sick and the disabled for lack of funds, the government announces that money is no object as far as flood relief is concerned. ‘Self-help’ is bracing only for the poor, it seems.

The hollowing-out of the state is a ruse by small-statists to achieve their objective: the dominance of our social life by the private and commercial sectors. Simultaneously we are transformed from citizens into consumers, increasingly depoliticized, and reduced to changing things through the (lack of) power in the market place. At the national level, government evades responsibility for its failures by blaming ‘Europe’ or ‘the global economy’ and thereby makes itself redundant. These excuses aren’t available at the local level, so local authorities are starved of funds instead. The inevitable result is that they fail to meet their obligations, even their statutory ones, and their legitimacy goes into decline. Before long, both national and local government look toothless and the rationale for state action becomes threadbare. It is a short step from there to the economic liberal’s ultimate objective: a ‘nightwatchman’ state (Nozick, 1972) whose responsibilities are confined to maintaining law and order – preferably outsourced to private security agencies.

In contrast, the post-growth state, and by extension the state that is preparing for post-growth, has to be a ‘telescopic state’, in a phrase first coined by Marius de Geus (1999). The telescopic state works on the maxim that nothing should be done at a higher level that can be done at a lower level. The default position for the post-growth state is therefore decentralist, and this is in keeping with the more localized

forms of life that will necessarily accompany resource descent. But these localized lives will be energized and enabled by the telescopic state, rather than abandoned by it. The post-growth state will actively fund decentralization, as a process of transition, and eventually it will fund ‘decentralism’, once the process of decentralization has run its course. This contrasts with trends towards urbanization which lead to regional and national infrastructure investment, and an increased propensity to travel, rather than to localized jobs-intensive investment.

The post-growth state is necessary not just as a promoter of decentralism but also as a defender of social, economic and cultural equality. Left entirely to their own devices, constituent parts and individual actors in the nightwatchman state will go their own way and do their own thing without regard for the common life that binds people together and sustains us all. The postcode lottery that disfigures fair access to services today will be replaced by an even cruder determinant of a citizen’s fate: the size of a bank balance. As we’ve already pointed out, protection from the catastrophic effects of unplanned degrowth is possible, and this protection will be available to those with the money to buy it. On our current trajectory, one of deepening inequality and the ripping apart of the public sphere and our common life,

this is exactly where we are headed. The antidote to this is to argue, right now and as a matter of extreme urgency, for equality and a celebration of the idea and practice of ‘the public’, as necessary conditions for the post-growth politics for which we are arguing.

It is absolutely essential that re-localisation, and indeed the whole of the rest of the post-growth project, is accompanied by a politics of gender. It has long been said that women hold up more than half the world, and the danger implicit in a politics of re-localisation is that they will be asked to hold up the rest of it as well. This cannot and should not be allowed to happen. Study after study has pointed out that the majority of unpaid work done both inside and outside the home is done by women (e.g. OHCHR, 2013). To the extent that there will be more of this work – this caring work – to be done both in the transition to a post-growth world and during the process of degrowth that will lead us there, we must make sure that this work is shared equitably.

Fundamentally, this means an equitable sharing between men and women, since gender is the fault line along which fairness and unfairness in this regard runs. So a precondition for a just and benign transition to post-growth which runs alongside all the others is gender equality.

Contraction and convergence – the politics of ‘enough’

But if these are necessary conditions, they are by no means sufficient ones. It is not impossible to imagine a society driven by a powerful sense of the public and the need for equality (societies of the Marxist imagination, for example), but which still has a rapacious attitude towards the planet. Along with the degrowth points that societies are too unequal and too privatized, we must also recognise that resources of all sorts are limited.

Recently we have been urged (Klein, 2013) to forget the ‘astronaut’s eye’ view of the world, and to immerse ourselves in local struggles with a social character, in the belief that properly directed attempts to enhance human welfare will have the knock-on effect of a pacified relationship with the non-human natural world. This forgets that the battle for increased human welfare has been going on for some time without any appreciable benefit to the non-human natural world. Most often, indeed, the latter has been a casualty of the former. So we need to put things in a bigger context – the context that is provided, precisely, by the ‘astronaut’s eye’ view of a blue-green planet hanging in black space, defined by its vulnerability and its finite size. There is nothing outside that planet to which we have meaningful access in terms of sustaining life. This is why post-growth politics is on its way, whether we like it or not. The question is whether we will plunge into it unplanned or descend into it gradually, with all the promise this holds of a more fulfilling life for us all.

If the practices of post-growth are not to be forced upon us in a precipitate, unplanned and potentially catastrophic way we need to learn them now. The longer we walk towards the cliff of collapse, the more dangerous and risky the descent will be. Underpinning the politics of equality, the public, and localization is the politics of *enough*. This is possibly the toughest nut of all to crack, as everything is geared to persuading us that we never have enough of anything, ever. And of course some people don’t have enough of what they need for a fulfilling life, so the politics of enough is aimed at those who have too much or who aspire to have too much. We have come to think of scarcity as the gap between what people want and what they have. This needs to be rethought. For the sake of equity and a more pacified relationship with the nonhuman natural world that sustains us, we should think of scarcity as the gap between what people need and what the world can sustainably provide for us. This renewed focus on ‘need’ turns our attention back to those who are most important in this whole debate: those who do not have enough. And the recognition that not all our wants can be, or should be, satisfied is also a recognition of the limited nature of our resource-based circumstances.

So what is needed, right now, is a generalized set of policies aimed at contraction and convergence (see, for example, Schumacher, 2014). In the climate change context, where it is championed by Aubrey Meyer (2000), contraction and convergence refers to contracting greenhouse gas emissions and converging on an agreed global per capita level compatible with climate safety. Inevitably, in the short term, this means that some people’s emissions will increase while others’ decrease. The eventual carbon target is

zero, and there is even case for the rich paying back the carbon debt. Planned degrowth means applying contraction and convergence more generally across all types of consumption.

While it might not be hard to sell contraction and convergence to those who are under-consuming, the paraphernalia of persuasion means that many people around the world (though still a minority, numerically) need to be convinced of its merits. Let's remind ourselves that contraction will come, whether we like it or not. Once again, the question is whether the landing will be soft or hard. It is too much to expect a mass conversion to the merits of contraction on the basis of individual changes of mind. The preparation for the inevitable needs to begin now at an institutional and collective level, beginning with the dismantling of the massive infrastructure that militates against the politics of enough – including, but not restricted to, advertising. A step in the right direction would be what our Green House colleague Anne Chapman calls 'public interest advertising': 'advertising that points out the negative effects on the world and the earth that particular products or technologies have, as a counter to the commercial advertising currently done to sell products' (Chapman, 2007: 168). There is some evidence that this could have the effect of lowering demand, which is key to the

achievement of contraction and convergence, especially among high consuming individuals and groups. This is the historical task of Green parties around the world, and nothing should deter them from it. One of the biggest enemies is short-termism, and Greens should resist it. Green politics is the politics of long horizons and we are playing into the hands of business-as-usual, and making catastrophic degrowth more likely, if we set our sights on short-term gains only. Every tactical move must be calibrated against its contribution to long-term contraction and convergence.

Having enough of some things opens up the possibility of having more of other – better - things. Once we step off the treadmill of accumulation by reducing the number of hours we work and sharing access to satisfying work among us all, we'll have more time for the things that make us content: spending leisure time with others, for example. Nine percent of OECD citizens work long hours (defined as more than 50 hours per week – 18% men and 6% women in the UK; OECD, 2014). This is one of the causes of overproduction, so a 'change in our way of life and the removal of useless needs' (Latouche, 2009: 79) is essential both to bring our economic activity back to one planet level and to create the space for people to lead more fulfilling lives.

Conclusion

However we attempt degrowth, through scientific reasoning, spiritual commitment, or some kind of commonsense, we need to reassess our place in the world. The American forester and environmentalist Aldo Leopold (1949) got it right when he urged us to regard ourselves not as conquerors of the land community but as ‘plain members’ of it. This reorientates our aspirations, recalibrating them to the scale demanded by the human condition – a fragile creature on a limited planet.

Let’s remind ourselves once again that there is no other condition available to us than this. We have come to think of the industrial era of Promethean expectation and performance as normality, whereas it is in fact a world-historical era of exception. We have been living off the capital provided by the laying down of carbon millions of years ago. That capital is well on the way to being exhausted and a landing on the other side of growth is inevitable. A planned policy of contraction and convergence, starting now, will give us a decent chance of making that landing a soft one.

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