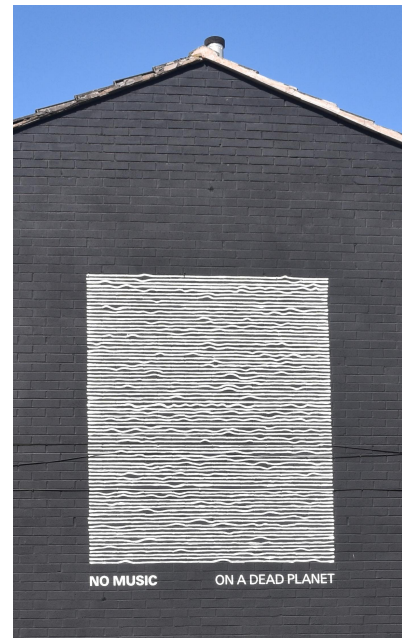


Can Politics Face Up to Climate Change?

In this paper I suggest that if politics we have today in the UK, Europe and within the UN's framework are not up to tackling the challenges of climate change, then there's little chance of avoiding societal collapse. As large swathes of land become uninhabitable due to drought and unbearable rise in temperature, population migration on a vast scale will cause increased tensions in an already volatile world. In response governments will be likely to become more authoritarian grabbing at technofixes which will be imposed in belated attempts to mitigate the worst effects of the climate catastrophe. It doesn't have to be that way. We can lead a good life here and in other parts of the world if resources were shared more equitably. I argue that capitalism is incompatible with tackling the climate emergency. The profit motive and its underlying drive for ever greater consumerism is irreconcilable with an otherwise harmonious planet on which we all can live well. Remember the slogans 'no planet B' and 'no music on a dead planet'.



Is it utopian? Not necessarily. Is it achievable? Yes, if we can imagine it. Will it reduce the risks of more wars and avert population migrations from what will otherwise become uninhabitable terrain? Surely, it's achievable. Geo-politics based on co-operation and the acceptance of historic racism which led to exploitative colonisation and imperialism, will yield positive outcomes. We need to move beyond the mistaken belief that humans are above nature and to understand we are part of this biodiverse planet which we continue to destroy at our peril, and to the jeopardy or extinction of many other species.

Liz Truss who for a brief period in the autumn of 2022 was Prime Minister in the UK spoke of 'economic growth'. Blatantly intending to increase wealth for the already rich, whilst promising a few crumbs would trickle down to the poor, she amongst her party members was at least honest in this regard. Very much a neoliberal smokescreen for exacerbating societal inequalities.

The first experiments in neoliberalism, such as that following the 1973 CIA backed coup in Chile, had to be imposed by military force. Jason Hickel referring to the 2011 Occupy London camp notes ‘resistance against neoliberal capitalism has come not as a demand for socialism – as one might have expected a few decades ago – but as a demand for democracy’.¹ Yet over a century before, Walter Crane, artist, educator and socialist foresaw this dichotomy: ‘If a wealthy man were to divest himself of his property and distribute it, he would not bring Socialism any nearer, and his self-sacrifice would hardly benefit the poor at large (except, perhaps a few individuals), but under the working of the present system his wealth would ultimately enrich the rich – would gravitate to those who *had*, and not to those *had not*. The object of Socialism is to win justice, not charity. A true commonwealth can only be established by a change of feeling, and by the will of the people deliberately, in the common interest, declaring for common and collective possession of the means of life and wealth, as against individual property and monopoly.’²

The questions now are how can we resolve the climate emergency and at the same time build a true democracy to ensure the necessary changes?

The concept of the ‘ecological footprint’ was established in the 1990s as a way to measure the use of planetary resources. It became clear for all to share the same standard of living enjoyed in the ‘developed world’, would require resources from multiple planets. The ecological footprint was adopted as an indicator by the UK government in 2005.³ Area profiles of quality of life were developed by the Audit Commission for each local authority area to improve local decision making and accountability. In addition to a meaningful ‘ecological footprint’ for the UK, estimates of carbon dioxide emissions were sought, including those embodied in the production and transport of imports from abroad. The ‘carbon footprint’ promoted by BP in the same year⁴ (as a way to individualise emissions and disguise the fossil fuel industry’s responsibility), has now become ubiquitous, eclipsing the use of the ‘ecological footprint’. Regularly updated area profiles were abandoned when the Audit Commission was replaced after a change of government.

Apart from short term thinking, perhaps the biggest barrier to adopting policies which would seriously tackle the continued rise of carbon dioxide emissions, is the blinkered devotion to economic growth. Even before the meltdown of financial systems in 2008, came increasing calls for a better understanding of economic models and how they relate to the real world.^{5,6} Post-crash, alarmed at how narrow and all pervasive within the curriculum were neoclassical economic models, Manchester post-grad economic students warned of the perils of leaving economics to the ‘experts’ and its threat to democracy.⁷ In a well-researched argument they recommend ‘citizen economics’ as a remedy to the current

¹ Jason Hickel, ‘Neoliberalism and the end of democracy’, LSE, 2016

² Walter Crane, ‘William Morris to Whistler: papers and addresses on art and craft and the commonweal’, London, 1911

³ HM Government, ‘Securing the future – *delivering UK sustainable development strategy*’, DEFRA, March 2005

⁴ Origin of the concept https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/carbon_footprint last accessed 14 March 2023

⁵ David Woodward and Andrew Simms, ‘Growth isn’t working’, nef, London, January 2006

⁶ Larry Elliott et al, ‘A Green New Deal’, nef, London, July 2008

⁷ Joe Earle et al, ‘The Econocracy’, Penguin Random House, 2017

technocratic system that marginalises the general public and their ability to engage with economic issues.

As alluded to above, reliance on a percentage increase in gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of a healthy economy and as a panacea for capitalist consumerism, is flawed at best. It certainly does not equate to societal well-being. At worst, its pursuit is undeniably an underlying cause of chaotic anthropogenic climate change. Also rethinking economics, Kate Raworth offers a different take to creating and distributing prosperity.⁸

In a period of prolonged austerity in the UK, with many public sector workers striking to achieve a living wage, save services, and redress losses of income due to a decade of below inflation wage increases, it is not going to be easy to build a mass movement that endorses an unproven alternative to economic growth. Yet the case has to be made for a post-growth economy, sometimes referred to as 'steady state economics' or 'degrowth'.

Key proposals espoused for degrowth are: differentiate between sectors that can grow and need investment whilst moving away from economic growth measured as increase in GDP; redistribution of wealth through universal basic income and social policy; regenerative agriculture; reduced consumption and travel; and debt cancellation.⁹ Describing growth as 'capitalism's secular promise of redemption', the authors offer both a compelling critique of growth, but also practical solutions. The self-reinforcing growth dynamics of expansive modernity can and must be overcome without jeopardising social, cultural and democratic advances. Albeit those advances were won through social struggles within the context of growth.

Societal progress as measured by ever growing GDP is a fallacy which drives ever growing cumulative carbon emissions and thus consequent rise in global temperature. Urgent action to phase-out fossil fuels is required, as pointed out in the latest IPCC assessment, which also includes the following paragraph in its summary for policy makers.¹⁰

The consideration of ethics and equity can help address the uneven distribution of adverse impacts associated with 1.5°C and higher levels of global warming, as well as those from mitigation and adaptation, particularly for poor and disadvantaged populations, in all societies.

With governments in the US and Europe still willing to approve new fossil fuel extraction, transformational change is needed.¹¹ There is a need to overcome the 'power of entrenched interests and their control over political systems', and perhaps reclamation of commons, described by Gramsci as a counterhegemonic worldview.¹² So what can be done? A mass movement? Perhaps, if there is enough time, there is a role for citizens' assemblies, and a chance to establish a coalition of international localism.

⁸ Kate Raworth, 'Doughnut Economics', Penguin Random House, 2017

⁹ Matthias Schmelzer et al, 'The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World beyond Capitalism', Verso, 2022

¹⁰ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/> D.2.2 released 20 March 2023 last accessed 23 March 2023

¹¹ Laurie Laybourn et al, '1.5°C – Dead or Alive?', IPPR, Chatham House, Cohort 2040, February 2023

¹² Cynthia Kaufman, 'The Sea Is Rising And So Are We – A Climate Justice Handbook', PM Press, 2021

There are many examples and earlier initiatives such as Lucas Aerospace shop-stewards plan promoting socially useful product,¹³ community owned renewable energy schemes,¹⁴ and an understanding that well-being is higher within more equal societies.¹⁵ Whilst it is difficult to break the stranglehold of ever expansionist capitalism, it has to be challenged.¹⁶ The fossil-fuelled industrial revolution only encouraged a distorted belief in white superiority. Imperialists and colonisers discounted the wisdom of indigenous cultures as it did not fit into their narrow view of civilisation. Hence capitalism lit the fuse for anthropogenic climate chaos.

We may have to examine whether our institutions are fit for purpose, in terms of supporting the action necessary within the next few years to preserve a liveable planet. Technofixes may not suffice, nor will business as usual. Yet there are reasons to be cheerful. One such can be found in local authority climate change action plans if they are to be believed.¹⁷

Mike Franks, 23 March 2023.

¹³ <https://lucasplan.org.uk/story-of-the-lucas-plan/> last accessed 23 March 2023

¹⁴ <https://energy4all.co.uk> last accessed 23 March 2023

¹⁵ Thomas Piketty, 'The Illusion of Centrist Ecology', *Lemonde.fr*, 11 June 2019, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, 'The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better', Allen Lane, 2009

¹⁶ Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'The Origin of Capitalism – A Longer View', Verso, 2017

¹⁷ For example: 'Net Zero Newcastle – 2030 Action Plan' (produced in partnerships with businesses, institutions and the community

https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Climate%20Change/Net%20Zero/Net%20Zero%20Newcastle%20-%202030%20Action%20Plan_0.pdf last accessed 23 March 2023