

MONEY, WORK, AND MASS EXTINCTION:
TRANSFORMATIONAL DEGROWTH
AND THE JOB GUARANTEE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is composed of three independent essays. Each essay traces social and ecological crises to capitalist institutions and proposes how a job guarantee (JG) can be adapted to resolve them in the context of degrowth. The first essay focuses on the relationship between economic growth and ecological destruction. In a monetary production economy, there is a trade-off between employment and the environment. To reconcile social and ecological goals it is necessary to decouple employment from growth. A JG makes this possible. The outlines of a simple two-sector model show how a JG can be used to maintain full employment and facilitate a reduction in aggregate output. The JG offers individuals a way to opt out of monetary production and thus, presents a pathway to fundamentally transform the economy.

The second essay considers the diverse variety of strategies and policies that have emerged in the degrowth movement. These are classified into two categories. Top-down approaches insist that centralized policies relying on government control are necessary. Bottom-up approaches insist that transformation must stem from the decentralization of power and the expansion of individual autonomy. This essay proposes that a JG is uniquely positioned in between the two and demonstrates why this unique positioning enables a JG to serve as a platform for the multi-dimensional strategies and aims of degrowth. Here the argument is not

that a JG alone can achieve the diverse goals of degrowth, but rather that it can serve a vital function in catalyzing, supporting, or unlocking pathways envisioned by the movement.

The third essay argues that the crisis of mass extinction is equal parts human and ecological. The Anthropocene is evidence of humankind's capacity to change the world. However, the rapid extension of market logic and money value during the neoliberal era is generating forms of alienation that destroy human meaning and rob people of their own social agency. Overcoming the problem of mass extinction thus involves developing a more anthropocentric economy. A JG presents a radical possibility for transforming the world by reclaiming the human meaning and value of work.

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a dissertation titled “Money, Work, and Mass Extinction: Transformational Degrowth and the Job Guarantee,” presented by BJ Unti, candidate for the doctorate degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I began this project in 2011, the world was still reeling from the Great Recession that started with the financial crisis of 2008. Today, the economy is rapidly sliding into a new and likely bigger crisis, this time kicked-off by a virus. The dramatic events that mark the onset of these crises come to be viewed as causes in themselves, but the fact is, financial bubbles and coronaviruses only reveal ever-present structural fragilities of a capitalist economy that have become more pronounced in recent decades of neoliberal hegemony.

Whatever the economic situation, the twenty-first century is defined by ecological crisis. The scientific community warns—and has been warning—that humans are exploiting the earth at an unsustainable rate. Our collective failure to heed these warnings has everything to do with the same economic institutions that produce recurring crises of recession and depression. Overlapping, dual economic and ecological crises pose a regrettable dilemma. Maintaining business as usual on the economic front also means maintaining business as usual with respect to ecological destruction. The focus of this work is to better understand this dilemma and explore ways out.

The contradiction set up by these dual crises is something economists have been aware of since at least the 1970s. In her address to the American Economic Association, Joan Robinson (1972) announced “the second crisis of economic theory.” The first crisis, associated with the Great Depression of the 1930s, was resolved—at least in theory—with the publication of Keynes’s *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (1936). Keynes explained why the system would not self-correct and what government could do to save the economy. The

core of Keynes contribution was to demonstrate that society had the capacity to determine the volume of output and employment.

The second crisis emerged with the realization that employment as such did not entail prosperity. Indeed, since the 1930s “military Keynesianism” had proven to be the only acceptable method of fiscal stimulus. Of course, this does increase output and employment, but it is output in the form of weapons, and employment in the form war. Thus, while the first crisis of economic theory was a *quantitative* problem of determining the volume of employment, the second crisis involved a *qualitative* problem of determining what it is we produce and, equally important, how we go about producing it.

The most alarming aspect of the second crisis is related to environmental decline. While the growth of output and employment may produce social benefits, historically it has also driven environmental destruction and ecological overshoot. By 1972, concern for the environment was moving to the center of public discourse. A decade earlier, Rachel Carson sparked environmental consciousness with her book *Silent Spring* (1962). Her warning regarding the threats posed by economic growth and industrialization was echoed in rapid succession by Georgescu-Roegen (1971), Meadows et al. (1972), Daly (1973), and Robinson herself (1971, 1972). What was so disconcerting about the second crisis was the contradiction it set up with the first. At bottom it appeared we faced a trade-off between employment and the environment: between ecological and economic prosperity.

Although Keynes solved the immediate problem of unemployment, his solution only opened the door to a much bigger and more troubling question. In essence, Robinson’s second crisis is a backhanded nod to Keynes’s achievement that says, “Yes, *but*...what is the point?” We can have full employment, but to what end? The question marks Robinson as a heretic.

Economics religiously evades this topic, refusing to hear the question. An assumed answer orients the entire whole enterprise by way of default. Adam Smith opened an inquiry into the wealth of nations. Ever since, economists have taken it as given that the never-ending growth of material wealth is *the* objective. Anyone who stops to ask Robinson's question risks excommunication.

A straight line runs from *homoeconomicus* and Hobbes's jungle to the modern crisis of mass extinction. The history of economic thinking does not reflect a linear progression towards a more accurate re-presentation of reality; except, in a perverse way it does. History shows reality has moved closer to theory and not the other way around.

The individualistic premises of neoclassical economics have helped create a world of isolated individuals and a concomitant war of each against all. Expanding market relations sever social connections and the advance of money value crowds out every other form of meaning and value. Rational calculation increasingly *is* the only way to navigate a totally commodified market society. Climate change is one more inevitable effect of human nature. It is collateral damage of the social war, a negative externality.

Caught in the middle of both crises is human existence. If we really ask Robinson's question we come to Marx's answer. The real wealth of the economy, what we actually produce, is people, our lives.¹ Our mode of production is how we coordinate the collective human project

¹ Marx notes the historical novelty of viewing wealth as an end in itself, "Among the ancients, we discover no single enquiry as to which form of landed property, etc., is the most productive, which creates maximum wealth. Wealth does not appear as the aim of production, although Cato may well investigate the most profitable cultivation of fields, or Brutus may even lend money at the most favorable rate of interest. The enquiry is always about what kind of property creates the best citizens. Wealth as an end in itself appears only among a few trading peoples — monopolists of the carrying trade — who live in the pores of the ancient world like the Jews in medieval society. Wealth is, on the one hand, a thing, realized in things, in material products as against man as a subject. On the other hand, in its capacity as value, it is the mere right to

of creating one another, ourselves, and the world. Keynes's theory of effective demand makes Marx's theory of alienation legible to the formal logicians of economic theory. Common ground between Marx and Keynes is found in the paradox of money.

The core of Keynes's diagnosis and solution to the problem of unemployment is an understanding of the special role of money as the central institution of capitalism. Money, Keynes explains, is why a capitalist economy must grow and also why it is not likely to grow fast enough. Understanding money sets forth a practical solution to the problem of unemployment. If money is something we make up, then money should not stop us from taking care of ourselves. There are no "natural" limits on money, and it follows we can grow as fast as necessary to keep everyone working. But then Robinson's question comes back.

What is the point of keeping everyone working? Are we consuming to work? Or, working to consume? Moreover, Keynes's practical solution does not account for the real constraints of the planet's life support systems. The earth's capacity to furnish inputs and absorb

command other people's labor, not for the purpose of dominion, but of private enjoyment, etc. In all its forms, it appears in the form of objects, whether of things or of relationships by means of things, which lie outside of, and as it were accidentally beside, the individual.

Thus the ancient conception, in which man always appears (in however narrowly national, religious, or political a definition) as the aim of production, seems very much more exalted than the modern world, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim of production. In fact, however, when the narrow bourgeois form has been peeled away, what is wealth, if not the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers etc., of individuals, produced in universal exchange? What, if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature — those of his own nature as well as those of so-called "nature"? What, if not the absolute elaboration of his creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which make the totality of this evolution — i.e., the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by any *previously established* yardstick — an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? In bourgeois political economy — and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds — this complete elaboration of what lies within man, appears as the total alienation, and the destruction of all fixed, one-sided purposes as the sacrifice of the end in itself to a wholly external compulsion" (Marx 1857).

outputs is not, like money, a matter of social convention. So, while Keynes discovered a way to liberate us from an arbitrary social constraint, what this liberation really frees us to do is collide with non-arbitrary biophysical limits.

Marx's critique runs deeper than Keynes's. Despite the paradox of poverty amidst plenty and the unjust, arbitrary distribution of economic rewards, Keynes argued the tyranny of money was better than alternatives. By contrast for Marx, money was not merely an obstacle between society and full employment. In the social framework of $M - C - M'$, money takes on a life of its own and becomes a barrier between humans and their own existence.

The stakes of money's tyranny are thus much higher for Marx. And while he, like Keynes, never fully grasped the physical threat of capitalism's environmental destruction, Marx plainly saw in it the spiritual destruction of human life. The core of Marx's critique is not inequality or unemployment. The real existential threat for Marx was always qualitative. Alienation destroys human meaning and existence and does so especially if capitalism works. Full employment in capitalist production is the opposite of a solution to alienation. The goal for Marx was for workers to rescue the human quality of their existence by reclaiming conscious control of their activity. It was never about the volume of employment. It was always about what and how we produce.

Robinson's *qualitative* problem is the original crisis of capitalism. In the twenty-first century, the Anthropocene and mass extinction offer a different kind of support for Marx's conclusion that capitalism is an existential threat. But we still live in a capitalist society and it follows that Keynes's policy insights remain relevant. They just need to be re-jiggered so that solutions to the immediate problem of unemployment will set us working toward a qualitative

transformation of the economic system. The argument here is that something like a job guarantee is uniquely suited for this purpose.

This dissertation is composed of three independent essays. However, each essay considers how to reconcile environmental and economic goals by implementing a job guarantee re-designed as a tool of transformational degrowth. The first essay re-examines the Keynes's theory of effective demand. It makes use of Domar's long run analysis and Boulding's Bathtub theorem to elucidate the environmental unsustainability of capitalist expansion. It proposes a job guarantee (JG) as a means to decouple employment from growth and outlines a model of how the JG might offer a pathway of transformational degrowth.

The second essay surveys the wide range of policies and strategies developed in the degrowth movement and seeks to situate the JG in this broader program. Degrowth proposals can be divided into two contending camps. *Top down* strategies insist that centralized policies relying on government control and state power are required to overcome structural constraints and path dependencies built into the institutional architecture of contemporary capitalism. *Bottom up strategies* insist that transformation must stem from the decentralization of power, increasing autonomy for individuals and communities, and that only voluntary individual initiative can achieve a sustainable and equitable transition. The JG occupies a unique position between top down and bottom up strategies and thus can serve as a scaffolding for the diverse strategies of degrowth.

The third essay focuses specifically on alienation. It explores the crisis of mass extinction as a crisis of human meaning and value. The proliferation of human despair that haunts centers of capitalist development is itself the ecological crisis of mass extinction. This works against a logic that views ecological crisis as occurring somewhere else, out there, in nature, apart from

humans, thereby crippling our sense of agency. The environmental crisis is the human crisis in the same way that development is underdevelopment. Mass extinction as the destruction of humans and the world is one historical process. To overcome mass extinction, it is necessary to develop a more anthropocentric economy that recalls people as the fundamental output of the mode of production. The real power of the JG in this context is to reclaim the human meaning and value of work.

CHAPTER 2
TRANSFORMATIONAL DEGROWTH
& THE JOB GUARANTEE

I. Introduction

Traditional Keynesian and Post Keynesian policies provide useful tools for addressing many of the inherent social and economic flaws of capitalism such as involuntary unemployment, poverty and inequality. However, these policies fail to account for environmental limits. As such the solutions they offer all rely on increasing aggregate demand, stimulating higher levels of economic growth and throughput. By contrast, a job guarantee (JG) program embodies special features that dissolve the contradiction between employment and the environment: between economic and ecological prosperity.

This chapter explores these special features and argues that the JG can be used to pursue the social and environmental aims of degrowth.² The first section examines Keynes's diagnosis

² Degrowth is not easy to define. At its core is a rejection of economic growth as a social objective. The idea first emerged in the 1970s alongside the Club of Rome's, *Limits to Growth* (1972) and Georgescu-Roegen's, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (1971). In 1972, Andre Gorz, who is credited with coining the French term for degrowth "decroissance" posed a seminal question: "Is the earth's balance, for which no-growth—or even degrowth—of material production is a necessary condition, compatible with the survival of capitalism?" (D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015, 1)

Today degrowth is an international social, political and economic movement calling on academics and activists of diverse backgrounds to radically reimagine an economic future that is not premised on economic growth. A catalyst for the movement is growing frustration with half-hearted, empty, or naïve proposals for "green growth," "sustainable development," or "green capitalism." Such win-win slogans fail to acknowledge the systemic causes of environmental decline and perpetuate the myth that we can address the issue without making fundamental changes to our way of life. By contrast, degrowth has roots in ecological realism and recognizes that any serious response to a problem driven by overuse of the planet must include a decrease in production and consumption.

While exploring ways to produce and consume less is central to degrowth, the movement is about much more than a quantitative reduction of material throughput. Degrowth recognizes that significant qualitative changes to existing forms of social and economic organization are

of and solution to the problem of unemployment in terms of effective demand. It is shown that the principle of effective demand has important and paradoxical implications for economic growth and the environment. The next section builds on Marx, Veblen, and Keynes's insight regarding the central role of money in a capitalist economy. It is argued that monetary production ($M - C - M'$) is not only the root cause of unemployment, but also the driving force behind the existing ecological crisis. The third section compares the JG and alternative paths to full employment in terms of their environmental implications. The final section considers how a JG program may be modified to slow down the economy while maintaining full employment.

II. Effective Demand: Linking Jobs and Growth

Keynes's (1936) theory of effective demand diagnosed the problem of involuntary unemployment in capitalist economies. According to Keynes, the volume of output and employment is determined by the sum of consumption and investment demand. Because people tend to save a portion of their income, there is a gap between consumption demand and income (output). In order to achieve full employment then, investment demand must fill the gap at the full employment level of output. However, there is no mechanism to ensure that investment demand will fill the gap because investment decisions are based on expected future profits in a world characterized by fundamental uncertainty. The normal situation for a capitalist economy is one where investment falls short of what is required to bring about full employment.

necessary to create a future wherein both humans and the planet can flourish. From this perspective, the necessity for change imposed by environmental limits is viewed as an opportunity to address longstanding social problems associated with capitalism including poverty, inequality, unemployment, exploitation, alienation, and the erosion of community (ibid.).

Keynes's explanation of effective demand was confined to the short run. When Domar extended Keynes's analysis into the long run he found that the problem of effective demand was made worse (1946, 1947). The reason is that the same investment needed to fill the gap between income and consumption also increases productive capacity. As the volume of output expands following each increment of investment, so too does the absolute size of the gap between income and consumption. As the gap grows, successively more investment is needed to fill it. But each additional increment of investment only further widens the gap. Consequently, "the economy finds itself in a serious dilemma: if sufficient investment is not forthcoming today, unemployment will be here today. But if enough is invested today, still more will be required tomorrow" (Domar 1947, 49). Finally, as the demand gap expands, excess capacity puts downward pressure on profit expectations. The result is that just when a higher volume of investment is required, the inducement to invest is weakened.

Boulding's (1945) bathtub theorem can be used to shed light on this paradoxical result. The bathtub theorem is particularly insightful because it is stated in real (physical) terms:

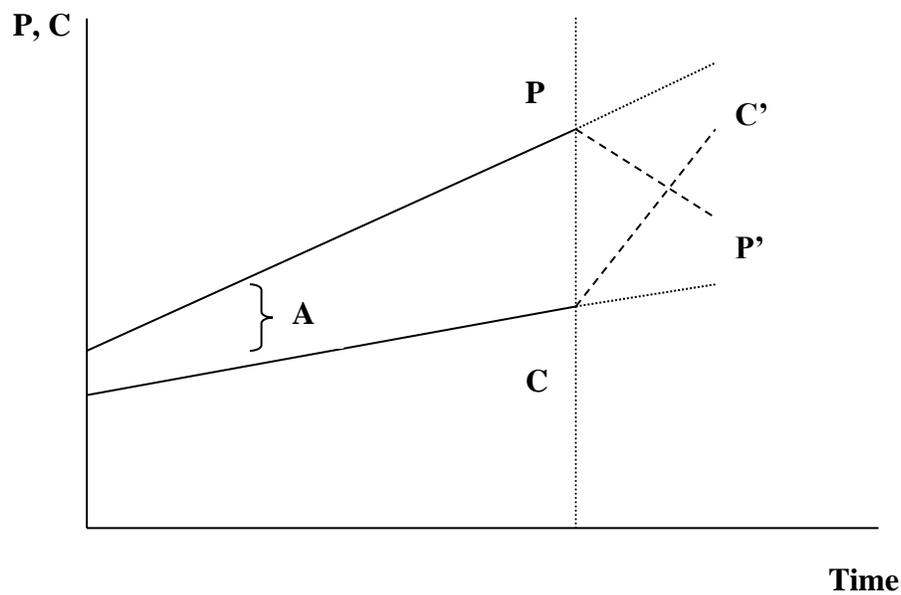
$$A = P - C$$

The rate of accumulation is equal to the rate of production minus the rate of consumption: where A is the rate of accumulation, P is the flow of production (addition to capital stock) and C is the flow of consumption (destruction of the capital stock).³ Boulding uses the analogy of a bathtub to explain the model. Production represents the flow of water into the tub. Consumption represents the flow of water down the drain. The volume of water in the tub represents the capital

³ It is important to note that Boulding's concept of consumption is not the same as Keynes's idea of household expenditure. Consumption in the Keynesian sense actually describes an *asset transfer* from businesses to households. Boulding uses consumption in the classical sense to describe the *destruction of assets*.

stock, and the difference between the flow of production and consumption is the rate of accumulation.⁴

According to Boulding, the bathtub theorem is the “first step in understanding long-run crises of capitalism—deflationary pressures of a mature society and its intractable unemployment” (1945, 3). Unemployment occurs because the economy has an institutionally limited capacity to absorb the stock of accumulated assets. When the growth of the stock exceeds the level desired by capitalists, the rate of accumulation (the difference between production and consumption) must fall. This can happen in one of two ways: (1) the rate of production must decrease (2) the rate of consumption must increase.



Boulding's Bathtub Figure 1

⁴ In terms of practical application, the bathtub theorem suffers an obvious setback. Because it is stated in physical terms we cannot plug in actual values for P, C and A in a world of heterogeneous goods. Nonetheless the theorem remains true as a matter of identity and as such serves as a useful heuristic for thinking about physical stocks and flows.

The first case—a decrease in production—is brought about by falling profit expectations and results in involuntary unemployment. As Boulding puts it, “in a situation where the owners of the stock pile are unwilling to increase their holdings, in the absence of an increase in consumption, employment and production must decline until the difference between production and consumption is equal the rate of accumulation which capitalists are willing to allow. This ...in a nutshell is the main Keynesian contribution to economic thought” (1945, 3). The alternative—an increase in consumption—is unlikely to occur unless the government intervenes which is the traditional Keynesian solution. In light of the Domar problem, ever-increasing government spending is required to maintain full employment in the long run (Vatter and Walker 1997, 1989; Wray 2007).

Boulding’s analysis helps to illuminate the paradox of effective demand precisely because it is stated in physical terms. What it demonstrates is that crises occur when the system becomes *too productive*. In other words, when we produce too much, profit expectations fall off, investment declines and the result is rising unemployment, poverty and misery. The paradox is clear: people suffer not because we don’t produce enough, but rather because we already produce too much, or alternatively, because we do not destroy (consume) output fast enough.

To avoid a crisis of involuntary unemployment in the long-run, Domar demonstrates the net investment in each period must be larger than in the previous period. But investment expands productive capacity. Therefore, to avoid becoming too productive, society must always expand production. In other words, to avoid unemployment a capitalist economy must grow at an exponential rate. As Dillard puts it “employment in investment activity helps to maintain demand for the consumption output of existing facilities. In order to make full use of the factories already in existence, we must always build new factories. Otherwise, in our society

with its characteristic widespread inequality of income, there will not be enough money spent to keep the old factories going. If investment falls off, unemployment results” (1948, 8).

III. A Common Cause: Unemployment and Ecological crisis

In order to address the problems of unemployment and ecological crises it is necessary to understand their root causes. Marx (2000), Veblen (1965), and Keynes (1964) all identified the root of the economic problem in the institution of production for a profit or more simply monetary production (Dillard 1980, 1987). This section explains how and why the causes of the current ecological crisis can be traced to the same source.

The fundamental link between unemployment and ecological crisis is overproduction.⁵ And, overproduction as noted by Marx and Keynes in particular, is a monetary phenomenon. Classical theorists denied the possibility of overproduction on the basis of Say’s Law: supply creates its own demand. However, as Marx points out, Say’s Law only holds in the context of a barter (i.e. non-monetary) economy. In a situation where individual producers exchange commodities for commodities (C – C’), supply literally is demand. If money is introduced as a medium of exchange (C – M – C’) the identity of supply and demand is broken, and the possibility of a crisis of overproduction or insufficient aggregate demand emerges (Marx 2000).

In a capitalist economy the potential for crisis is inevitably realized because money is both the starting point and aim of production (M – C – M’). The purpose of production is no longer use value (C’), but rather money profits (M’). Capitalists own the means of production

⁵ Overproduction and underconsumption may be thought of as two sides of the same coin. Both are relative terms defined in relation to one another, and to this extent they are interchangeable. However, there is a danger in thinking this way. While a given situation may be described by either term, the two terms point in opposing directions toward differing solutions. In an economy that produces more than enough output to meet human needs it is misleading to describe crises in terms of underconsumption. Indeed, with respect to ecological limits overproduction *and* overconsumption currently coexist.

and therefore control production decisions. They must be willing to throw money into circulation to hire workers and purchase raw materials if production is to take place. On the other hand, workers own nothing but their labor power and remain at the mercy of capitalists. Whether or not social needs are being met, workers cannot set production in motion. What is required is the belief on the part of capitalists that they will be able to realize profits through the future sale of output. If capitalists' expectations are grim, they can deny workers access to the means of production and the result is involuntary unemployment.

Unemployment is the most obvious social contradiction of monetary production. In a society in which production is geared towards profits (exchange value) and not needs (use value), the satisfaction of needs becomes a curse. Indeed, in a capitalist economy meeting needs is merely a byproduct of making money profits. And when the system is too productive, profit expectations fall off, resulting in poverty amidst plenty. This explains why massive quantities of resources are channeled into the wasteful industry of need production (i.e. marketing and advertising) even as the basic needs of large portions of the population remain unmet.

It should come as no surprise that an economic system that operates without regard to human needs fares no better when it comes to respecting environmental limits. If we ask why people who want to work are denied employment the answer is simple. It is not profitable to employ them. If we ask why the destruction of the planet continues unchecked the answer is likewise that it is not profitable to stop. So long as production aims at the endless accumulation of money profits, the environment remains in serious peril (Blauwhof 2012; Foster 1999; Harvey 2010; Klein 2014; Kovel 2002; Magdoff and Foster 2011; R. Smith 2010, 2011).

So, why must a capitalist economy always grow? The answer is not that we are failing to produce enough output to meet basic human needs. For example, US GDP per capita in 2013

was over \$53,000.⁶ Rather, the economy must grow so that capitalist can realize profits and workers can secure jobs.

The relationship between profits and employment reflects the fundamental conflict between workers and capitalists in a system of monetary production. Economic growth is not directly in the interest of the majority of the population—at least not in the industrialized North.⁷ Indeed, beyond environmental limits, growth is a threat everyone’s wellbeing. For the working class, growth is desirable only indirectly in so far as it supports the security of employment. On the other hand, growth is the *raison d’etre* of the capitalist class. As Marx puts it, “Use value must therefore never be looked upon as the real aim of the capitalist; neither must the profit on any single transaction. The restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what [capitalists] aim at” (Marx 1947, 131). This is the basic condition of monetary production and the key to understanding both unemployment and ecological crisis.

Although the theory of effective demand emerges from an analysis of the short run, Keynes identifies the basic relationships between profits, employment and growth. In a monetary economy the level of employment depends primarily on the volume of investment; investment is a function of profit expectations; and profits in the aggregate will only be realized if investment is sufficient to ensure that the economy is growing.⁸ If the economy stops growing, involuntary

⁶ This clearly indicates a problem of distribution not growth. The longstanding tradition in economics of viewing growth as the remedy to all problems must in part be explained by a political unwillingness to seriously entertain discussion of redistribution.

⁷ Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) demonstrate that key indicators of mental and physical wellbeing are not correlated with aggregate income in the industrialized North. Degrowth advocates argue that the North needs to degrow in order to provide the ecological space for the South to grow (Kerschner 2010; Latouche 2010; O’neill 2011).

⁸ Kalecki’s profit equation captures this relationship (1965, 45 - 52). In a simplified economy with no government or foreign sector, assuming that workers do not save, and capitalist do not

unemployment rises. To solve the problem of unemployment then, the government must ensure that aggregate demand is always sufficient to maintain economic growth.

Keynes's diagnosis of the problem of unemployment in terms of money paved the way for its solution. However, the environmental problems associated with monetary production remain to be addressed. Full employment if achieved through increased aggregate demand and growth will simply put more pressure on an already overtaxed planetary ecosystem.

To reexamine the theory of effective demand and the policies flowing from it in the face of environmental limits it is useful to recall Boulding's bathtub theorem. Boulding points out *two* ways to remedy a growing divergence between production and consumption: (1) increase consumption (2) decrease production. The first is not likely to occur in the absence of government intervention owing to falling profit expectations associated with accelerating accumulation. Thus, the Keynesian solution of government action is required to bring consumption back in line with production. In the second case—in the absence of intervention—production declines creating unemployment and possibly depression. So, it seems we are stuck with a tradeoff between the environmental costs of growth and the social costs of unemployment.

But have all the alternatives been exhausted? Is there no way to make use of the unique powers of government to remedy overproduction without increasing consumption? In other words, is there some way to have our cake and eat it too; with production declining and employment remaining stable?

consume, profits are determined by investment. Thus, to realize profits capitalists must invest, meaning the economy must grow.

IV. Paths to Full Employment

Building on the theory of effective demand and modern money theory (MMT), Post Keynesians have proposed two alternative paths to full employment. The first and most common approach relies on fiscal policy to fill the demand gap. The second approach calls for direct job creation through an employer of last resort or job guarantee program (JG). Neither policy was designed to address environmental concerns and indeed both promote growth. However, when compared, it is clear that the JG offers advantages over demand management policy with respect to both employment and the environment.

The demand gap approach seeks a handle on employment via the manipulation of aggregate demand. When aggregate demand in the private sector is insufficient for full employment, fiscal policy can be enacted to boost demand (Arestis and Sawyer 2004) & (2003). The three essential goals of the demand gap approach are: (1) increasing aggregate demand (2) stimulating private investment and (3) increasing productive capacity (P. Tcherneva 2008). This approach suffers from two obvious weaknesses. On the employment front, it is indirect. If the goal is to increase employment, why not hire workers directly?⁹ On the environmental front, the flaw of the demand gap approach is that aims to achieve full employment through economic growth. As Tcherneva notes, “this is a pro-investment pro-growth policy” (ibid.).

The JG approach proposed by Minsky (1968), Wray (1998), and Mitchell (1998) represents an alternative path to full employment. Rather than acting through aggregate demand

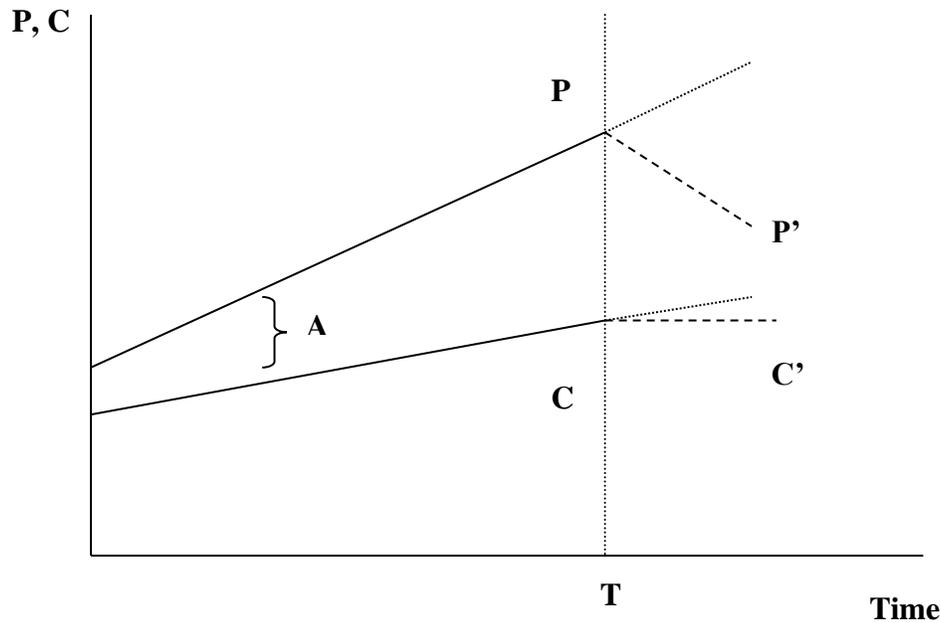
⁹ In his critique of the JG, Sawyer concedes this weakness of the demand gap approach, “the attraction of ELR schemes appears to be their ability to guarantee full employment. Variations in mainline public sector jobs or taxation may aim to provide full employment, but that cannot be guaranteed through forecasting errors and implementation delays” (2003, 890).

to stimulate private investment, the JG achieves full employment by directly hiring workers. This offers three advantages over demand management. First, it eliminates unemployment immediately. Second, it channels government spending directly to employment. And perhaps most importantly, it can be used to influence not only the quantity but also the quality of employment.¹⁰

With regard to environmental goals however, the most important advantage of the JG is that it severs the link between aggregate demand and employment. As Mitchell and Wray point out, “ELR achieves full employment without regard to the level of aggregate demand” (2005, 236). If employment and aggregate demand can be decoupled, then it may be possible to decouple employment from economic growth. In other words, a JG might provide a means for overcoming the existing trade-off between economic and environmental goals.

In the context of Boulding’s model, a JG provides a novel solution to the problem of overproduction. Suppose a situation in which production and consumption are diverging such that profit expectations are falling. According to the demand gap approach there are two possible outcomes: (1) falling production, rising unemployment and possibly a depression, or (2) rising consumption, increased aggregate demand and stable employment. With a JG in place the third option is to allow production and aggregate demand to fall, while maintaining full employment thus avoiding a depression. In this case, both the economic objective of full employment and the environmental goal of reducing output (throughput) are achieved.

¹⁰ Degrowth advocates Alcott (2011) and Blauwhof (2012) both highlight the possibility of using a JG program to alter the quality of employment and output.



Boulding's Bathtub Figure 2

Referring to the diagram, a JG eliminates the negative impact of falling production on the level of employment. If JG workers earn a lower wage than private sector workers (and workers spend what they get) aggregate demand and consumption also fall.

Of course, a JG as such does not necessarily serve environmental objectives. After all, it will increase employment and aggregate income, and thus it seems a JG must increase aggregate demand, output (throughput), and economic growth.¹¹ However, owing to the special nature of JG employment it may in fact be made consistent with falling aggregate output and income in the long run.

In this regard, the most important feature of the JG is that it transcends the conditions of monetary production. Because JG work is not constrained by money profits it can be channeled

¹¹ Compared to levels that would exist with no policies in place to mitigate the decline in production.

to all kinds of socially beneficial projects that cannot and will not be undertaken by the private sector.¹² This is the basis for the “green jobs” JG proposal put forward by Forstater (2003, 2004, 2005) and Tcherneva (2007). However, green jobs represent only one of the possibilities opened up by a JG, and by itself a green jobs approach is not likely to bring about the required the reduction in growth necessary for a sustainable economy. Another more radical potential opened up by the removal of the profit constrain is that of reducing productivity.

As proposed, a JG will hire off the bottom and “the pool [of JG labor] will tend to contain the least productive workers” (Wray 1998, 139). And since the object of the program is to provide jobs, JG employment should be more labor-intensive than private sector employment further reducing productivity. Rather than viewing low productivity as a bad thing, if environmental sustainability requires reduced growth, low productivity out to be a policy goal.¹³ Moreover, it is easy to see how reducing productivity is consistent with improved working conditions since the simplest ways to achieve lower productivity are slowing down the production process, decreasing the length of the working day, and replacing mechanized mass production with more humane and less alienating forms of craft labor. Finally, while reduced

¹² In fact, JG workers can do anything society deems worthwhile. This might include going to school, producing works of art, planting community gardens, taking care of the elderly, raising children, habitat restoration etc.

¹³ In this context, “reducing productivity” refers to increasing employment per unit of output and/or decreasing output per unit of time. This goal stems from the assumption that in the aggregate, output is a good proxy for throughput based on the historical correlation of GDP and throughput (Jackson 2010; Kallis 2011). Obviously, reducing productivity in this sense is not desirable in all fields of production. In any field where socially useful goods and services are produced sustainably, high productivity may be desirable. Additionally, high productivity may be desirable in any case where it serves to reduce the time required to complete an onerous task without necessitating an increase in output. Finally, reducing productivity does not require the abandonment of any particular technology or technique of production. It can be achieved in any existing line of production by merely reducing the pace of production or the length of the working day.

productivity as a policy goal may be a tough sell, it should not be forgotten that the point of a JG is to improve peoples' lives and not to increase output.¹⁴

As a policy objective, reducing productivity raises a serious problem: How is productivity to be measured? Reducing productivity specifically refers to increasing employment (labor time) per unit of output and/or decreasing output per unit of time. The real problem then is how to measure output. In a one-commodity world there is no problem because a unit of output is defined. In a world of heterogeneous goods, the obvious solution is to convert all goods to money values through the use of market prices. But if money values of output are used to construct a measure of productivity, there is no guarantee that reducing productivity will achieve the underlying goal of reducing throughput because there is no reason to expect that relative prices for any *particular* pair of commodities will provide an indication of relative throughput.

The problem of measuring productivity represents the biggest theoretical obstacle to operationalizing the degrowth model presented in the next section. And while no perfect solution is clear at present, there are a variety of ways addressing the problem without necessarily solving it. First of all, there is a strong historical correlation between GDP and throughput. This indicates that using money values to measure productivity may be a useful if imperfect solution at the aggregate level. On the other hand, when operationalizing a JG, productivity might be measured on an industry basis overcoming the problem of heterogeneous goods. For example, if JG workers produce wooden chairs that approximate similar wooden chairs produced by the private sector, a unit of output is defined. Now reducing productivity in the JG sector is a simple matter of ensuring that more labor time is required to produce a chair in the JG sector, or that over any

¹⁴ Beyond a basic level, rising income is not well-correlated with quality of life measures (see Layard 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; O'Neill 2011). Indeed, Stanfield and Stanfield (1980) argue that a sustained growth in consumption can lead to a deterioration in quality of life.

period of time JG production results in fewer chairs produced. This can be achieved in the JG sector by (1) adopting more labor-intensive methods (2) maintaining the same methods but slowing down production (3) maintaining the same pace and method of production but reducing the length of the working day. The point here is that even though the problem of measuring productivity remains to be solved, it is still meaningful to talk about reducing productivity as a policy goal.

Another possibility that emerges with the elimination of the profit motive and a slowing down of production is an emphasis on *quality* and *durability* over *quantity* and *marketability*. In other words, JG work can be geared toward producing the best use-value as opposed to the most exchange-value. Increasing the durability of output is vital strategy for reducing rates of production and consumption because, by definition, goods of higher durability are consumed (used up) more slowly. With a falling rate of (physical) consumption, the same stock of useful goods can be maintained at a lower rate of production. As Boulding (1949) argues, confusion in economic theory centered on the concepts of income and consumption has led to the belief that welfare is increased by maximizing production and consumption, “There is a very general assumption in economics that income (or out-go) is the proper measure of economic welfare, and that the more income and out-go we have, the better. In fact, almost the reverse is the case. Income consists of the value production: out-go is the value of consumption. Both income and out-go are processes involved in the maintenance of the capital stock...it is the capital stock from which we derive satisfactions, not from additions to it (production) or subtractions from it (consumption).”¹⁵ Thus, “the objective of economic policy should not be to maximize

¹⁵ Boulding points out that we obtain satisfaction from using *existing* goods and from *using them up*. In other words, he distinguishes between *use*, which yields satisfaction and *consumption*,

consumption or production, but rather to minimize it, i.e. to enable us to maintain our capital stock with as little consumption or production as possible” (ibid. 79).¹⁶

Facing environmental limits, Boulding is right about what our objectives *ought* to be. However, the logic of production for profit dictates otherwise. It is true for instance, that a house that never depreciated would be an improvement for its owner. The problem with producing durable goods in a monetary economy is that if needs are met unemployment increases. Better to build houses that fall apart each year. But this where the JG comes in. If workers are guaranteed jobs then increased durability, which lowers throughput, does not threaten employment.

Finally, the JG offers the potential for falling aggregate demand without falling employment. Suppose a JG is in place and consequently the economy is operating at full employment. When a recession occurs investment, output and employment in the private sector fall. However, the total volume of employment remains stable. Workers simply shift from the private to the public sector. If as proposed by JG advocates, the JG wage is lower than the private sector wage, then aggregate demand falls as the relative size of the JG sector grows.¹⁷ And if JG work is less productive than private sector work, aggregate output also falls. The key here is that full employment is maintained during the recession even as aggregate demand falls. And falling

which involves the destruction of some element of the capital stock. For example, we derive satisfaction from the use of a coat, but not from using up (destroying) the coat.

¹⁶ Daly makes an analogous argument using the following identity:

$$(\text{service}/\text{throughput}) = (\text{service}/\text{stock}) \times (\text{stock}/\text{throughput})$$

“Growth” is defined as an increase in throughput holding the right-hand ratios constant. By contrast, sustainable “development” involves increasing the two right hand ratios holding throughput constant (Daly 1996, 68).

¹⁷ Assuming workers in both sectors spend what they get.

output is consistent with full employment so long as JG workers are less productive than private sector workers.

Thus far it has merely been shown that falling aggregate demand and output are consistent with full employment under a JG scheme. This will occur during a recession given the traditional JG assumptions. However, *over the cycle* a JG may result in higher levels of aggregate demand and economic growth because the fall of demand and output during a recession is less than it would be in the absence of the JG. Assuming that during the recovery phase of the cycle the JG pool shrinks to zero, all gains in terms of reduced productivity will vanish and output over the cycle will be higher than would be the case without a JG. Moreover, if the JG mitigates skill depreciation associated with unemployment and/or raises the productivity of workers re-entering the private sector through job training/placement, this will further stimulate economic growth.¹⁸

Yet it is highly unlikely the private sector will absorb the entire JG pool during the recovery phase of the cycle as the private sector has a very poor track record of achieving full employment. This implies that some reduction in productivity will be retained over the cycle. However, with respect to ecological limits, the problem is that the economy will still be growing. And unless economic growth ceases to be a threat to the environment then growth must halt.¹⁹

¹⁸ Note however, that the stimulus to growth from the JG is less than that which would result from a successful demand gap policy. This follows from the fact that the demand gap approach seeks to preempt the recession such that there is no fall in output or demand. This may be unrealistic, but it is nevertheless the objective of the demand management policy.

¹⁹ Technological optimists argue that economic growth will solve all the problems it creates, and the current trajectory of the economy is towards “dematerialization” and a decoupling of GDP from throughput (Lorek 2015). However, “expectations of win-win, sustainable growth through technological and efficiency improvements have not been fulfilled” (Scneider, Kallis and Marinez-Alier 2010). There has been historically and there remains today a strong correlation between GDP and throughput (Jackson 2010; Kallis 2011; Lorek 2015). Even if the future is

This begs the question of whether the JG can be used to pursue the more radical objective of degrowth.

V. Outlines of a Full Employment Degrowth Model

A two-sector model can be used to derive the minimum conditions required to eliminate growth while maintaining full employment in the context of a JG program. The basic conditions for reducing growth are: (1) The JG sector is less productive than the private sector, (2) The JG wage is lower than the private sector wage, and (3) Over time, JG employment must grow as a relative share of total employment. The first two conditions are part of traditional JG proposals. What is new in this case is that low and/or decreasing productivity in the JG sector becomes a policy objective. The third condition has not previously been put forward as an intended outcome of the JG.²⁰ This condition obviously has radical implications. In short, it suggests that the path toward a sustainable economy leads away from monetary production.

Assuming these conditions are met it is possible to demonstrate how full employment is consistent with a secular decline in output under a JG. To simplify the following exposition ignores changes in the size of the labor force, and productivity growth in the private sector. The initial implementation of the JG will cause a one-time increase in aggregate demand, output and employment (analogous to the one-off inflation likely to occur with the initiation of the JG).

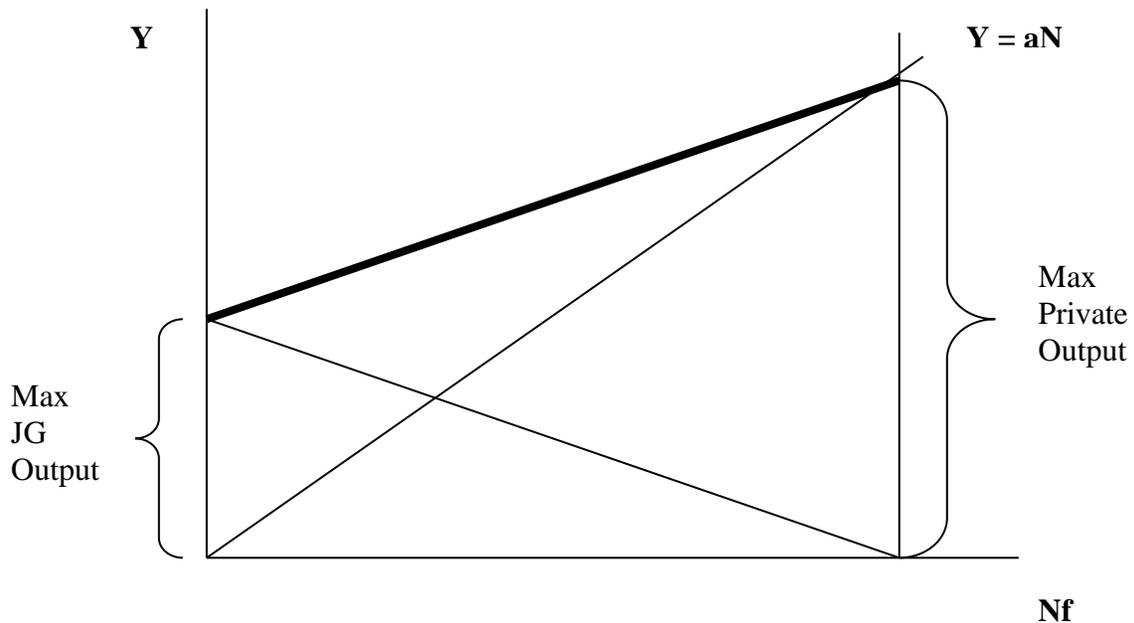
However, during the bust phase of the business cycle workers will be channeled from relatively

uncertain it would be wise to opt for a precautionary approach rather than to bank on the prophesized but unrealized dematerialization of GDP.

²⁰ The JG was originally conceived as an elaboration of Keynes's solution to the problem of unemployment. As such it was designed to guarantee full employment, stabilize prices and promote economic growth. Environmental limits did not factor into its conception. The JG/Green Jobs proposal seeks to address sustainability, but its aim is limited to *minimizing the environmental effects of full employment*. The goal here is to place sustainability and employment on an equal footing.

high productivity, high wage, private sector employment into low productivity, low wage, JG work. If, during the ensuing boom phase of the business cycle, a portion of the JG workers choose to remain in the public sector, then JG employment will grow as a share of total employment over the cycle. So long as some portion of the workers that newly enter the JG pool during each recession choose to stay in the pool during the subsequent recovery, each cycle provides a net addition to the JG sector equal to the net diminution of private sector employment. With JG employment growing as a relative share of total employment, the rate of growth of aggregate output and aggregate demand decline.

Nell (n.d.) provides a useful diagram for illustrating these dynamics. The vertical axis measures aggregate output (Y) and the horizontal axis depicts employment (N). With a JG in place, the economy is always at full employment (N_f). Private sector employment is measured from left to right, and JG employment is measured from right to left on the horizontal axis. The bold black line indicates the difference in productivity between the two sectors. Actual output is determined by the sum of JG and private sector output. When JG employment is zero, all workers are employed in the private sector and output reaches its maximum. When private sector employment is zero, all workers are employed in the JG sector and output reaches its minimum. When all three conditions of degrowth hold, then over the cycle the economy moves down and to the left along the bold black line.



Nell's Two-Sector Productivity (Figure 3)

In the framework outlined above, the rate at which the growth of output declines will depend on two factors: (1) The difference in productivity between JG and private sector employment, and (2) The rate of growth of the JG sector as a share of total employment over the cycle. Thus, if we know the difference between productivity in the JG sector and the private sector, we can calculate the required rate of growth of the JG sector as a share of total employment necessary to achieve a specified decline in the rate of growth of output. Or vice versa, given the rate of growth of JG employment as a share of total employment we can calculate the required difference in productivity between the two sectors to achieve a specified rate of degrowth.

The force driving degrowth in this framework is the business cycle. The endogenous fluctuations of a capitalist economy act like a pump generating a flow of workers into and out of

the JG pool. The crux of the whole argument hinges on the appropriate specification of the “valve” mechanism required to ensure that, on average, the in-flow of workers into the JG pool exceeds the outflow of workers taking jobs in the private sector. The valve cannot be a monetary incentive since wages in the JG must be lower than private sector wages to achieve the reduction in aggregate demand required for degrowth. But because JG employment is not constrained by money profits a multitude of non-monetary benefits may be offered to encourage workers to *choose* lower wage jobs in the JG.

So, what are examples of such non-monetary benefits? Freed from the profit constraint, a JG opens possibilities for all kinds of improvements in working conditions, hours of work, and types of paid employment. How many people currently work jobs they hate while secretly dreaming of a career in the arts; writing plays or novels, becoming a painter, dancer, actor, or musician? How many parents are forced to leave their children at daycare so they can pay the bills? How many would go back to school if they had spare time or income? How many would accept a smaller salary if they could work fewer hours and still have access to healthcare? How many would accept a pay cut if it meant they could work from home or in their communities? How many would accept a lower wage if it meant they could engage in fulfilling work like growing food, restoring wilderness habitat, building parks, or providing care to their friends and neighbors? More important than its potential for altering the quantity of employment and output, the real promise of the JG lies in its potential for transforming the quality of work. Above all, what makes the JG a powerful tool for achieving the goals of degrowth is the choice it provides individuals to opt out of monetary production.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter seeks a way out of the dilemma posed by the dual crises of unemployment and environmental decline. Keynes's theory of effective demand is a useful starting point for this task because it identifies the underlying causes of both crises. In a capitalist economy the object of production is money profits. Profits are necessary for employment and in the aggregate, the realization of profits requires continuous growth. So long as we remain confined to a system of monetary production economy, full employment requires exponential growth and we are stuck with the trade-off between social and ecological prosperity.

The promise of the JG is that it solves the problem of unemployment by transcending the constraints of monetary production. This opens the way not only to degrowth in terms of declining aggregate output, but perhaps more importantly, in terms of a fundamental transformation of the economy away from alienating and exploitative labor processes and towards a system in which work itself is an end and not simply a means to consumption.

CHAPTER 3

“NON-REFORMIST REFORM”

A PLATFORM FOR DEGROWTH

I. Introduction

From its formalization as an intellectual movement at the First International Conference on Degrowth (DG) in Paris 2008, DG has insisted that solutions to the triple-crisis of our time (social, economic, ecological) will not come in the guise of mainstream calls for *more or freer* markets (Sneider, Kallis and Marinez-Alier 2010).²¹ In contrast to the dominant narratives of tech-optimists, eco-modernists, and green-capitalists, DG argues there is no technological silver-bullet that will allow us to have our cake and eat it too, via “dematerialization,” or the decoupling of economic growth from material throughput (Jackson 2009; Kerschner, Wachter, et al. 2018; Polimeni, et al. n.d.; Wiedmann, et al. 2015). As laid out in the 2008 “Degrowth Declaration,” realistic solutions call into question fundamental institutions and cultural values of contemporary capitalism (Buch-Hansen 2018; Carlsson 2015; Kallis, Degrowth 2015; Latouche 2009; Muraca 2013; Sneider, Kallis and Marinez-Alier 2010; van Griethuysen 2012). Any genuine proposal for transition to a sustainable future must include the obvious and direct measures of: reducing production and consumption, working and earning less.²² Indeed, the definition of DG that emerged from the Paris Conference is, “an equitable down-scaling of

²¹ De-commodification, “exiting” the market, an expansion of commons, and a rejection of the logic and values of the marketplace are central themes of degrowth (D’Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015).

²² This applies to the global economy but acknowledges disparities between wealthy nations of the Global North and poorer countries in the Global South. A central tenet of degrowth is environmental justice and the recognition that the Global North must degrow to create space for poor countries in the Global South to grow.

production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions” (Sneider, Kallis and Martinez-Alier 2010, 512)

What DG has since demonstrated is that less can be more. An end to competitive mass production, hyper-consumption, and the rat-race of work-and-spend does not entail an end to prosperity. To the contrary, our ecologically unsustainable way of life has also shown itself to be socially destabilizing, spiritually bankrupt, and destructive of the kind of community that humans and the planet need to flourish (Jackson 2009; Schor 2010). A mounting body of empirical evidence overturns the economic dogma equating well-being with growth, and instead confirms The Easterlin Paradox (Easterlin 1974). Beyond minimal thresholds, rising income and consumption do not correlate with increased human happiness or social well-being, and in some cases the relationship is negative (Alexander 2012; Jackson 2010; Layard 2005; O’neill 2015; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Sekulova 2015; Schor 1998). The work done on this front validates the claim of DG that an end to growth does not entail an end to prosperity. Downshifting is compatible with the improvement of individual and social well-being.²³

²³ This was recognized by J.S. Mill in his 1848 chapter on the stationary state: “It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on. Even the industrial arts might be as earnestly and as successfully cultivated, with this sole difference, that instead of serving no purpose but the increase of wealth, industrial improvements would produce their legitimate effect, that of abridging labour. Hitherto it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being. They have enabled a greater population to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment, and an increased number of manufacturers and others to make fortunes” (Mill 2004, 692). This chapter suggests Mill might be claimed as an early advocate of DG. Indeed, DG explicitly embraces a stationary or steady-state economy as the final destination of transitional DG (Kerschner 2010).

Through its realistic appraisal of the crisis we face and its critique of conventional economic thinking, DG arrives at a call for a fundamental transformation of society (Research & Degrowth 2010). Thus far, this call has resulted in a proliferation of new ideas, techniques, strategies, policies and proposals for alternative ways of relating to one another and the planet. However, as members of the movement have begun to point out, despite its fertility in envisioning alternative futures, DG has achieved limited success in terms of delineating clear pathways from theory to practice. This suggests more focus now needs to be directed towards concrete policy proposals that outline pathways of transition to a sustainable future.

In a comprehensive analysis of DG policy proposals, Cosme et al. note, “the degrowth literature would benefit from authors adding more detail to the proposals endorsed, to avoid unclear messages... When constructing policy, it is crucial to clearly define the objective of the proposal and which concrete environmental or social issue it aims to address. If this is not done, there is the danger that degrowth proposals will remain ambiguous and confusing in the context of policy debates” (Cosme, Santos and O'Neill 2017, 330; Van den Bergh 2011).

In addition to the problem of ambiguity, Schneider et al. criticize existing DG proposals on the grounds of scale and scalability (Schneider, Kallis and Martinez-Alier 2010, 515). In many cases, small-scale or even individual approaches are proposed to address macro-level or global problems. The movement's core values of voluntary action, participatory democracy, and decentralization (D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2015) has led many to advocate grass-roots approaches that rely on *individuals* choosing to “exit” or “escape from the economy” (Fournier 2008). However, as Schneider et al. point out “small to medium-scale initiatives are taking place at fringe of the market economy” (Schneider, Kallis and Martinez-Alier 2010, 515). In some cases, these rely on the infrastructure of the market economy. In others, small-scale initiatives

merely offer “complements” to existing economic arrangements rather than challenging the system or presenting alternatives. This raises the question of “whether such initiatives will remain at the fringe of the economy or whether they provide real alternatives that can be scaled up and provide building blocks of a future degrowth society” (ibid.).

This criticism as well as the general observation that DG has struggled to move from theory to practice on a meaningful scale is echoed by Buch-Hansen who writes, “While countless initiatives that resonate with degrowth have emerged at the local level, the degrowth movement has, thus far had a negligible impact on the functioning of the wider economic system” (Buch-Hansen 2018, 157).

In sum, while degrowth may represent the only realistic²⁴ approach to the crises of the present, the movement has achieved only modest progress in achieving its vision. This is likely due in large part to the challenge degrowth presents to the interests of existing centers of political and economic power. As Kallis et al. put it, DG aims directly “clash with profits and the interests of those who hold more political and economic power” (Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier 2012, 177). Yet, the lack of progress also indicates a shortcoming of the movement itself. To this point degrowth has succeeded primarily in terms of “decolonizing the imaginary” (Latouche 2015; Muraca 2013) as well as “public debate from the idiom of economism” (Kallis 2015, 3). It has done this by generating and elaborating a multiplicity of potential alternatives that enable us to envision a future that departs radically from the current paradigm. But what is lacking is a clear roadmap showing how we move from here to there.²⁵ This points to a need to redirect

²⁴ In this context, DG is “realistic” in the sense that it recognizes that the radical threat posed by the ecological crisis demands equally radical transformations of existing social, political, and economic institutions. The mainstream is “unrealistic” in maintaining the view that no fundamental changes are required, e.g. we can continue to pursue endless growth.

intellectual energy from *envisioning* alternative futures to mapping pathways for their *realization*. This chapter explores how and why a Job Guarantee (JG) represents one such potential map or pathway for the realization of the radical social and economic transformations envisioned by DG.

In this context, the power of the JG comes from its potential to serve as a platform that both unlocks and supports the realization of a diverse array of the aims, strategies, proposals, and policies of the broader, “multi-dimensional” DG project. Indeed, a JG may not only serve to catalyze and support other approaches, it is argued that in many cases, proposed strategies are not possible unless the JG (or something like it) is in place. The previous chapter demonstrates how a JG may be implemented to directly achieve a socially sustainable reduction in economic growth and throughput. In this regard, the JG’s most important feature is that it decouples employment from growth, thus overcoming one of the most frequently cited obstacles to the entire DG movement (See also Alcott, 2013; Sekulova, Kallis, et al. 2013; Unti 2015, 2018).²⁶

In this chapter, a different feature of the JG is emphasized and elaborated. Here the promise of the JG flows from the unique space it occupies in the dialectical interplay of structure and agency. The JG sits between centralized, top-down (TD), government intervention that addresses macro-level constraints on one hand, and a de-centralized, bottom-up (BU) approach, on the other hand, that empowers workers vis-à-vis capital, while expanding the realm of

²⁵ This may be an example of what Weiss & Cattaneo refer to as a “knowledge gap” in the DG literature. In their sweeping analysis of peer-reviewed literature on DG between 2006 and 2015, Weiss & Cattaneo cite specific cases of this shortcoming, noting that certain proposals that “emphasize the incompatibility of degrowth and the market economy...elaborate little on concrete policy scenarios to foster a large-scale transition” (Weiss and Cattaneo 2017, 226).

²⁶ “Employment has been frequently put forward as a major challenge to the degrowth narrative” (Sekulova, Kallis, et al. 2013, 4).

individual choice at the micro-level. For this reason, it should appeal to both sides of the ongoing debate within the DG literature between TD and BU approaches (Cosme, Santos and O'Neill 2017; Sekulova, Kallis, et al. 2013). These contending approaches may be summarized as follows:

- TD Approach: insists that centralized policies relying on government control and state power are required to overcome structural constraints and path dependencies built into the institutional architecture of contemporary capitalism.²⁷
- BU Approach: insists that transformation must stem from the decentralization of power, increasing autonomy for individuals and communities, and that only voluntary individual initiative can achieve a sustainable and equitable transition.²⁸

The JG synthesizes these approaches, making use of the power of the central governments to expand the array of options available to individuals to “exit” capitalist production and to empower community autonomy through the re-localization of production and the strengthening of social connections. It is argued that in the absence of a JG, individual choices (especially for

²⁷ Cuba represents an extreme case of how top-down policy can be effective in quickly achieving a transition to a lower throughput society. However, the authoritarian nature of this transition puts it at odds with the key demand for democratization in the DG movement (Borowy 2013); (Sekulova, Kallis, et al. 2013). Kallis points out that Cuba is the only country in the world, according to the WWF, to “combine a high UNDP Human Development Index with a low ecological footprint.” And he insists, “there is no reason to assume that this success has been bought at the expense of democracy and individual freedom” (Kallis 2011, 875). More generally, examples of TD approaches include calls for governments to establish resource caps and regulations, impose taxes, create employment, address distribution, regulate advertising, promote renewable energy, eliminate harmful subsidies, implement campaign finance reform etc. (Cosme, Santos and O'Neill 2017, 328-330)

²⁸ There are wide variety of BU proposals. Most center ideas of voluntary downshifting, simplicity, or frugality, encouraging individuals to reduce consumption, production, and waste. Others emphasize sharing economies, the expansion of commons, the decentralization and deepening of democratic institutions, and the promotion of alternative political systems (Cosme, Santos and O'Neill 2017, 328-330).

those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy) are constrained by social and economic institutions that close off possibilities for voluntary down-shifting and BU change.

The organization of the chapter is as follows. Section two considers the how the relationship between structure and agency is manifest in both the roots of crisis we face and the debate between TD and BU advocates of the DG movement. The third section specifies and elaborates the unique position of the JG as a bridge between structure and agency that addresses the arguments of both TD and BU advocates. The fourth section demonstrates how and why this unique positioning of the JG enables it to serve as a platform for the realization of a variety of key proposals and strategies for achieving degrowth. Here the argument is not that the JG alone can achieve the diverse goals of DG, but rather that it can serve a vital function in catalyzing, supporting, or unlocking diverse pathways envisioned by the movement.

II. Structure and Agency: Top-down or Bottom-up

DG takes aim at the triple-crisis (social, economic, and ecological) of our time. In this context, the “economic crisis” should not be narrowly understood in terms of the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the ensuing Great Recession. By contrast, DG is generally consistent with the notion that “capitalism is the crisis,” or at least that as a historical process, it resembles an endless series of crises (Buch-Hansen 2018).²⁹ This means the “economic crisis” remains relevant even if the Great Recession appears to be subsiding.

²⁹ There is not absolute consensus on this view of capitalism in DG. Several prominent thinkers (Van den Bergh 2011; Lawn 2011; Ott 2012) attached to the movement do believe in that capitalism is compatible with a sustainable future (see the 2011 exchange between van den Bergh and Kallis in the *Journal of Cleaner Production*). As another example, Kallis et al. challenge the argument of steady-state economists like Lawn who argue that a smooth degrowth transition to a SSE is attainable under capitalism. Lawn’s position is that, given government imposed environmental limits, the market allocation via price signals is the best tool for smooth,

The economic crisis is closely linked to the social crisis. Under this heading fall a number of interrelated phenomena including: (i) growing disparities of income and wealth, (ii) the destruction of traditional social-bonds via the extension of market values into ever more aspects of human existence (iii) the ongoing enclosure of commons in the forms of knowledge, public goods, and ecosystem services, dispossessing individuals and communities of autonomy (iv) the disappearance of community and attendant relations of reciprocity, and (v) the atomization and alienation of individuals increasingly subject to competition, market relations, and a strict routine of work and spend.³⁰

Finally, the ecological crisis highlights the urgency of DG. Even if existing social and economic institutions are somehow exonerated from their role in the above mentioned crises, there is no doubt that the current economic system directly threatens clearly defined ecological and planetary boundaries (O'Neill, et al. 2018; Magdoff and Foster 2011; Rockström, et al. 2009). If the triple crisis is to be tackled, it is crucial to begin with an understanding of its causes. This section focuses specifically on the causes of the ecological crisis.

Identifying the drivers of the ecological crisis is necessary if the crisis is to be thwarted and effective policy measures are to be designed and implemented. Most important for present

equilibrium-inducing transition. Kallis et al. contend that this position neglects actually experienced history of capitalism: “the history of capitalism is one of dramatic ups and downs. Periods of unprecedented growth are followed by catastrophic crises of value destruction (including by war) clearing the ground for fresh accumulation” (Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier 2012, 177; Harvey 2010). A more general argument advanced is that capitalism must either grow or collapse. Degrowth that relieves pressure on the environment is an economic possibility under capitalism, but not one that is socially sustainable. The name for degrowth under capitalism is “depression” (Blauwhof 2012; Klitgaard and Krall 2012; R. Smith, 2010).

³⁰ Much of this stems from the “culturalist” tradition of DG which has roots in economic anthropology, a criticism of mainstream economic assumptions, and of the neocolonial bent of western “development” models. In this vein, key philosophical threads of the movement are traced to the works of Karly Polanyi, Andre Gorz, Ivan Illich, and Cornelius Castoriadis.

purposes is identifying whether the ecological crisis stems primarily from macro-level, social and economic structures, or alternatively from micro-level factors such as human nature or given consumer preferences. This, in turn, should shape and direct the construction and implementation of policy.

There are a wide variety of competing explanations for our current environmental predicament. To simplify, these can be divided into two camps differentiated by their roots in contending social ontologies emphasizing either the primacy of individual agency or that of social structures. This basic difference in framing explanations of the crisis leads, in turn, to fundamentally divergent conceptions of how the crisis can and should be addressed. The tension created by these contending frameworks manifests itself in the DG discourse as an unresolved debate between TD and BU pathways of transition (Boillat, Gerber and Funez-Monzonte 2012; Cosme, Santos and O'Neill 2017; Sekulova, Kallis, et al. 2013; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017).

The DG movement in identifying itself with a critique of, and alternative to, mainstream economics implicitly sides with a structuralist social ontology countering the extreme methodological individualism at the core of neoclassical theory. This is manifest in DG's explicit rejection of utilitarianism (Romano 2015, 21) and mainstream arguments which hold that price adjustments in the free market will: (1) bring about an optimal allocation of society's resources that takes into account social welfare and environmental limits, and (2) spur the technological innovations that will enable us avoid any serious changes to the economic and social status quo (Hawken, Lovins and Lovins 1999; Simon 1981; Schor 2010, 72 -73). From this perspective, rational economic agents autonomously pursuing their self-interest via the exercise of free choice will deliver us from ecological collapse. The explanation of our current predicament is that "artificial" interference with the "natural" proliferation of markets has

hindered the commodification of everything, pre-empting the optimal allocation of resources that will result when the market encompasses all.

Despite the dominance of neoliberal policy since the 1970s, forms of public goods, commons, and non-market activity continue to evade enclosure. And goods and services that have not been assigned property rights and money values remain *external* to the market, leading to distorted price signals, misallocations and ultimately environmental problems. While those in DG, view processes like commodification, the extension of markets, and the logic of profit as drivers of ecological crisis (K. Polanyi 2001; Blauwhof 2012; Kallis, Degrowth 2015; Magdoff and Foster 2011; Smith 2010; Sekulova, Kallis, et al. 2013). Neoclassicals view the same processes as the solution. Specifically, the *internalization* (i.e. commodification) of all resources is viewed as necessary for prices to serve as accurate signals to market actors. One function of accurate price signals is to shift resources into appropriate channels of innovation that will produce the technology needed to overcome the contradiction between economic growth and environmental limits.³¹ It is argued this will lead to the dematerialization of growth, allowing capitalist accumulation and growth to continue unabated despite environmental limits.

Overall the DG movement identifies ceaseless economic growth as the root cause of the ecological crisis. This in turn begs questions about the drivers of growth and the nature of capitalism. Most (although not all) within DG conclude capitalism of any variety entails a

³¹ According to neoclassical economics “if the full costs of production were internalized to the productive process, an optimal number of goods and services would be produced and consumed... [S]ocial utility will be maximized when markets are free and the prices of commodities are correct, because then rational consumers can be left alone in the marketplace to satisfy their private preferences in an optimal way, within the confines of a given income... If the overconsumption of certain commodities is causing problems of some sort, however, this must be because the costs of production are not fully internalized” (Alexander 2012, 2-3; Samuelson 1938; Mankiw 2015).

growth imperative. And beyond simply the quantitative imperative of capitalist growth, there is an additional criticism of the qualitative nature capitalist production that highlights the ways in which the logic of profit leads to the degradation of humans and the environment.

Although DG's explicit critique of neoclassical economics points to a structuralist social ontology, the movement is a diverse coming together of perspectives that welcomes dialogue and debate. And in many cases, those identified with the movement lean in the direction of individual agency. This is at least implicitly the view of a large contingent that insists on individual, autonomous, and *voluntary* pathways of transition (Elgin 2010; Elgin 2013; Deriu 2012; Muraca 2013; Ott 2012). Indeed, in terms of foundational principles and overarching themes the DG discourse has an anti-state/anti-centralization bent. By contrast, it promotes ideals of direct, participatory democracy, de-centralization, self-direction, horizontalism, and autonomy.

Despite these core themes, comprehensive analysis of degrowth policy proposals reveals that a majority actually call for TD initiatives that require some direct control by governments. Overall, these proposals acknowledge the need for high levels of state intervention. Cosme et al. who conduct the analysis note that this marks a contradiction in the discourse (Cosme, Santos and O'Neill 2017, 327).

The case of Cuba's rapid transformation following the collapse of the Soviet Union has become a focal point of this tension. While some look to Cuba as an example of how radical changes can be achieved quickly, others disparage the Cuban model as fundamentally at odds with DG due to its authoritarian foundations (Boillat, Gerber and Funez-Monzonte 2012; Borowy 2013; Sekulova, Kallis, et al. 2013). For instance, while Sekulova et al., admit that Cuba offers an example of how a society can rapidly transition to lower levels of energy use and

throughput, they also state that Cuba “is certainly not an example of sustainable degrowth in practice due to its top-down, authoritarian implementation” (2013, 3).

At the center of all these controversies in the DG literature is a contradiction between its fundamentally structuralist ontological orientation when diagnosing the crisis, and its tacit commitment to the primacy of individual agency when it comes to addressing it. This commitment to agency is expressed through core principles of voluntary simplicity, autonomy, decentralization, and an individualistic politics of escape. As indications of the movement’s structuralist orientation consider the following questions:

- “If economic growth does not increase well-being, and is uneconomical and anti-ecological, what is it that sustains it as a primary national objective?” (Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier 2012, 178)
- “If money doesn’t make us happy, why do we act as if it does?” (Ahuvia 2008)
- If more consumption doesn’t improve wellbeing, why do we continue to pursue higher levels of consumption? (J. Schor 1998)
- If it’s not fulfilling, “why does the global consumer class consume so much? Are we not free to step out of the rate race and simply consume less?” (Alexander 2012, 1-2)

These questions raised again and again in the literature, as well as the answers presented, point to structural forces, institutions, systemic economic requirements, social norms, and cultural values that generate path dependencies and lock us into ways of living which are clearly uneconomic, inhumane, and unsustainable.³² Acknowledgement of these forces is precisely what leads to the call for radical transformations of existing social, political, and economic institutions. However,

³² For example, “social, economic, and political structures can ‘lock’ people into high consumption, energy-intensive lifestyles even when they desire a ‘simpler life’ of reduced or restrained consumption” (Alexander 2012, 3).

many of the same calls cling to BU approaches that rely on individuals voluntarily and spontaneously rejecting hegemonic social structures and adopting radical lifestyle changes on a massive scale.

It should be noted that those advocating BU approaches are subject to the same charges of elitism and anti-egalitarianism that they warn about with regard to TD “technocratic” policies. Many of the proposed forms of individual “down-shifting” involve or require considerable resources—such as wealth, social capital, and economic security—that are simply not available to everyone, least of all poor and working people. Kallis et al. advance this criticism pointing out that many who have downshifted within the existing system are “people who had a choice between simplicity and meaningless affluence,” while others face a much graver choice, or none at all (Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier 2012, 174).

In this sense, calls for BU approaches, contradict the acknowledged structural constraints that impinge upon the ability of individuals to voluntarily opt out of the existing paradigm. Forces larger and more powerful than individuals (especially those at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy) enforce compliance with existing norms through subtle and direct forms of domination. For example, a key element of the voluntary simplicity model involves the choice to exchange money for time, reducing hours of paid employment and thus income, consumption and throughput. Additional leisure time gained via the exchange allows individuals to develop new skills, strengthen social bonds, cultivate community, increase civic engagement and participate in self-provisioning. The problem is, all of this assumes the choice to exchange (what must be surplus) income for time is an option.

But for many, no such choice exists. First, because they lack excess income and are trapped in an existing pattern of work by sheer economic necessity, insecurity, or debt. Second,

because workers are often are not in a position to make demands of their employers. Third, even when that is an option, it may entail costs such as lost benefits or stigmatization among fellow workers or employers. Access to healthcare currently prevents many who desire additional free time from shifting to a part-time schedule or retiring. These are only the most urgent, directly felt aspects of structural “lock-in.” Others are less obvious to individuals, but nonetheless generate powerful influences and dire consequences. One specific example involves consumption patterns.

A massive literature on the topic shows that individuals are not making “rational choices” according to standard economic models.³³ Instead of serving functional or material needs, consumption increasingly serves a symbolic, communicative, social ends (Baudrillard 1998; Bourdieu 1984; Jackson 2005; Hamilton 2010; Hirsch 1976; Schor 1998; Veblen 1899). For those who exceed a threshold of basic needs, consumption patterns and particular goods are used to create and re-create social identity (Hamilton 2010). Commodities signify our social position, communicate our values, and identify us as members of this or that affinity group. As Jackson puts it, “We consume in order to identify ourselves with a social group, to position ourselves within that group, to distinguish ourselves with respect to other social groups, to communicate allegiance to certain ideals, and to differentiate ourselves from certain other ideals” (Jackson 2005, 31).

In this case, the choice to reduce one’s consumption of any particular good is not merely a matter of material austerity. It can have powerful and damaging social effects in a cultural

³³ See Jackson for a concise summary of the neoclassical theory of consumption detailing how the starting assumption of insatiable wants leads directly to the view that, “the more we consume (in economic terms) the better off we are.” This, in turn, underpins economic emphasis on GDP and growth (2005, 21-23).

framework that places such a high emphasis on the symbolic significance and ritualistic display. A reduction of consumption in this context may impact one's place or even acceptance within a particular group and may result in loss of identity or a diminished sense of self-worth. As Scheider et al. note this means, "Environmental appeals to change consumption behavior implicitly ask people not merely to change their behavior but change their sense of personal identity" (Scheider, Kallis and Marinéz-Alier 2010, 514).

An enlightened critic of consumer culture may be able to identify these forces at play and even transcend them, to a degree, by establishing like-minded, anti-consumerist, peer groups who deliberately socialize and communicate in ways that evade the efforts of mass marketing and the sway dominant culture. Appeals to individuals to abandon consumer culture constitute a major thread of DG strategy, e.g. voluntary simplicity (Elgin 2010), downshifting (J. Schor 1998) eco-communities (Cattaneo and Galvada 2010), co-housing (Lietaert 2010), and nowtopians (Carlsson 2008). However, this points back to problems of privilege, exclusivity, and scale. Inoculating oneself to the ubiquitous advances of consumer culture, if possible at all, is likely to be more feasible for those with more resources, access to education, and the time to develop a nuanced cultural critique as well as an understanding of the sophisticated ways in which marketing works on our desires and insecurities.

Finally, there are the ways in which a voluntary reduction in consumption runs into macroeconomic constraints. If, as proposed, reduced consumption is adopted on a wide enough scale to have a meaningful impact on the environment, it would likely result in an economic crisis directly threatening employment, income, and economic security across society. It is surprising how many economists appear to overlook this. It is again the problem of effective

demand and the paradoxical nature of a capitalist economy which demands that we all keep using things up fast enough to keep ourselves employed.

In sum there is contradictory gulf between the structuralist ontology of the DG discourse on one hand, and its call for BU voluntary changes initiated by individuals on the other. Here the problem emerges as a catch-22: either an insignificant number of individuals downshift thus precluding systemic change, or a significant number downshift leading to economic collapse. As many have noted, given capitalism, voluntary DG is not an option, “capitalist economies can therefore either grow or collapse: they can never degrow voluntarily” (Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier 2012) see also (Blauwhof 2012); (Magdoff and Foster 2011); (Smith 2010).

The way out of this trap is not the abandonment of the founding democratic, voluntary, principles of DG, and their replacement by an authoritarian regime of TD policies that diminish the space for individual autonomy and social deliberation. Rather it is some synthetic hybrid of both TD and BU strategies that reinforce one another. As Cosme et al. explain TD and BU approaches need not be mutually exclusive, “some proposals classified as top-down may have the goal of indirectly driving bottom-up action. An example is the proposal to reduce working hours... Although many people might prefer to work fewer hours this can only happen if institutions are reformed to give them this choice” (2017, 327). Muraca makes a similar point arguing, “the path towards a more sufficient sober life-style requires a radical change in institutional and social conditions if it is to be a feasible path for more than a few ascetic heroes” (2013, 153).

Such a hybrid model must take account of the risks and practical difficulties of relying on centralized power of governments to achieve democratic and socially equitable goals. Indeed, it is reasonable to expect governments like those in the U.S. today, to make every effort to prevent

DG as it is a direct threat to the economic interests they serve (Speth 2012). At the same time, a synthetic approach must acknowledge the limitations of a purely BU approach that depends on the spontaneous cohesion of increasingly atomized individuals around voluntary actions that directly oppose the dominant norms and institutions that shape their “imaginary” and lived existence. Here a critical weakness of the BU approach is the amount of time it will take for such a grass-roots mobilization to reach a scale large enough to achieve system-wide transformation. For this reason, Kallis et al. raise the question whether bottom-up social processes are “up to the scale and urgency of the challenge” (Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier 2012, 178).

A synthetic approach actually must confront the challenges presented by both BU and TD approaches at the same time. After all, truly democratic initiatives that make use of centralized government power will only materialize as the result of BU political pressure. And, once adopted, they must rely on continuous BU pressure to restrain the dangerous tendency for centralized power to steer society away from democratic goals. But if a synthetic policy is subject to the *difficulties* of both approaches it can also claim the *advantages* of both. And the scope, scale, and speed, of the transformation required to face the ecological crisis demand as much.

II. Non-Reformist Reform: Top-Down *and* Bottom-UP

The previous section highlights a contradiction that runs throughout the DG movement between its fundamentally structuralist interpretation of crisis, and the individualistic politics that inform its solutions. This, in turn, creates tensions regarding both the perceived compatibility (or incompatibility) of capitalism with DG, and between advocates of TD versus BU strategies for transformation. Here it is argued that a JG presents a hybrid or synthetic approach that resolves these contradictions and addresses the arguments and concerns of both TD and BU advocates. In

this sense, it is proposed that a JG represents Gorz's concept of "non-reformist reform" (Gorz 1967).

Muraca, quoting from Gorz, summarizes this concept as follows: "while a reformist reform subordinates its objective to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system, a non-reformist reform implies a modification of relations of power and implies structural reforms. It 'is conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands'" (2013, 166). Citing Nancy Frazer, Muraca elaborates writing that non-reformist reforms, represent a political strategy "that, by still adopting existing frameworks of representation concerning patterns of recognition and redistribution, nevertheless 'set in motion a trajectory of change in which more radical reforms become practicable over time [...] By altering the terrain upon which later struggles will be waged, non-reformist reforms expand the set of feasible options for future reform. Over time their cumulative effect could be to transform underlying structures'" (ibid.).

Occupying this unique position as a non-reformist reform between TD and BU approaches, lends the JG a special capacity to bring together divergent themes and strategies of DG under a single platform. This is not to propose a silver bullet. The argument is not that the JG is the only path to DG. Rather the argument is that due to its amphibious quality, a JG represents one possible rallying point or lever for the eclectic aims and strategies of DG.

The JG was not conceived as a tool for addressing environmental concerns. Its roots are in Keynes's *General Theory* (1936) and post Keynesian elaborations on Keynes's vision. Specifically, an employer of last resort or JG was designed to address what Keynes identified as an essential flaw of capitalism: the failure to provide for full employment. A JG is the most

effective and direct solution for this problem as it immediately eliminates involuntary unemployment and ties government spending directly to jobs.

Eliminating unemployment also serves to address broader aspects of the economic and social crises identified by DG. However, it does not address the ecological crisis. Indeed, a JG as traditionally envisioned, will stimulate aggregate demand, growth, and thereby throughput (Minsky 1968; Mithell 1998; Wray 1998). In other words, it will likely exacerbate the ecological crisis.

However, a JG need not be an anti-ecological motor of growth. To the contrary, a JG contains in it the seeds for a radical transformation of the economy that leads to a reduction of production and consumption while simultaneously overcoming a central critique of DG—that it will generate unemployment. To reconfigure the JG from a policy aimed exclusively at full employment, to one that can be used to degrow the economy requires several modifications to traditional proposals (Unti 2018).

The first attempts to alter the JG to account for the environment resemble calls for a green New Deal. Under Forstater’s “green jobs” model, JG workers would be employed in the construction of green infrastructure, renewable energy, retro-fitting existing buildings to improve efficiency, tree-planting, habitat restoration and so forth (Forstater 2003, 2004, 2005). Such models seek to minimize the negative environmental impacts of additional employment and growth stimulated by the program.

By contrast, the DGJG model outlined by Unti, places ecological goals on an equal footing with full employment and proposes a framework for utilizing the JG to reduce production and consumption. There are three conditions required for DG under the proposal: (1) JG workers are paid a lower wage than private sector workers, (2) JG work is less productive than private

sector work, and (3) the JG sector grows as a share of aggregate employment over time (Unti 2018). These are arranged from least to most radical in terms of their departure from the original proposals.

The lower wage is part of the original proposal with the government effectively establishing a new minimum wage by determining the money value of labor in the JG sector. The idea that workers in the JG will be less productive than those in the private sector follows from the idea that the JG will be hiring “off the bottom” of the labor market (Wray 1998, 139). In the DG model however, low or reduced labor-productivity becomes a policy goal.³⁴ Productivity in this context, specifically refers to output per worker per unit of time. The requirement for DG is that workers in the JG sector produce less output per unit of time than their counterparts in the private sector. As a policy goal, reduced labor productivity is problematic for a number of reasons. In particular, there is the problem of how to measure productivity. This matter is discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. Despite these problems there is a simple way to achieve reduced productivity in practice: reduce the pace of production, the length of the working day, or both. Each of these is entirely compatible with, if not explicitly advocated for, in numerous DG proposals (Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier 2012, 176; Alexander 2012; Jackson 2009; Norgard 2013; Schor 2010; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017; Cosme, Santos and O'Neill 2017).

The final modification, that the JG grows as a share of total employment over time, represents the most radical departure from original JG proposals. With this modification, the

³⁴ Norgard argues for shifting the economy from higher to lower labor-productivity as a means of achieving DG and increasing happiness (Norgard 2013). Sekulova et al. argue “if labor becomes less productive in physical output, but ‘more productive’ in meaningfulness conviviality and autonomy, the net effect of the change could be positive for well-being and energy saving” (Sekulova, Kallis, et al. 2013, 4)

policy becomes a *non-reformist reform*. Following the logic of what has been laid out, if (1) JG work is paid less than private sector work, (2) JG work is less productive than private sector work, (3) JG work grows as a share of total employment, then over time the rate of growth of output will continuously fall until it declines.³⁵ This implies that over time private (capitalist) sector employment will shrink and public (JG) sector employment will grow. In other words, the path to DG leads away from capitalism. Hence the DGJG is a non-reformist reform that can be implemented within the existing system, but nonetheless set in motion a process of radically transforming it.

Whether or not this will be socially acceptable will depend heavily on the details of the organization, administration, and implementation of the JG. But here is the crucial point. For the JG to grow as share of employment, individuals must voluntarily choose JG work over higher-wage work in the private sector. That is, they must choose to downshift.³⁶ This means that the JG must offer non-monetary benefits that outweigh the opportunity cost of private sector wages. For example, such benefits may come in the form of more meaningful work, improved working-conditions, and reduced hours (Unti 2018).

For this model to succeed in gaining and retaining popular support, the administration of the JG should be highly de-centralized. The role of the state is first and foremost to finance the

³⁵ This is of course subject to the critique that output as measured by GDP is not a primary target of DG and that GDP suffers from a variety of setbacks that make it inadequate for achieving goals related to the environment or human well-being. As van den Bergh argues, it is crucial to account for the composition of production and consumption and GDP offers nothing on this front (Van den Bergh 2011). This is valid and in practice composition should be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, the historical correlation of GDP growth with material throughput and harmful emissions remains strong. Given the urgency to act, the complexity of disaggregating output, and the empirical evidence, a reduction of output as measured by GDP seems a sufficient if not necessary condition for saving the planet.

³⁶ This is in keeping with core value of direct participatory democracy in the DG movement.

program. Additionally, government should establish guidelines concerning environmental caps/regulations, working conditions, and see to it that locally administered programs adhere to those guidelines (i.e. enforcing the reduced work week, maintaining the wage and benefits package, and encouraging low-throughput employment and methods of production).

Administration of the JG should otherwise be undertaken at a community level,³⁷ and involve a high degree of social deliberation with community members democratically determining what kinds of employment will meet the needs of the community, provide meaningful work, minimize throughput, and maintain the health of local ecosystems. Management of project proposals, monitoring of work, and the keeping of records should also be carried out at a local level. This will involve significant amounts of labor providing employment to those who wish to serve administrative functions.

Overall the aim of the DGJG is to tap the strengths of both centralized TD policy and grass-roots BU approaches. In this case, the key strengths of the central government are: (1) the ability to finance the JG (2) the ability to universally ensure access to employment and economic security, (3) the ability to initiate economy-wide policy and (4) to encourage rapid institutional change.

Regarding affordability, JG proponents have argued for the feasibility of a JG via cost estimates—taking note of the estimated wage bill as well as cost savings associated with reduced

³⁷ “Proponents argue that a JG should be financed by a national government that spends in its own currency under flexible exchange rates, since such a government can always afford to provide an inelastic demand for labor at a base wage. This does not mean, however, that the program should be necessarily run by a federal government; indeed, jobs programs in India and Argentina have been quite decentralized in their operations. Further, jobs do not necessarily have to be provided by the government sector; for instance the non-profit sector will generally have intimate knowledge regarding community needs while often being short of available workers (or funds to hire workers) to meet these needs” (Fullwiler 2012, 1; Tcherneva 2012).

spending on unemployment insurance, welfare, crime, public health and other costs linked to involuntary unemployment. These estimates show that traditional calls for a JG are quite feasible given existing budgets in nations like the US. Several estimates of the cost of a traditional JG proposal put total expenses at less than 1 percent of GDP for the US (Wray 1998). Perhaps more importantly, JG proponents frequently ground the policy in an understanding of modern money theory (MMT), which details why a sovereign currency issuing nation with a flexible exchange rate, can always afford a JG (Wray 1998, 2012).

The universality of the JG is essential in terms of it serving as a platform, catalyst, and prerequisite for other DG proposals. Most proposals call on individuals to choose to downshift or adopt dramatic lifestyle changes. In nearly every case, this entails exchanging income for time. Proposals also call for various degrees of exiting the money economy. The problem, as noted, is that this is not a viable choice for many people because it entails a risk of lost employment and associated economic security. With a JG in place, however, the choice becomes universally viable. The door is immediately thrown open to everyone to downshift and exit monetary production without jeopardizing economic security.

III. A Platform for Degrowth

The most obvious criticism of BU approaches to DG is that they require individuals making significant lifestyle changes that not only run against the grain of hegemonic social norms but entail a risk of economic insecurity. In many cases, this means BU strategies are not actually equitable because they are open only to privileged groups.³⁸ For the same reason they might not actually represent valid “bottom-up” strategies. Their exclusivity also points to

³⁸ If such approaches are only viable for an exclusive group with high economic security, excess income, wealth or other resources, then perhaps this is a case of mis-categorization. The label “bottom-up” is indeed ironic if the approach is unavailable to those on the bottom.

problems of scalability and urgency. This is not to suggest these approaches should be abandoned. To the contrary, they represent extremely important elements of DG. It does, however, suggest that there are pre-requisites to such strategies. Changes must be made to current economic arrangements and new institutions must be established that provide individuals with a legitimate choice to downshift or opt out of capitalist production.

The JG (as outlined above) is one possible pre-requisite serving this vital function. In this role, the purpose of the JG is not itself to achieve DG. Instead, it serves as a broad platform for the pursuit of numerous other DG strategies. The role that JG can play in supporting these other strategies many and diverse. It is not the case that every possible DG strategy will be aided by a JG. However, it is argued that at a minimum the JG is compatible with every other approach. In most cases, the JG can at least serve a supporting role. In other cases, it is clear how and why a JG may be used to initiate or catalyze other DG strategies. Finally, in several cases it is argued that the JG or something like it is necessary to make specific DG proposals possible, given existing social, economic, and political constraints.

This section consists of two parts. The first is to demonstrate why DG “should embrace the JG,” providing an affirmative answer Alcott’s (2013) question. The reasoning is that the JG is consistent with both the broad philosophical foundations of the movement as well as its specific policy goals. The second part considers a number of existing DG proposals and demonstrates how and why a JG can serve as platform, catalyst, or pre-requisite for each.

The broad philosophical aims of DG are spelled out in the 2008 Degrowth Declaration published in a 2010 special issue of the *Journal of Cleaner Production* (Research & Degrowth 2010, 523-524) as well as the accompanying introductory essay to the same issue from Schneider et al. (2010, 511-518). Combined, these texts insist that DG is not confined to the ecological

problems associated with the dogma of economic growth. Equally important are issues of justice, equality, human well-being, social sustainability and democracy. Further, in their analysis of proposals for action Cosme et al. (2017, 326), identify three central goals of DG: (1) Reduce environmental impacts; (2) Redistribute Income and Wealth; (3) Promote transition from a materialistic to a convivial and participatory society.

The JG as originally proposed was specifically intended to address issues of social sustainability and justice, well-being, and equality. The basic premise of the JG is that in a monetary economy, where it takes money to eat, and a job to get money, employment ought to be a human right. The same logic stands behind the inclusion of the “right to work” in the UN’s 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, and MLK’s famous statement, “To deny a man a job is to say that a man has no right to exist.” Given capitalism’s proven inability to provide for full employment, the only way to ensure this right is through a universal JG. The guarantee of employment alone will not solve all of the disparities and injustices that capitalism produces. However, it is a significant step in the right direction.

One of the most overlooked features of the JG is the impact that it will have on workers across the board. A JG not only serves those who cannot find employment in the private sector. It improves the bargaining positioning of labor universally. As Kalecki puts it, full employment reduces the disciplinary power of “the sack” (Kalecki 1943). Moreover, a JG will put pressure on private sector employers to provide wages, benefits, and working conditions at least on par with those of the JG. This means that particularly onerous jobs will have to compensate workers accordingly. A JG may also go a long way in challenging the totalitarian organization of the modern workplace by providing workers with an opportunity to walk away. If JG labor processes are organized democratically at the community level, this will further pressure private

employers to adopt more democratic modes of workplace governance. The people who will benefit most from a JG are those currently on the bottom of society; involuntarily unemployed or working the worst, lowest-wage jobs. In sum, by provisioning economic security, empowering the least well-off, improving working conditions throughout the economy, and re-politicizing jobs, a JG serves the aims of justice, equality, and democracy.

The JG is also consistent with the three policy goals identified by Cosme et al. (2017). At a basic level JG work can be directed to sustainability through a “green-jobs” approach. In its more radical form, a JG can be used to directly pursue reductions in production and consumption. In its radical form, as a non-reformist reform it also provides a transitional pathway out of capitalism. This pathway is in keeping with the voluntary, democratic, and autonomous principles of DG because it does not force anyone to abandon capitalism. Instead it provides a universal and viable choice to any individual seeking a way out. In so doing, it can also serve as a platform, catalyst, and prerequisite for an array of divergent DG proposals.

Catalyst, Precondition, Platform

This paper has already examined how and why calls for voluntary simplicity, frugality or downshifting may not represent viable pathways for economy-wide transition without something like a JG in place. This criticism stems from recognition that many people are currently living lives of such economic precarity that they have no choice to trade money for time. In this case, a JG (or something like it) becomes a prerequisite. Through its provision of economic security, the JG transforms voluntary simplicity into a viable, universal, and therefore scalable DG strategy. However, voluntary simplicity is not the only strategy that a JG supports. A JG can be usefully applied to the initiation, acceleration, and perpetuation of a number of DG proposals including:

Reduced Hours, Re-Localization and community development, Sharing Economies, Care and de-commodification.

Reduced Hours

Reducing the work week is one of the most popular proposals within the DG movement and seems to be one of the most simple and obvious ways of achieving the mutual aims of improved well-being and reduced environmental impact. If we all work fewer hours, then production and throughput decrease. With additional leisure time, people will have more time to develop relationships, engage in civil society, learn new skills, volunteer, pursue education, exercise, and enjoy life (Schor 2010, 102). Overall, the aim is to exchange traditional throughput-intensive forms satisfaction via consumption, for time-intensive forms of satisfaction via learning, socializing, community engagement, and play.

While a JG is not a necessary policy for achieving reduced hours, it may serve as a useful pathway for that goal. As proposed, a DG JG will require reduced productivity and the easiest way to achieve this is to reduce hours of work. If for example, a JG is implemented as a 30-hour workweek then even if JG workers produce as much per unit of time as their counterparts in the private sector, the JG sector still achieves reduced productivity. Assuming a JG is politically attainable, it may be easier to implement a 30-hour week within the JG, than to impose it as a nation-wide standard. Nonetheless, a 30-hour week in the JG is likely to result in pressure on private sector employers to make work-time concessions to their employees. Moreover, a shorter work week in the JG is likely to be one of the most significant non-monetary benefits of the JG that will help to retain JG workers over the cycle ensuring that the JG grows as a share of aggregate employment. In any case, if the private sector matches reduced hours this achieves the same aim of reducing overall production.

Finally, the JG will achieve a central goal of DG in terms of politicizing or re-politicizing the economy. As Alcott (2013) notes, a JG is an important step in this re-politicization. Politicizing jobs and establishing employment as a right is crucial step toward democracy and autonomy and away from heteronomy with respect to economic institutions.

Re-Localize

The localization of the economy serves the aims of DG on a number of fronts. By fostering face-to-face relationships, community, trust, cooperation, and relations of reciprocity, re-localizing economic activity helps reverse the damage done to the social fabric by the logic and values of global capital. Reducing the social and spatial distance between those interacting in relations of production and consumption serves to humanize the economy. When producers know the consumers of their products, they experience a sense of accountability. Similarly, when consumers live in proximity with producers and production, they develop an understanding of methods, environmental impacts, working conditions, etc. This means that consumers will be better situated to make informed choices, in turn, pressuring producers to comply with community standards. Perhaps the most obvious advantage of localizing production and consumption is the massive reduction of energy use and emissions associated with reduced transport.

A JG can and should be used to re-localize the economy. Administered at a community level the JG will focus on employing members of the community in ways that serve the community. This means local work, reduced commutes, and reduced energy consumption in the transportation of goods and services. As an example, the JG might undertake local food production via community farms and gardens. This will provide meaningful work, healthy food, and curtail energy use in terms of transport, processing, and refrigeration.

Another example might be JG public arts and entertainment via music, poetry readings, dance, and theater. Here again the JG fulfills multiple functions, providing meaningful-enjoyable work, fostering community, and creating opportunities for public consumption to replace high throughput private consumption. For instance, rather than everyone purchasing a television to plug-in and watch at home, community members can walk to the local theater. It should be noted that this kind of public consumption is likely harmful to the health of a capitalist economy via its impacts on aggregate demand, profits, and employment. Given capitalism, it is desirable that everyone purchases a television (and better yet a new model each year) because it helps to fuel sales and jobs. Thus, public consumption poses a threat to employment. In this case, that threat is pre-empted by a JG.

Care

Speth (2012) argues that we must create a new economy that makes sustaining people, communities, and the environment the objective of economic activity. This contrasts with the existing system which views such goals as the by-products of market success and growth. Speth notes if there is a watchword for this new economy that “watchword is caring: caring for each other, the natural world, and the future” (Speth 2012, 183).

Care is also positioned as part of the struggle for social justice and equality in the DG discourse. Care work, central to social and economic reproduction, is often unpaid, invisible, and undervalued. As non-market activity it has no money value and therefore, according to economics no value at all. This is a legacy of patriarchy, which by denying wages to a class of work traditionally reserved for women, ensures their dependence and subservience to male breadwinners (Picchio 2003). It is also a reflection economics’ “productivism” which values

only the activity recorded in market transactions while ignoring all the unrecorded work which actually make market transactions possible (D'Alisa, Deriu and Demaria 2015, 63-66).

The JG can be used to increase our commitment to care, while addressing issues of equity and justice. Care work such as raising children, maintaining a household, caring for the elderly and infirm, preparing food, and serving as a companion or assistant to those in need, are precisely the kinds of activities that JG workers should perform in a DG model. By providing a wage for such work, the JG will help to break the stigma, dependence, and inequity traditionally associated with these roles. Moreover, a JG can be used to halt the destructive commodification of care work which has begun under neoliberalism.

The commodification of care work is destructive because it reduces what are deeply personal, emotional, and human relations to instrumental market transactions. Instead of parents raising their own children, a daycare center or professional baby-sitter receives a paycheck to perform the work. This changes the nature of caregiving and removes from the equation deep emotional connection. As Sandel explains, markets are not neutral conveyors of goods and services. To the contrary markets, “mark” goods and express or change our attitudes towards them. “When we decide that certain goods may be bought and sold, we decide, at least implicitly, that it is appropriate to treat them as commodities, as instruments of profit and use?” (Sandel 2012). Under a JG, parents would receive wages to raise their own children. Similarly, family members could be paid to take care of their aging parents and grandparents rather than sending them off to a nursing home.

In sum, a JG will re-localize care and build a more robust network of care-giving that relies on personal bonds and community embeddedness to ensure quality. By ensuring care workers are paid, a JG should increase the overall amount of care in absolute terms and as a

share total employment. It is crucial that care work becomes a central part of a DG economy because it provides meaningful work, helps to cultivate social bonds, serves a vital need in every community and requires low levels of throughput.

Sharing

Next to reduced hours the simplest, most obvious, and direct way of achieving reduced production and consumption, is to pursue institutions that expand opportunities for sharing. Employing Boulding's framework for welfare, sharing allows us to increase the amount of satisfaction we receive from the existing capital stock while minimizing both consumption and production. In addition to its obvious impact on throughput, sharing has tremendous potential to build and strengthen community bonds. But what exactly is meant by sharing? And if it's so wonderful why don't we do it now?

With the aims of DG in mind, sharing in every possible form ought to be explored. This may include co-housing, work-sharing, expansion of commons, and public goods. On a more basic level, we can look to the existing institution of the library to understand how sharing might work. Except instead of limiting the function of the library to books, it should be extended to every possible good and service. The most obvious goods for library sharing would include those that most people use only at occasionally. Tools and recreational equipment are excellent examples of sharing models that currently exist on small scales. Many cities are now home to tool libraries, where community members can borrow tools to complete a project. Similarly, many university campuses offer recreational equipment libraries, providing students and community members access to a variety of outdoor equipment on demand.

It is easy to imagine expanding networks of sharing to include many more items from computers and electronics to cars and home appliances. In every case, sharing and the use of

libraries offers great potential to reduce our production, consumption, and overall demand on the planet. First, and most obviously, if instead of everyone purchasing one of everything, we simply share a smaller pool of resources, fewer items need to be produced and sold. Second, and less obviously, when all of the tools, appliances, cars, and recreational equipment we need are available from a library, there is no need to store them in our homes. This would enable people to build and live in much smaller dwellings, reducing throughput for construction, heating and cooling.

Finally, libraries bring people together. They are hubs of community engagement, culture, and the diffusion of knowledge. It is easy to see tool libraries hosting courses on safety, crafts, and home-repair, or creating bulletin boards for people seeking volunteers to help with local construction projects. Similarly, as happens around existing recreational libraries, courses are offered teaching people how to use, maintain, and repair equipment, and group outings are organized to build community around shared hobbies.

So, where does a JG fit in? As in other cases, the JG contributes to the sharing economy in a variety of ways. First and foremost a JG overcomes the problem of unemployment. A significant commitment to libraries and sharing would be devastating to a capitalist economy. While it is obviously not necessary and—in light of the ecological crisis it is downright insane—that we all buy one of everything, the consequence of not doing so is economic crisis. As Krugman notes:

“There is one very powerful argument that can be made on behalf of recent American consumerism: not that it is good for consumers, but that it has been good for producers. You see, spending may not produce happiness, but it does create jobs, and unemployment is very effective at creating misery. Better to have manic consumers American style, than depressive consumers of Japan . . . There is a strong element of rat race in America’s consumer-led boom, but those rats racing in their cages are what keeps the wheels of commerce turning. And while it will be a shame if Americans continue to compete over who can own the most toys, the

worst thing of all would be if the competition comes to a sudden halt” (Krugman 1999).

So, in this sense, the JG may be viewed as a prerequisite to the wide-spread adoption of sharing. Without something like a JG in place, sharing is not a socially sustainable option.

A JG may also be used to initiate or catalyze the sharing economy and the establishment of libraries. Construction and administration of libraries will create numerous jobs. Similarly, the maintenance and upkeep of library assets will require regular employees. Once again, a JG can and should offer employment carrying out precisely this type of work. It provides meaningful work, that serves local communities, while helping to foster social bonds, and reducing levels of production and consumption.

Finally, libraries and sharing networks can and should provide universal access to the community’s collective resources thereby serving the aim of equality. Just like existing libraries nobody will be forced to use them. This means the rich can continue to dwell in their private kingdoms of private ownership. However, it also means that the least well-off in society will have access to valuable resources they would otherwise be denied.

V. Conclusion

This chapter argues that the JG can serve as a platform for the multi-dimensional themes, strategies, goals, and policies of the DG movement. The reason the JG offers potential in this regard is owing to the unique space it occupies between TD and BU pathways of transition. This unique positioning means it can overcome a basic contradiction in the DG discourse between its fundamental structuralist orientation in terms of diagnosing crises, and its simultaneous over-reliance on individual agency to address them. The JG is an amphibious approach calling on the power of government to expand the space for social deliberation, community autonomy, and

individual choice. Indeed, it is argued that without first initiating macro-level institutional changes, many of the BU proposals called for are not feasible, scalable, or socially sustainable.

The JG is an example of how to overcome what Boonstra & Joosse identify as “the degrowth paradox.” The paradox begins with DG’s recognition that the drivers of the ongoing social and ecological crises are traceable to the structures and imperatives of a capitalist economy: “By singling out economic growth as the cause of ecological and social misery, degrowth blames the inner workings and logic of capitalism, since economic growth is the single mechanism that holds the capitalist system together” (Boonstra and Joosse 2013, 173). The problem is this. No proposal that is compatible with capitalism will be effective. What is required is a complete break from the system. But here is a “paradox; since it is a classic sociological insight that societies never start with a blank slate” (ibid.). The question then is “how a process of degrowth can materialize within capitalism.” This chapter proposes an answer in terms of Gorz’s strategy of non-reformist reform.

The JG is not a revolutionary proposal. It was conceived as a reform to achieve full employment and thereby stabilize capitalism. However, a JG also contains in it seeds for radical transformation. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight these radical seeds and transform them from potential unintended consequences into primary policy goals. The last chapter explained how the JG might be configured as a non-reformist reform, itself providing a pathway out of capitalism. This chapter explores further how the JG can serve as platform for the diverse and growing list of DG proposals. It demonstrates that a JG is not only consistent with the core philosophical themes of DG, in many cases, it may be a prerequisite to transitional strategies envisioned by the movement.

CHAPTER 4

MONEY, MEANING, AND MASS EXTINCTION

WORK FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE

I. Anthropocene

This mass extinction is different because *we are the asteroid*.³⁹ In 2008, the Geological Society of London announced the arrival of a new, fundamentally *human* epoch: the Anthropocene (Gibson-Graham 2009). Humankind has proven its capacity to change the world and now records this feat as a stratum of plastic accumulating in the earth's crust (Zalasiewicz, et al. 2016). The term "Anthropocene" is a perfect metonym for the kind of thinking that got us into this mess and now prevents us from even beginning to imagine a way out. The term is not inaccurate, but it is literally misleading. It pulls in the wrong direction, leaning into the dualism of Enlightenment thinking/being that created our dilemma.⁴⁰ Blame in the Anthropocene is a Neo-Malthusianism scapegoat that always points at someone else. It is worse than a *non sequitur* because it compresses our future imaginary into a tiny space between inevitable apocalypse and some eugenicist's lifeboat fantasy.⁴¹

³⁹ The term *mass extinction* is used throughout to refer to the ecological and human crisis of the Anthropocene. Ecological philosopher, Morton (2018, 5) argues, "the global warming that we cause is now bringing about the Sixth Mass Extinction. Maybe it would make it more obvious if we stopped calling it 'global warming' (and definitely stopped calling it 'climate change,' which is really weak) and started calling it 'mass extinction,' which is the net effect." Morton (2017, 72) notes that this mass extinction is unique and invisible. "It's the most significant moment for lifeforms on this planet since the dinosaurs got wiped out by that asteroid, and we can't see it directly—we see only spatiotemporal pieces of it. *We are the asteroid*."

⁴⁰ Proposing an economic ethics for the Anthropocene, Gibson-Graham argue that a "reparative stance is receptive and hospitable, animated by care for the world and its inhabitants...., it distances us from the subject-object dualism that separates humans from a disparaged or discounted non-human world. Performing this dualism has arguably led us into planetary crisis, and "un-performing" it may turn out to be a key practice in an ethics for the Anthropocene".

An alternative imaginary is taking shape in the unification of the Degrowth Movement (DG) of the global north with the Environmental Justice Movement (EJ) of the global south. DG's effort to imagine "new ways of life" and EJ's struggle to defend "old ways of life," both take aim at imperialist ideologies of growth and development and promote alternative ways of being human. Both are de-colonial struggles for autonomy.⁴² And the "life-projects they seek to defend rediscover or invent anew share similar ontological orientations and all are expressions of movement against alienating and objectifying effects of capitalism" (Singh 2019, 139).

In social science, EJ and DG overlap in recent "ontological turns" that dissolve the nature-culture dualism, recognize the rights and value of nonhumans, and open "possibilities of other-than-capitalist subjectivities inspired by Indigenous ontologies" (Singh 2019, 139-140). Most importantly, DG and EJ both recognize the crisis of capitalism is fundamentally a crisis of meaning.

While the ontological turn is a promising development for DG, it can also generate confusion. Framing the problem in terms of overcoming anthropocentrism is exactly the wrong way to proceed.⁴³ The idea that we are too anthropocentric reasserts and reinforces the "alienating and objectifying effects of capitalism." The real problem of the Anthropocene is that

⁴¹ Garret Hardin (1974).

⁴² Presenting "an ecofeminists contribution to degrowth" Bennholdt-Thomson advocates, "a decolonization of the hearts and minds, and a decolonization also of the economic culture that has encroached on the daily life of ordinary people" (2016, 21).

⁴³ For example, "You have nothing to lose but your anthropocentrism!" (Morton 2017, 75). In *Being Ecological* (2018), Morton explains how object-oriented ontology can help us escape "anthropocentrism which holds that humans are the center of meaning and power" (Morton, xi - xli). Singh's piece displays a similar tendency, "Recent scholarship seeks to extend justice beyond anthropocentric frames...work remains to conceptualize non-anthropocentric multi-species ecological justice" (2019, 140).

we are not anthropocentric enough. Environmental decline is *not* the outcome of an overemphasis on humanity; just the opposite. The ecological crisis is a human crisis. The world is sick, and people are sick with the same disease. Deaths of despair are equal parts social and ecological.

It took tremendous work to create the Anthropocene. The question is why we would ever undertake such effort? Keynes famously drew attention to the uncanny power of defunct economists to covertly control our thoughts.⁴⁴ He was onto something. Neoliberal market relations expand through the dispossession and destruction of human meaning. Money value swallows everything in its path, abolishing values as such. An imaginary future is increasingly obscured by the ruthless ideology of monied efficiency. Beyond hopeful maroons of human solidarity, we are losing sight altogether of what it means to be human.

This loss of humanity is a signal that we are not anthropocentric enough. To save our world, we must start to remember what it means to be human. With our humanness in mind, we can get to work restoring the biosphere. Posthumanists are right, except often in the wrong way (Saundberg 2014). Human-nature dualism *is* the problem. But the solution is to pull people back to the center, not kick them out. A posthuman world is the one we *have been* constructing. We need to move the other way, toward a world fit for humans.

Even posthumanist discourse remains caught in the dualism of Enlightenment thought. The human (subject) is still distinguishable from the world (object). The ecological crisis is a symptom of our alienation from nature through our creation of the concept “nature.” This

⁴⁴ “The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist” (Keynes 1936 , 383).

ideological severing coincides with the social crisis of alienation from ourselves through our creation of the concept “humanity.” We severed ourselves from nature and ourselves in one move, with one distinction.⁴⁵ But despite our imagination, humans are still nature, and nature is still human. Remembering what it means to be human involves forgetting the distinction. Recollecting the world involves recollecting ourselves. There is no such thing as a posthuman future.

Stated explicitly in the language of dualism this still makes sense but in a different way. Taking humans as separate from everything else (the world), it is clear that humans cannot exist without the world. If we really *center* our attention on people—what they do/are—it is immediately clear that people need a *world*, and more specifically, a world *fit for humans*. A world fit for humans is the kind of world that humans belong to; the kind that produced humans. It is the world that always already was. It is our home.⁴⁶ The EJ movement shows that the way forward is through history (Singh 2019). Humankind’s memory is a reminder of what we are already doing and recalls a future fit for humans.

This paper explores the crisis of mass extinction as a crisis of human meaning and value. The proliferation of human despair that haunts centers of capitalist development is itself the ecological crisis of mass extinction. This works against a logic that views ecological crisis as

⁴⁵ Watts singles out Kant’s role in solidifying the distinction, “humans are assumed to be separate from the world they are in, in order to have a perception of it...The man-made distinction between what and how/why is not an innocent one. Its consequences can be disastrous for not only non-humans but humans as well” (Watts 2013, 24).

⁴⁶ Watts explains that for the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee “we (humans) are made from the land; our flesh is literally an extension of the soil” (2013, 27). And “in many Indigenous origin stories the idea that humans were the last species to arrive on earth was central; it also meant that humans arrived in a state of dependence on already functioning society with particular values, ethics, etc.” (ibid. 25).

occurring somewhere else, out there, in nature, apart from humans, thereby crippling our sense of agency.⁴⁷ The environmental crisis is the human crisis in the same way that development is underdevelopment (Frank 1966). Mass extinction as the destruction of humans and the world is one historical process.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section (2) sketches a profile of human despair that signals the crisis of mass extinction. Geographically, in space and time, the profile resembles a map of economic upheaval during the neoliberal era. Section (3) outlines how meaning and values define ways of being and shape human activity in a mode of production. Antihuman ways of meaning and value that structure capitalism turn our mode of production inside-out. Section (4) explores the imaginary crisis of capitalism presented as the extinction of meaning. It elaborates the imaginary's role as a condition of human existence, and the historic conquest of the human imaginary through commodification and the universalization of money value. Section (5) considers the material foundations of imaginary conquest in capitalist production. Alienation, as the object of managerial control over the labor process, increasingly makes relations between people and things ambiguous. Mechanization is a microcosm of the way the fetishism of money and the meaning of efficiency transform our mode of production into a "mode of extinction." Section (6) analyzes the output of the capitalist mode of extinction in the form of "extra people." Over time, the concentration of money—as the objectified need for humanity—leads to crises of socially imposed overpopulation and scarcity. Increasingly, extra people are *employed* to

⁴⁷ The point here is not to undermine the validity of EJ arguments that (1) the global north bears a vastly disproportionate responsibility for the historical destruction of the biosphere, (2) centers of capitalist development increasingly outsource the environmental costs of their own destructive consumption habits. These arguments are based on a very real imbalance between those who have historically caused and continue to benefit from the rape of the planet, and those who have historically suffered the costs and now face the most terrifying consequences mass extinction.

manufacture their own meaninglessness and despair. The concluding section (7) proposes how a job guarantee re-envisioned as a program of *make-work* can decolonize the imaginary. The revolutionary value of the job guarantee is *meaning* not money. This is what distinguishes it from an income guarantee. Its real promise is the recollection of humans and the world by providing universal access to meaning through care. An anthropocentric economy is possible. *Human care* is revolutionary struggle for a post-capitalist future.

II. A Profile of Despair

As plastic accumulates on the surface of the globe and carbon-dioxide accumulates in the atmosphere, so despair accumulates in the hollowed-out soul human of society. Mass extinction is a human crisis. While the fantasy of decoupling economic output from throughput has yet to materialize, economic output has been so thoroughly detached from humanness that despair now flourishes at the center of economic “development.”⁴⁸

Despite being the richest country in the world and spending the most per capita on health care, the US is the only “affluent” nation to experience declining life expectancy. Fueling this reversal of life expectancy are “deaths of despair” (Case and Deaton 2017).⁴⁹ But *deaths* of despair are marginal. As the phrase implies, they are only the ends of despair. The *depths* of despair are gaining momentum and now sweep across the whole country (Gaydosh, et al.

⁴⁸ “Whilst high income economies may have largely failed to decouple their economic growth from the most important measures of ecological footprint and impact, they have had more unwitting success in decoupling it from increases in happiness” (Pullinger 2014, 13).

⁴⁹ “Mortality declines from the two biggest killers in middle age—cancer and heart disease—were offset by marked increases in drug overdoses, suicides, and alcohol-related liver mortality in this period. By 2014, rising mortality in midlife, led by these “deaths of despair,” was large enough to offset mortality gains for children and the elderly (Kochanek, Arias, and Bastian 2016), leading to a decline in life expectancy at birth among WNHs between 2013 and 2014 (Arias 2016), and a decline in overall life expectancy at birth in the United States between 2014 and 2015 (Xu and others 2016)” (Case and Deaton 2017, 398).

2019).⁵⁰ Despair's menacing profile is carved into the landscape of our daily lives and reveals itself as a set of staggering statistical trends on suicide, depression, anxiety, addiction, poverty, homelessness, violence, disease, and profound loneliness.

From 1959 until 2013, the average American lifespan increased by nearly ten years. That increase is attributed to improvements in cancer treatment, heart health, and injury-prevention. In 2011, despite ongoing improvements in public health and medical technology, life expectancy stalled. By 2014, it was in decline. Woolf and Schoomaker who published these findings in the *Journal of American Medical Association*, report the reversal in life expectancy was driven by rising midlife mortality “caused by drug overdoses, alcohol abuse, suicides, and a diverse list of organ system diseases” (Woolf and Schoomaker 2019).

The novelty of declining life expectancy has created a stir in popular discourse. The phrase “deaths of despair” fills headlines. A 2020 op-ed in the *New York Times* declares, “Only in America has life expectancy now fallen three years in a row, for the first time in a century, because of ‘deaths of despair’” (Kristof and WuDunn 2020). But the data show that despair is not a *new* phenomenon. Rising midlife mortality among adults aged 25 – 64 first shows up in the 1990s (Woolf and Schoomaker 2019). That means despair's roots run even further back. The year 2014 only marks a historical inflection point; the moment steadily creeping despair finally swamped ongoing advances in public health and medicine.

⁵⁰ Gaydosh et al. (2019) find that growing despair is not restricted to rural white populations. The past decade sees “rising despair among the young adult cohort now reaching midlife that cuts across racial/ethnic, educational, and geographic groups may presage rising midlife mortality for these subgroups in the next decade.”

The now famous graph of the US economy that shows the growing gap between productivity and real wages over the past 50 years is a good way to visualize the growth of despair. A person born around the time productivity ditched wages in the 1970s would have reached adult hood in the 1990s. Today that gap is bigger than ever and so are the symptoms of despair.

Symptoms

Between 1999 and 2017, the rate of drug overdose deaths for people aged 25 – 64 increased nearly fourfold, from 6.7 per 100,000 to 32.5 per 100,000. During the same period midlife deaths from alcoholic liver disease grew 40 percent. And while the trend for virtually all other cancer deaths is declining, deaths from *liver* cancer have increased 60 percent (Healy 2019). In 2017 alone, drug overdoses killed more than 70,000 Americans an increase of 95 percent from 2007 (Beinhart 2019).

Rates of suicide for adults began rising in the early 1990s and increased 38.4 percent between 1999 and 2017 (Healy 2019). For young adults aged 18 – 19, suicide has increased by 56 percent between 2008 and 2017. This draws a stark contrast with the rest of the world. Globally suicide has *declined* 30 percent over the past two decades. In the US, it has *increased* by 33 percent over the same period (Beinhart 2019).

It's clear the U.S. is mentally ill. This is made worse by the fact that many Americans have no or only limited access to health care. And even if they do, there is an extreme paucity of mental health resources especially in rural areas.⁵¹ More than one third of Americans with major depressive disorder do not receive treatment. Some 60 percent of adolescents who have major

⁵¹ “A 2018 study revealed that 65 percent of non-metropolitan counties in America have no psychiatrists” (Rodrick 2019).

depressive disorder do not receive care (Gerson 2019). The National Institute for Mental Health reports that in 2017 “an estimated 17.3 million adults in the United States had at least one major depressive episode. This number represented 7.1% of U.S. adults.” The American Psychological Association reports that, “approximately 40 million American adults ages 18 and older, or about 18.1% of people in this group in a given year, have an anxiety disorder” (Rosen 2020).

Despair also shows itself in widespread economic privation, homelessness, and poverty. While official counts report homelessness nationwide is lower than it was in 2010, they also show that homelessness has been rising for the last three years. Major cities like New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle are in crisis. The homeless population in California is 22.5 percent higher today than it was in 2010 (Knowles 2019). In Los Angeles County, deaths of “social exposure” have been steadily rising since 2013. More than 1000 homeless people died in 2018 alone; that is three people a day at an average age of just 51. A column on the epidemic in the *Los Angeles Times* states, “the coroner’s reports...are ghostly sketches of social disorder, poverty, violence, addiction and isolation. They speak to a breakdown that extends beyond homelessness and reaches into our economy, our schools, our criminal justice and healthcare systems” (Lopez 2019).

A 2017 UN investigation of poverty in the U.S. found that 40 million Americans live in poverty. Nearly half of them are in deep poverty with income less than one half the poverty threshold. Among the nations of the “developed” world the US has the highest child poverty rate of 25 percent and also the lowest social mobility. At the minimum wage in 2017, a worker who worked full-time year-round fell below the poverty threshold for a family of three. The number of Americans living in extreme poverty (less than \$2 a day) nearly doubled in the past 20 years to 1.5 million (Nadasen 2017).

Scapegoats

When it comes to identifying the underlying causes of despair, the typical scapegoats are drugs, alcohol, guns, and social media. *Drugs and alcohol account for heart and liver disease, addiction, and overdose. They are also blamed for poverty and homelessness. Guns are responsible for suicide and violence. Social media destroys self-esteem, creating depression and anxiety.* But all of these are only symptoms and coping mechanisms. Despair rises from the very soul of world we create and recreate daily. Increasingly, the chilling reality of American society is cruel and deadly isolation. Each day our world more closely resembles the atomized desolation of neoliberal individualism.

The era of despair coincides with the historic rise of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). Since the 1970s, the social safety net has been dismantled. Inequality has risen dramatically. Labor regulations have been rolled back. Union membership is down. Wages are stagnant. Funding for social programs and education are in decline. Trade agreements have exposed American workers to global competition. Jobs have been outsourced. Manufacturing is disappearing. Rural communities are in crisis. The masses have been plunged into debt. Costs of living are rising. The ranks of the uninsured are swelling. Student debt weighs heavier on each generation. Getting sick has become the leading cause of bankruptcy. And while work is increasingly insecure, members of the “precarariat” are working more hours just to make ends meet. According to mortality researchers, the nexus between economic hardship and premature death is likely despair’s fellow traveler: “chronic stress” (Healy 2019).

Woolf and Shoomaker (2019) point out that despair’s economic origins have geographic contours that can be traced on a map. Premature deaths are most evident in parts of the country that suffered severe job losses, population drain and “a consequent hollowing out of local civic

and social institutions” (Healy 2019). Over the last forty years states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Indiana felt exactly these effects as the steel and coal industries collapsed, and outsourcing wiped out manufacturing. These four states contain only 11 percent of the nation’s population but account for almost one third of the rise in midlife mortality (ibid.). But the same pattern of despair stretches across the entire country, marking the historic path of neoliberalism. “Maps of suicide and addiction rates are maps of despair. They largely match the disappearance of American manufacturing. We can date that decline to President Ronald Reagan’s economic policies of the 1980s” (Beinhart 2019).

It’s not guns, drugs, alcohol, or social media that create despair; it’s the “free market.” More specifically, it is the way markets destroy the fabric of communities, severing social connections of meaning and value that ground a person’s sense of identity, place, and purpose. Alienating isolation and loneliness are the real heart of America’s peculiar despair.⁵²

⁵² Rodrick (2019) points out how patriarchal values of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency, prevalent in the American west, make men especially vulnerable to deaths despair when facing economic and social insecurity. Particularly in rural areas, values of independence and self-reliance intensify the neoliberal mentality of “every-man-for-himself.” Depression is viewed as a weakness. Common responses of those suffering depression include denial and social withdrawal. Seeking treatment is highly stigmatized and rarely occurs. By contrast alcoholism is rampant and guns are ubiquitous. So is suicide. The CDC reports that white men account for 70 percent of suicides in the US, and the states with the highest suicide rates are Alaska, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah and New Mexico. Case and Deaton who published original research on “deaths of despair” in 2015 noted at the time the disproportionate representation of middle-aged white men. Further digging into the data has since revealed that the rise in deaths of despair is not limited to this demographic. Their new findings indicate the key variable is class. Despair is surging across the working-class amid rising inequality and healthcare costs. And this is unique to the U.S. Case explains, “European countries have faced the same kind of technological change we have, and they’re not seeing the people killing themselves with guns or drugs or alcohol... There is something unique about the way the U.S. is handling this” (Leonhardt and Thompson 2020).

Isolation

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam traced the decline of community in the US. “In ten short years between 1985 and 1994 active engagement in community organizations...fell by 45 percent” (Putnam 2001, 60). Another study tracked responses of Americans over years to the question: “How many confidants do you have?” The researchers wanted to know how many people an individual felt they could turn to in a crisis. In 1985, the modal response was three. In 2004, the most frequent response was ZERO (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006). The American Psychological Association states that loneliness levels have reached an all-time high. In a 2018 survey of 20,000 U.S. adults, nearly half report they sometimes or always feel alone. Forty percent also report they sometimes or always feel their relationships are not meaningful and they feel isolated (Novotney 2019). And each new generation is lonelier than the last. More than 20 percent of millennials report they have *no friends at all* (Ballard 2019).

Loneliness and isolation are the most disquieting symptoms of neoliberal despair. Humans, like other social animals, need social connection to survive. Loneliness kills. Studies have found that loneliness causes levels of the stress hormone cortisol to soar. And experiments indicate that becoming acutely alone is as stressful as experiencing a physical attack (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008, 94-95). Loneliness creates insecurity that disrupts sleep.⁵³ It causes depression and anxiety and increases mortality. People suffering from loneliness become sick. They turn to

⁵³ Micro-awakenings have been recognized as a measure of loneliness. People who are lonely experience repeated momentary awakenings throughout their sleep. The same is true for any social animal in isolation. The theory is this is an evolutionary response to the insecurity of sleeping apart from the group (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008, 15). A very close-knit, cooperative farming community of Hutterites in North America display some of the lowest levels of loneliness in the world (Hari 2018, 78).

drugs. They self-destruct. And for those with access to care, they are increasingly prescribed pharmaceuticals. In place of human connection, people are given pills (Fottrell 2018).

In *Lost Connections* (2018), Johan Hari proposes that conventional wisdom concerning despair entirely misses the mark. Starting from the neoliberal creed that “there is no such thing as society,” the western world has come to conclude that, both in terms of causes and treatment, mental illness is strictly a matter of brain chemistry. Depression, anxiety, and despair are symptoms of a chemical imbalance inside *the individual*. To feel better, *individuals* should consume cheaply produced, highly priced, capsules of supremely commodified intellectual property.

Hari’s sweeping survey of academic research, covering natural and social science, reveals that empirical evidence for the chemical theory of mental illness is at best highly suspect, and more generally, non-existent.⁵⁴ The evidence clearly shows that the crisis of despair is not in individuals’ heads. It is in “the world and the way we are living in it” (Hari 2018, 14). Mental health, Hari argues has everything to do with the social and psychological stuff of human

⁵⁴ Hari shows that research and clinical trials are systematically corrupted by the profit interests and power of the pharmaceutical industry, “that why the drug companies conduct their scientific studies in secret, and afterward, they only publish the results that make their drugs look good.” Researchers concerned with widespread manipulation and “publication bias” filed FOIA requests with the FDA to get complete accounts of drug studies. The totality of research shows that antidepressants are no more effective than placebos. They are actually worse than placebos because they predictably produce harmful side effects. Professor David Healy, who has written a detailed history of antidepressants explains the theory that low serotonin causes depression is entirely unfounded. This theory has never been debunked because it was never scientifically established, “there was never any basis for it, ever.” The largest study conducted of serotonin’s effects on humans revealed no direct relation with depression at all. Professor Andrew Skuse of Princeton states attributing depression to low serotonin is “deeply misleading and unscientific” (2018, 17 - 37). Sadly, what appear to be the most effective treatments for mental illness: prescribed social connection and community engagement, attract no research funding at all. Indeed, the multibillion-dollar pharmaceutical industry is threatened by “social prescribing” because it cannot be commodified (2018, 198).

connection. Isolation and loneliness are the effects of disconnection and the breeding grounds of despair.

III. Meaning and Values

People and their lives are the real products of the economy, not things. This basic insight underpins Marx's whole project and, is exemplified in the concept of the mode production. The way humans organize social reproduction is the mode of production. The essential output of any mode of production is human existence itself.⁵⁵ In, *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels explain that humans produce not only material goods but also social relations, and therefore by extension, *human beings*, who daily make and remake themselves and each other in the very process of acting on the world (Graeber 2013, 233).

Conceptually, the mode of production presents an alternative to the idea that society is merely a collection of individuals. If society is nothing but individuals, we face the question what holds it together and there is no definitive answer. For Marx, starting from the view that humans are essentially social and creative, society is a mode of coordinating projects of human action. As such, there must be some concept or conceptions of value that set everything in motion. Assuming all humans are on some level the same kinds of creatures, then it follows that at some level they all pursue the same sorts of things.⁵⁶ These things are values. "All human

⁵⁵ Marx and Engels argue "the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'" (1976, 48)

⁵⁶ Graeber points out this same idea forms the core of the investigation of culture in anthropology: "Cultures, when first conceived, were thus imagined first and foremost as fields for the pursuit of certain forms of value— values that shaped humans into creatures whose very perceptions and sensibilities were attuned largely to that pursuit" (2013a, 220).

beings do, in some sense, organize their lives, feelings, and desires around the pursuit or furtherance of [values]” (Graeber 2013a, 219 - 220).

Human values emerge through and shape the ways humans relate to one another and the world. They are products of social consciousness and the basis of human connection. Values form a common subjective or shared imaginary that define human meaning and purpose. In sum, values are what bring social worlds into being (Graeber 2013a). This means human worlds consist of more than just people and things.⁵⁷ They are collective *projects* of mutual creation, created and recreated daily by humans (Graeber 2001).

Values coordinate the mode of production as the collective project of producing humans and their social world. A social world is a necessary condition for human existence as *social beings*, in the same way that the natural world is a necessary condition for human existence as *physical beings*. Humans cannot exist without social connection any more than they can exist without food.⁵⁸ Values as the common subjective define possibilities of human connection though shared meaning and purpose. They orient an individual with regard to their place and role in the world. They make connection possible and explain how. Values provide an individual with a sense of identity and way of belonging. Humans cannot exist without belonging to the world and one another. Values and meaning are conditions of human existence.

⁵⁷ For EJ and DG the *plural* notion of “worlds” forms, “ontological continuities between the two movements and the grounds for alliance building...EJ and degrowth movements need to not only learn from each other, but think with the actual practices on the ground and the epistemologies of the South to foster pluriversal world-making practices” (Singh 2019, 138).

⁵⁸ Psychologists explain loneliness is an absence of *connection*, not merely an absence of other people. Social connection is obviously needed to bring a human into the world, but what is less obvious is that connection is needed for continued survival. Loneliness kills. To end loneliness, you need other people plus something else. You also need to *share something that is meaningful to both of you*. Connection exists through shared meaning and value (Hari 2018, 83).

An anthropocentric mode of production starts from the understanding that human beings themselves are the projects of mutual creation. Value is the way these projects become meaningful. The world we inhabit emerges from these projects (Graeber 2013a, 238). Capitalism has all this backwards. It is an inside-out mode of production; a mode of mass extinction.

Capitalism

Capitalism presents an antihuman *universe* structured by ways of meaning called markets and a singular value defined by money. Historically, capitalism develops as a process of disconnection, division, and alienation. Money value crowds out all human values (Harvey 2005, 3; Sandel 2012, 64). A human's money value is an abstract commodity that can be separated from their person, bought and sold. The economic sphere is severed from the human sphere of reproduction.⁵⁹ In the market, there is no room for human connection. Emotion, love, care, and personal relationships are to be left at home. Above the door to the marketplace is a sign that reads: "No Humanity Allowed"

The "wonder of the market," according to its champions, is that is *impersonal*. Impersonal is defined as "not having or showing personal feelings, not existing as a person, having no personality." The economy is where you must be a rational machine. The less human you are, the better your chance of success. Compassion, empathy, honesty and friendship make

⁵⁹ "The entire field of anthropological value theory since the 1980s has been founded on a single intuition: the fact that we use the same word to describe the benefits and virtues of a commodity for sale on the market (the "value" of a haircut or a curtain rod) and our ideas about what is ultimately important in life ("values" such as truth, beauty, justice), is not a coincidence. We speak of value when labor is commoditized. On the market, the value of any good or service ultimately comes down to that proportion of the total pool of waged or salaried labor that is invested in producing it. The moment we enter the world where labor is not commoditized, suddenly we begin talking about values. What is the most common form of unpaid labor in our society? Surely, housework." (Graeber 2013a, 224).

you weak. Ruthlessness is rewarded. Manipulation is “*market-ing.*” The popular expression “don’t do business with your friends” is an acknowledgement of our collective awareness that markets and humanity do not mix. The first consequence of the market, notes Engels, is universal “mistrust” on one hand, and the “justification of this mistrust” on the other (1844). “Narrow self-seeking” becomes the “fundamental principle of society,” manifest everywhere in “brutal indifference” and “reciprocal plunder.” Hobbes’s “war of each against all is here openly declared” (Engels 1980, 60).

These particular forms of meaning and value that define capitalism and the nature of market interaction have enabled humans to dissociate themselves from themselves and the world. These forms contain the possibility of mass extinction. In the day-to-day activity of capitalism, the human project is set against itself. Means and ends trade places. Capitalism turns humans into means of producing material wealth; universalizing violation of Kant’s categorical imperative. Under the alienating reign of money value, we have lost track entirely of what we are doing, why we started, and where we are headed. If we don’t know where we are going, why are we trying so hard, and how will we know when we get there?⁶⁰

Money

The crisis of capitalism is a crisis of meaning and value. Human values cannot survive money value and the logic of markets, nor can a world fit for humans. Polanyi (1944) makes this clear. Marx (1867) explains the details. Money, as universal equivalent, makes possible the severing of humans from their activity and the world. It annihilates qualities, reducing the world

⁶⁰ John S. Mill is exceptional among economists for asking *the most important question* otherwise disregarded by economics, “Towards what ultimate point is society tending by its industrial progress? When the progress ceases, in what condition are we to expect that it will leave mankind?” (J. Mill 2004).

to quantity. Money is a way of fetishizing human meaning and value and positing it as something that exists outside of us, beyond social control. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx explains the fetishism of money:

“The special difficulty in grasping money in its fully developed character as money – a difficulty which political economy attempts to evade by forgetting now one, now another aspect, and by appealing to one aspect when confronted with another – is that a social relation, a definite relation between individuals, here appears as a metal, a stone, as a purely physical, external thing which can be found, as such, in nature, and which is indistinguishable in form from its natural existence” (Marx 1973, 239).

After the Enlightenment killed God, money presented a way to reinstate the external rule of a monotheistic authority. Through capitalist relations we become subject to the will of an abstraction we fantasize into power.⁶¹

Money’s rule is limited by the extent of the market. The logic of capitalist development is ceaseless market expansion. Utopian market efficiency is only realized when every last detail of life is commodified and brought under money’s reign. Commodification of everything is the strategy of the neoliberal political project (Harvey 2005, 3). But the commodification of everything requires that even humans and their world become commodities. And the commodification of human life and their world forecloses the continued existence of both.⁶² As

⁶¹ “There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities” (Marx 1947, 43).

⁶² “Labor is only another name for human activity which goes with life itself...land is only another name for nature... To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of

Polanyi puts it “no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude fictions for even the shortest stretch of time unless human and natural substance...was protected from the ravages of this satanic mill” (Polanyi 2001, 76-77). Thus, the extent of the market is itself limited by humanness; what Polanyi articulates in the “double-movement.”

Humanness is *the* collective commons. By definition it defies enclosure because it is what we all share.⁶³ To the extent that people persist on as humans, market expansion is thwarted. On the other hand, to the extent that abstract labor can be extracted from human life—if human activity itself can be chopped into discrete, uniform units, measured, quantified, purchased and sold, then humans can be separated from themselves. To the extent that our activity is commodified, it ceases to be human; “the worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home” (Marx 1977, 66). If we keep working this way, there will be no home left and no humans either.

Money as universal equivalent makes it possible for us to even imagine a sphere of human activity that does not belong to humanity as such: the economy. If the economy is socially dis-embedded and becomes something outside of human relations, then we can lose control and lose our way. The economy threatens to swallow humanity, creating a “market society.”

human beings and their natural environment...would result in the demolition of society” (Polanyi 2001, 76).

⁶³ In the project of DG, Helfrich and Bollier suggest, “the commons is better understood as a verb...commons don’t just fall from the sky. They [are] processes of shared stewardship about things that a community (a network or all of humankind) possesses and manages in common” (2015, 75).

In such a world, statements like the following begin to make sense: *It's good for the economy, just bad for people*. Wars, prisons, and natural disasters are great for GDP, income, and employment; that is, for the economy. Or consider the same paradoxical logic from the other side. *What's good for people, is bad for the economy*: sharing, mutual-aid, leisure, sleep, peace, reduced consumption, the abolition of advertising.

Automation is a perfect example. “It’s hard to imagine a surer sign that one is dealing with an irrational economic system than the fact that the prospect of eliminating drudgery is considered to be a problem” (Graeber 2018, 261). This can only make sense in a world where “the misery of being exploited by a capitalist is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited by a capitalist,”⁶⁴ that is, a world in which what everyone needs is something no one wants. The fact that we live in such a world is profound evidence that something has gone horribly awry. Mass extinction is the proof.

Value

Marx’s labor theory of value reminds us that we socially create the world, one another, and ourselves. There is nothing natural or universal about any particular mode of production except one thing. In order to exist, a mode of production must reproduce humans and their world. Marx invites us to recollect our agency when it comes to human project of creating our world. The Anthropocene is a loud reminder of our agency and a warning to be more *careful* with it. As Graeber explains:

“Marx’s theory of value was above all a way of asking the following question: assuming that we do collectively make our world, that we collectively remake it daily, then why is it that we somehow end up creating a world that few of us particularly like, most find unjust, and over which no one feels they have any ultimate control?” (2013a, 223).

⁶⁴ Joan Robinson.

We should add, “a world that is ecologically unfit for life.” The answer is that we have somehow forgotten the fact that this is what we are already doing. Our problem is we are so caught up with immediate tasks, that we’ve lost sight of the bigger project—like an artist so focused on the details of the fingernails they miss the gesture of the hand. We need some way to remind ourselves that the project we are working on is the production of ourselves, our neighbors, and our world. I would call this turning of our mode of production *right-side-in*; an anthropocentric economy.

Capitalism and money have turned our mode of production *inside-out* (Graeber 2006). In the framework of M - C - M’, means and ends trade places. Human activity “is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it” (Marx 1977, 66). Life’s harvest is deferred indefinitely. It’s kittens all the way down and never love for the cat.⁶⁵ Meeting needs is a byproduct of making money. The incessant reproduction of dissatisfaction is vital and lucrative work. Other people and the world stand between us and our goal. They are “in the way.” We consciously sacrifice even our own lives. We trade our activity (existence) for things. According to money, the opportunity cost of a career is your life. The opportunity cost of a degree is your education. The opportunity cost of healthcare is your wellness. The opportunity cost of justice is a prison and lots of recession-proof jobs. Emotions, connection, and human affection have no place in the increasingly impersonal world we create through cold market calculation. What we give up in order to participate in this economy is exactly what the economy was supposed to offer us all along: a way to be human and world to be human in.

⁶⁵ Keynes (1930) describes the pathology of accumulation: “He does not love his cat, but his cat’s kittens; nor, in truth, the kittens, but only the kittens’ kittens, and so on forward forever to the end of cat-dom.”

Agency

We can set means and ends back in their proper place by recalling our agency to create ourselves. An anthropocentric economy starts with this recognition and imagines a way forward by asking: what kind of humans do we want? To be clear, this is not an argument for eugenics, or genetic intervention, or even humans themselves viewed as finished products. The question of what kind of economy we want is an existential question about what kinds of lives we want to live. What kinds of activities do we want to participate in? What kind of world do we want? What kinds of friends and neighbors and lovers do we want to share it with? These questions are the starting point of an anthropocentric economy.

In the decolonized imaginary of the future, human lives are ends in themselves. Human existence/activity is not exchanged, sacrificed, consumed, used up, deferred, or sold to get to some other, higher, externalized symbolic token. The enclosure, dispossession, appropriation or sale of life is unthinkable. Our day-to-day activity of social reproduction, the mutual project of creating ourselves and our world; *work* itself, is the source of meaning, value, satisfaction, utility. In an anthropocentric economy, the distinction between consumption and production changes so that biting into a delicious, juicy peach is exactly the meaning of human production (Morton 2017, 127).

IV. Humans

If our day-to-day existence is the production of ourselves and the world, how do we find ourselves in this peculiar predicament? How is it possible that the human project leads to mass extinction? Isn't the point of all this work, effort, abstinence, sacrifice, training, education, competition, science, technology, development, and growth precisely the opposite? And how is it

that just now, with accumulated history of human capital at our fingertips, we find ourselves powerless to act?

Such a predicament could only exist as the product of a captive imagination. The fact that it really is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, tells us more about our imagination than the world, and more about capitalism than the apocalypse.⁶⁶ Our imaginary is a colonial subject, occupied, enclosed, and under imperial rule.⁶⁷ Reproduced in unconscious bondage, it labors fashioning the bars of its own cage. To even start decolonizing the imaginary then, we have to *remember* that the world was not always this way. In the ruins of our own past is the memory of a new future (Singh 2019). If it once *was otherwise* then surely it *could be*. And human history *recollects* that “human beings are not condemned, because of their biological constitution, to annihilate each other or to be at the mercy of a cruel, self-inflicted fate” (Einstein 1949).

Truly rethinking the economy means starting over again from before the beginning. An anthropocentric economy begins with the goal of producing humans and a world fit for humans. Before beginning then, we have to start with some idea about what humans are and what they need. In other words, what is *human nature*?

Nature

Humans are what humans do. Our day-to-day activity defines our existence—“for what is life but activity?” (Marx 1977, 67). Humans are nothing if not social. “Human beings are not just

⁶⁶ “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (Jameson 2003, 76).

⁶⁷ “The project to decolonize the imaginary has two main sources: the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis, on the one hand, and the anthropological critique of imperialism on the other. Alongside the ecological critique, these two sources are the intellectual origin of degrowth” (S. Latouche, *Imaginary, Decolonization of 2015*, 117)

social animals; they are so intrinsically social that if they are cut off from relations with other humans, they begin to decay physically” (Graeber 2018, 82). Humans cannot and do not exist without social connection; every person who exists is always already socialized. For humans to continue to *be*, they must reproduce themselves and their socialness. Social reproduction of humans and their world is nature.

Human existence is social activity in the world. “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce” (Marx and Engels 1976, 42). Many animals *produce*, but humans “distinguish themselves from [nonhuman] animals as soon as they begin to produce their *means of subsistence*, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their *means of subsistence* men are indirectly producing their actual material life” (Marx 1977, 67).

Humans are distinguished not only by *what* they produce, but also by *how* they produce. The way humans produce is always already social and in the world. *How* humans produce is consciously. They realize their humanness in conscious expression, “free conscious activity is man’s species-character” (Marx 1977, 68). Freedom and agency define conscious activity as a process that originates in the imagination and flows towards a definite purpose in the world.⁶⁸ “Purposeful action involves the conscious interweaving of our subjective energies and the objective world, and a double impact of reality upon the subject” (Simmel 2004, 221). Conscious activity is free to the extent that the actor controls and directs it according their own conscious purpose.

“Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly

⁶⁸ On “man’s” nature Veblen writes, “By selective necessity he is endowed with a proclivity for purposeful action. He is possessed of a discriminating sense of purpose” (Veblen 1899).

merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being. Or it is only because he is a species-being that he is a conscious being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity” (Marx 1977, 69).

Finally, “man produces even when he is free from physical need and *only truly produces in freedom therefrom*” (ibid. emphasis added).

Beyond physiological need is where human activity becomes truly human by becoming truly *free*. Artistic expression exemplifies the freedom of truly human activity; conscious activity for the sake of conscious activity. Human existence as its own object is undefined. Meaning and purpose are not given, and thus, left to the imagination. Truly human activity is directed by pure imagination.

The freeness of conscious human activity contains the seeds of social meaning and values. Our ability to consciously become the cause of our own imaginary purposes makes us truly human (Bloch, 2008). The same ability also describes how a human infant first becomes aware of their own existence as a discrete entity in the world.⁶⁹ We are most truly human when our imaginary purpose is most truly imaginary; that is, completely dissociated from physiological need. Humankind expresses its unique identity through the conscious social production of an intersubjective imaginary. An individual expresses their unique identity as a human self through conscious production of their own imaginary purpose in relation to the social world. Without an intersubjective imaginary of shared meaning and value a human has no identity or way to mean.

⁶⁹ In psychology, this is called “the pleasure at being a cause,” and is based on observations that infants experience extreme delight upon recognizing their ability to cause predictable outcomes in the world. This pleasure is associated with the infant’s emerging awareness of their own existence.

Humans belong to world.⁷⁰ Humans and the world mutually produce one another in a single life process.⁷¹ Humans react to the world as it stands, and, shape it in accordance with their will. The world is humankind's body and a necessary condition for human activity. "Nature is man's *inorganic* body—both inasmuch as nature is (1) his direct means of life, and (2) the material, object, and instrument of his life activity. Nature is man's *inorganic* body—that is insofar as it is not his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature" (Marx 1977, 67). Note that Marx denies human-nature dualism.

What is universally human then is social production that exists as free, conscious, activity in the world. Free conscious activity flows from the imaginary toward a purpose. Meaning and value form the common subjectivity of the social imaginary. An individual's activity and identity exist through social connections of shared meaning and value.

This covers *how* humans produce. However, *what* humans produce demands more attention. Their own "means of subsistence" is incomplete. It is necessary but not sufficient. The sufficient condition is identified in an even more distinctly human product of human labor.

⁷⁰ "It follows that if, as Indigenous peoples, we are extensions of the very land we walk upon, then we have an obligation to maintain communication with it. A familiar warning is echoed through many communities, that if we do not care for the land we run the risk of losing who we are as Indigenous peoples" (Watts 2013, 23).

⁷¹ "From the subsistence point of view human beings form part of the organic world process, of the living being that is the earth" (Bennholdt-Thomsen 2016, 22).

Human production is the production of *humans themselves and their world*, i.e. social reproduction. Human activity is care. Care creates human existence and a world fit for humans.⁷²

Separate Spheres

If we consider what humans are and need, our existing mode of production is *antihuman*. This is reflected even in our conscious theorizing about what it is we are doing. According to economics, the domestic sphere is somehow separate from and not in the market. The economy is what happens in the market. The creation of human life and social reproduction are nowhere in the textbook. The most basic activity of every human economy is dismissed and relegated to the household or nature.⁷³ The real human work of social reproduction—i.e. *care*, is awarded no economic value in practice. Therefore, in economic theory it does not exist.⁷⁴

This is a perplexing state of affairs. The irony of taking the household out of the “economy” is so absurd it stops being ironic. If humans create their own economy and the economy is how we create ourselves, why would we not count the most explicitly human, and therefore most

⁷² “Conditions of human life are created not merely by humans working on nature, but through a more reciprocal exchange of care between humans and nature” (Singh 2019, 142).

⁷³ Ecofeminists regularly draw parallels between the undervaluation of women's reproductive labour and nature's reproductive labour, e.g. (Shiva 2002); (Bennholdt-Thomsen 2016); (Singh 2019). “Feminist theorists have long challenged economism and productivism, at the heart of our economic institutions. Linking exploitation of women's reproductive labour and abuse of earth's regenerative capacities” (Singh 2019, 141)

⁷⁴ Folbre explains, in the 19th century the growth of capitalism created enormous apprehension. “Would society become so atomistic, so competitive, so individualistic that it would fall apart?” In response, women were locked out of the market and tasked responsibility for maintaining human values and relations in the household. In economics, “The separate spheres doctrine was appealing to economists [in the 19th century] for a variety of reasons. It relieved them of the responsibility for analyzing love and altruism, while reiterating their principles of morality” (2001, 11-13).

obviously valuable activity? There are at least two reasons: (1) patriarchy, and (2) care work defies commodification.

A sexual division of labor is not the same thing as patriarchy. With capitalism the sexual division of labor is enforced as patriarchy. Throughout the history of capitalism, women have been made second class citizens by economic means. They have oscillated between being excluded from the economy and imprisoned in the household, on one hand, and being forced into the market's most demeaning roles, on the other. In either case, women are asked to do more for less (Folbre 2001). In the market, this means less power, lower wages, harassment and abuse. In the household, this means especially unpaid labor. And whatever the whims of labor-market demand, women are always expected to continue the care work of social reproduction.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, women were forced into industrial production and there are many accounts “of the fantastically cruel and dehumanizing working conditions for women during this period” (Hunt and Lautzenheiser 2011, 68).⁷⁵ Starting in the late 19th century women were increasingly hostage to the domestic sphere and excluded from participation in the economic sphere.⁷⁶ It is not really clear which is worse. In the market,

⁷⁵ “Because women and children could be hired for much lower wages than men, and because in many cases entire families had to work in order to earn enough to eat, women and children were widely employed. Many factory owners preferred women and children because they could be reduced to a state of passive obedience more easily than men. The widespread ideology in this period that the only good woman was a submissive woman was a great help to their employers...Women were mistreated...severely. Work in a factory was long, arduous, and monotonous. Discipline was harsh. Many times, the price of factory employment was submission to the sexual advances of employers and foremen. Women in the mines toiled fourteen to sixteen hours a day, stripped to the waist, working with men and doing the work of men. There were reports of women who came out of the mines to bear children and were back in the mines within days after giving birth” (Hunt and Lautzenheiser 2011, 67).

⁷⁶ “By the twentieth century...a significant percentage of married women, particularly white women, spent all their time outside the market nexus, as full-time ‘domestic laborers,’ providing

women are less than human. On the other hand, in a *market society*, mere survival is tricky for women as a class barred from earning money. One way or another, they necessarily end up subject to the will of that class which is not barred from making money.

In the 21st century, women still do most of the unwaged work of care (B.L.S. 2019). And even when women are allowed into the “economy,” they earn less than men, have less power, are less likely to be promoted, and toil under a heavier set of expectations (Folbre 2001, 4). Women are expected to be submissive, cheerful, empathetic, and attentive in a way that men are not. They are expected to carry out all the interpretative, “emotional labor” of caring for others in the work environment (Hoschild 2012). This work is not only unpaid, but often unrecognized.

A mode of production that stubbornly refuses to value the most human work of human production and the humans who perform it, will end up with no humans. Care is what makes us human. The day-to-day reproduction of patriarchy is one more way that our mode of production reminds us of its inhumanity. It is not anthropocentric enough.

Resistance

Care resists money. Authentic caregiving defies commodification;⁷⁷as does humanness more generally. This means caring for humans is a form of anti-capitalist resistance (Bennholdt-Thomsen 2016). Care works against the logic of scarcity and multiplies its own abundance. Care

goods and, increasingly, services for their families... Studies of household labor beginning in the 1910s and continuing through to the 1970s show that the amount of time a full-time housewife devoted to her work remained virtually unchanged for over fifty years—despite dramatic changes in household technology (Schor 1991, 8)

⁷⁷ Folbre explains this “can be traced to the very nature of caring for other people. It is difficult to gauge its quality or measure its effects—partly because these have important emotional as well as physical dimensions. Caregiving is inherently risky because it is difficult to capture and claim the effects, which are embodied in people who cannot be contractually bound to pay them back” (Folbre 2001, 24).

resists enclosure because its value is inherently qualitative, emotional, and human. It cannot be quantified, measured, or contained (Folbre 2001). How do you know if someone really cares?

Another way to think about the uniquely human quality of care is to consider whether it could be automated. The answer is clearly no. A robot might be able to keep a human alive but surviving and being human are two different things. This points to a kind of general law: that which resists automation tends also to resist commodification. And what cannot be commodified, captured and brought into the market is neglected by capitalism.

To be human is to care; to engage in the activity of caring for humans and their world.⁷⁸ Above all, humans as social beings need *to be needed*. A person becomes needed, and thus human, by providing care. A person who provides care matters and so has a way to mean. In order to have an opportunity to be human, people need an opportunity to care. Humans need access to care. They can be needed by caring for other humans and the world. This is what it means to say that humans are social. They have a need to belong.⁷⁹ To be human is to belong with others in a world. Humans care to belong. Care is how humans fit in the world. A world fit for humans provides access to care.

III. Mass Extinction

Ecologically, mass extinction is the destruction of our inorganic body; the biosphere. This is a product of our alienation from the world. People are disconnected from the landscape and therefore have no awareness of their own role in the process of life. Without this self-understanding of dependence, humans are lost in world (Watts 2013). They experience this

⁷⁸ Singh advocates expanding the realm of care to include the non-human world and proposes caring for nature as a way beyond alienated wage labour (2019, 141).

⁷⁹ “People must belong to a tribe” (Wilson 1998, 6).

disconnection as disorientation, insecurity, and homesickness. Their own life process is strange and unfamiliar. They do not know how to care for the world because do not know the world.

Socially, mass extinction is the crisis of human loneliness, meaninglessness, and despair. This is the product of our disconnection from ourselves as social beings. People who are denied access to caring, are denied the most basic human need: *the need to be needed*. They experience this disconnection as meaninglessness. The ecological and social crisis are one historical process of mass extinction.

Our estrangement from ourselves and the world leads to a paradox. On one side, people are made extra. On the other, the world is made scarce. Both are problems of an appropriated imagination that cannot see beyond a mode of production that annihilates abundance and makes humans unnecessary. “Extinction is the logical conclusion of alienation” (Morton 2017, 153).

Appropriating the future

Mass extinction is a crisis of a colonized imaginary. One of the most devastating effects of capitalist expansion is the dispossession of meaning, value, and identity. On a Montana reservation in the late 19th century, a Native American man shared his life-story with an anthropologist. Recounting the time before settlers seized his people’s homeland, Chief Plenty Coups describes a rich world of meaning and metaphor. Everything, every act, and every person existed in relation to a shared purpose. Outside of this purpose, a person had no identity; not even a name. After his people were forced onto the reservation, Chief Plenty Coup’s life went on for many years, but his *story ended*. “After this,” he remarked “nothing happened” (Hari 2018, 133). In a world, where people are severed from meaning, nothing happens. Their identity vanishes.

Throughout the Americas, European settlers systematically appropriated not only the lives and lands of First Peoples, but their histories, cultures, values and ways of being. Children taken from their communities and sent to boarding schools were banned from speaking their own language, cut-off from themselves, and robbed even of their own memories. Research in anthropology and psychology has revealed that a traumatic effect of being severed from your past is an inability to imagine a future.

Studying extreme rates of suicide among First Nations youth in Canada, Chandler and Lolande (1998) found empirical evidence to this effect. In a study of 196 First Nations groups, they found that in communities with relative autonomy to reclaim and revitalize cultural traditions and meaning, suicide rates are low. In communities that lack autonomy to reconnect with ancestral ways, suicide rates are high. Drawing on this research and clinical studies of distressed adolescents, Chandler theorizes that extreme despair and self-destruction are symptomatic of an inability to imagine a future for yourself. Compared to other distressed youth, those with suicidal depression uniquely express a loss of identity. When asked to imagine a future, they simply cannot do it. Without a meaningful past to build a self from, there is no imaginable future (Hari 2018, pp. 135 - 136).

The genocidal appropriation of First Peoples' worlds robs all humankind of the memory of its past and sense of identity. With no sense of our past to build from, mass extinction manifests in our collective inability to imagine a future. It is a crisis of a colonized imaginary (S. Latouche, *Imaginary, Decolonization of 2015*).

Universal Equivalence

Capitalist markets now swarm the globe seeping into every pore of our being. The political aim of the neoliberal project is to pull the whole world into the market and thereby

consolidate class power. Once everything is a commodity, neoliberal propaganda declares, the utopia of market efficiency will be attained. Money is the “ontological gambit” of the neoliberal project.⁸⁰ Advancing as a commodity frontier, market value repeatedly collides with entrenched and defiant human values. The outcome is always the same. Universal equivalence is unstoppable, and money deftly ushers the rich and ragged pluriverse of human meaning into the sleek, dead, efficiency machine of the market.

The thing about money value is its demands are absolute. Even a commodity has different (qualities) use *values* in different contexts, but in the singular *uni*-verse of the market, there is only room for *value*. Human *values* of every other stripe (kinship, beauty, mutual-aid, truth, justice, reciprocity, love etc.) must be gone. And wherever markets go they crowd out all other values and meanings (Sandel 2012, Harvey 2005, Graeber 2013a). The imposition of money severs us from whatever it touches. Money appears like barbwire, cancelling access, enclosing, and annihilating our connections to one another, the world, and ourselves. In exchange for our former ways of meaning we are given arithmetic. In place of our unique, human qualities we are left with pure, lifeless quantity.

The ultimate violence of replacing our traditional human *values* with money *value* is the disappearance of our future. With no connection to our past, humankind is severed from its identity and therefore cannot imagine a future. An individual reduced to a money value, ceases to

⁸⁰ Graeber suggests that ontological claims can be a kind of political move in a context of competing value systems. “It’s only then, when universes collide, that it occurs to anyone to cement one universe’s status by insisting that it is somehow more real than any of the others, or that it has some special purchase on the nature of reality, as in the case of science or revealed religion. We might refer to this as ‘the ontological gambit.’” This often happens by taking tacit, interior infra-values that inform *how* one pursues value and reassembling them as an explicit value in themselves; that is as a meta-value (Graeber 2013a, 232-233). Money, markets, and efficiency offer examples.

have a unique meaning.⁸¹ As a commodity in the market, you no longer matter as you, but only as one more batch of quantity. People experience this eviction from themselves and the world in different ways throughout their lives. And, different people are unplugged on different scales, in different orders and at different rates. These days it is rarely so abrupt or brutal as the first touch of empire. The process has become more subtle and incremental, like a steady drip. Now the market gropes and gnaws at different aspects of our lives, bit by bit (Sandel 2012).

Dispossession of meaning and enclosure of our future imaginary is not finished. It is ongoing. Even in places where money is apparently already everywhere, fugitive humans are still scattered about, clinging to their humanness and wary of exposure. There is hope in the persistence of humans despite the market. Nevertheless, the market continues to worm its way deeper into the world. Our day-to-day life is increasingly infected with money and reduced to sterile quantity. Dehumanized and disconnected people are becoming *extra*.

Control

This estrangement from our “species-being” is elaborated in Marx’s theory of alienation. Dispossession of the means of subsistence, workers own nothing but their labor power. To live, they are compelled to exchange their life-activity; that is their *existence* for money. As their waking life is increasingly subject to the discipline of money, so their consciousness and imaginary is increasingly enclosed. People as commodities, are cut-off from their identity as humans. Through disconnection, people are made unnecessary, interchangeable, *extra*.

⁸¹ “Money has a very positive quality that is designated by the negative concept of lack of character. The individual whom we regard as a weak character is not directed by the inner worth of persons, things or thoughts, but by the external pressure that is brought to bear on him. The fact that money is detached from all specific contents and exists only as a quantity earns for money and for those people who are only interested in money the quality of characterlessness” (Simmel 2004, 232).

The historical process of alienation is not an accidental byproduct of capitalist development. To the contrary, it is the explicit aim of those charged with managing, organizing, and directing the process of capitalist production. Captains of production monomaniacally fix their attention. The white whale of management is *total control of the labor process*.

The object of the capitalist class is money profit. Production must therefore be organized according to principles of pure, monied, efficiency. However, production as *human activity* stands in opposition to the alien will of money.⁸² To the extent that workers maintain control of their own activity (i.e. remain human), monied efficiency is thwarted.⁸³ “It thus becomes essential for the capitalist that control over the labor process pass from the hands of the worker into his own. This transition presents itself in history as the *progressive alienation of the process of production* from the worker; to the capitalist, it presents itself as the problem of *management*” (Braverman 1988, 39-40).

The evolution of capitalist production is a tragic tale of management’s disturbingly successful conquest of human activity. It begins with the *detailed* division of labor, which is nothing more than the division of human life activity.⁸⁴ An insatiable demand for discipline and

⁸² In a study of management and automation Bright writes: “The attempt has been to create timed, predictable, consistent production action on the part of human beings. Yet, such an approach inevitably must be short of perfection. As links or 'resistant bodies' in the supermachine, human beings are not mechanically reliable. They do not consistently 'respond in the desired manner,' nor can they be constrained to do so” (1958, 16-17).

⁸³ Braverman summarizes Frederick Taylor: “So long as they control the labor process itself they will thwart efforts to realize the potential inherent in their labor power” (1988, 69).

⁸⁴ We have much studied and perfected, of late the great civilized invention of the division of labor; only we give it a false name. It is not truly speaking the labour that is divided; but the men: divided into segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin, or the head of a nail. Now it is a good and desirable thing, truly, to make many pins in a day; but if we could only see with what crystal sand their

surveillance then gives rise to the factory as the literal enclosure of human activity. Starting in the late 18th and early 19th century, management begins drawing on the social commons of scientific knowledge to enhance its control. At the end of the 19th century, capitalist management seized the enterprise of science altogether, redirecting it according to money's purpose (ibid. 107 – 109). As private property under capitalist management, science and technology become their opposite. Once intended to expand human capacity, they are now set against the mass of society as a means of abolishing human capacity. Mechanization marks this process and exemplifies the antihuman logic of capitalism. As Braverman notes, “the remarkable development of machinery becomes...the source not of freedom but of enslavement, not of mastery but of helplessness, and not of the broadening of the horizon of labor but of the confinement of the worker within a blind round of servile duties in which the machine appears as the embodiment of science and the worker as little or nothing”(ibid. 134). This tale of conquest is still unfolding.⁸⁵

Technology is fetishized and blamed for the paradoxes, inequity, and despair of capitalism. But before technology becomes its opposite, a very specific set of social arrangements must be in place. There must first of all be a sharp division between those who

points were polished—sands of human soul, much to be magnified before it can be discerned for what it is—we should think there might be some loss in it also. And the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than the furnace blast, is all in very deed for this—that we manufacture everything there except men” (Ruskin 1998, 180).

⁸⁵ Machines increasingly eliminate humans altogether. Digital technology promises total surveillance and uncanny discipline. Each worker in an Amazon warehouse is the slave of a handheld device that gives orders, tracks activity, and directs the overall flow of workers. Algorithms which direct the flow of pickers through Amazon's giant distribution centers are designed to prevent workers from encountering one another and thus socializing (Guendelsberger 2019). Management's dehumanizing grip reaches deeper and deeper into daily existence. In the digital age, we are never *not* at work, and thus, we are never at home.

control and those who execute production. The more disproportionate the division, the more terrifying the prospect. Next, the idea that human existence is a thing that can be chopped into discrete units of time, separated from humans, and exchanged as commodities must be widely accepted. Under such conditions, humans are prepared to experience their life-activity as its own negation. They are ready to be subjected to the labor process engineered for the purpose of those who control it. For workers, compelled by economic necessity to execute management's orders, the terms of the wage contract are clear: *your existence in this endeavor is only possible to the extent that your existence is not your own.*

The anti-human nature of this contract was once so obvious that people chose rather to die in the streets struggling against *wage-slavery* than to accept a life of non-existence. The market's conquest of the human imaginary is now so far along that most people have no memory of such a struggle and cannot fathom a world without wage labor. To remind ourselves of our humanity, it is useful to look more closely at how management's seizure of control severed us from ourselves. The mechanized assembly line is a kind of museum exhibit that dissects and displays the dynamics of alienation.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ The assembly line also resembles Adam Smith's dystopian vision of what the division of labor might do to a human. Smith paints a picture of dehumanization, depression, and despair: "The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention... and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment. The uniformity of his stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his mind... It corrupts even the activity of his body... His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues." (Smith 1986, 302).

Residue

The assembly line develops historically alongside alienation as the material realization of management's singular objective. Taylor argued "control over the labor process must pass into the hands of management, not only in a formal sense but by the control and dictation of each step in the process" (Braverman 1988, 69). The assembly line is the symbolic culmination of management's seizure of labor's conscious control; the final severing of conception from execution and thus, the total dehumanization of labor.

Wage-labor itself entails the alienation of the worker from the products of their labor. What the worker sells is their labor-power. In exchange for the wage, the capitalist claims ownership of labor's products. But this is only the most superficial alienation. An artist might sell a painting and, in this sense, cease to own it. Nonetheless, the painting still exists as a personal expression of the artist's identity. The painting continues to belong to the artist, in the same way that a story always belongs, in some way, to its author.

The assembly line is set up to sever any connection of this kind; to fully eliminate the worker's identity from the product of labor. Strict mechanical prescriptions, enforced by machine discipline, transfer pure homogenized labor-power, into uniform products. If perfected, mechanized standardization will make it impossible for the worker to recognize them self in their own labor.

Moments are the essence of profit. To remove the final traces of human residue from labor's product management slices time into TMUs defined as thirty-six ten-thousandths of a second (ibid., 121). Any potential opening in the labor process through which some personal artifact of the worker's humanity might slip into the product is meticulously engineered out of

existence.⁸⁷ The ideal of mechanical production is to deny the worker any potential to consciously control their own activity. A person denied a conscious role in their activity, is denied an opportunity to be human. They are thus cut-off from their own existence.

Instruments

Like a fractal mechanized control of production offers a microcosmic illustration of a much larger process at work in capitalism whereby means and ends trade places, we lose our sense of agency, and the mode of production becomes a *mode of extinction*.⁸⁸ “Considered in their physical aspect, machines are nothing but developed instruments of production whereby humankind increases the effectiveness of its labor...But within the framework of capitalist social relations, all this is reversed”(ibid. 157).

Everywhere in the factory, the relationship between people and things becomes confused: “it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labor, but the instruments of labor that employ the workman” (Marx 1947, 422). This seems impossible but *agency has traded sides*.

⁸⁷ In describing the evolution of machinery Usher explains, “The parts of the machine are more and more elaborately connected so that the possibility of any but the desired motion is progressively eliminated” (Usher 1959, 117-118)

⁸⁸ “Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour-process, but also a process of creating surplus-value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman. But it is only in the factory system that this inversion for the first time acquires technical and palpable reality. By means of its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labour confronts the labourer, during the labour-process, in the shape of capital, of dead labour, that dominates, and pumps dry, living labour-power. The separation of the intellectual powers of production from the manual labour, and the conversion of those powers into the might of capital over labour, is, as we have already shown, finally completed by modern industry erected on the foundation of machinery. The special skill of each individual insignificant factory operative vanishes as an infinitesimal quantity before the science, the gigantic physical forces, and the mass of labour that are embodied in the factory mechanism and, together with that mechanism, constitute the power of the “master”(Marx 1947, 422).

Tools are now giving the orders and people are their instruments. How is such a situation even imaginable? And, it gets worse:

“To work at a machine, the workman should be taught from childhood, in order that he may learn to adapt his own movements to the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton. When the machinery, as a whole, forms a system of manifold machines,... the motion of the whole system does not proceed from the workman, but from the machinery,” this means, “a change of persons can take place at any time without interruption of the work” (Marx 1947, 420).

In this machine world, tools set people in motion and direct every detail of their life activity. People obey the orders of things. Children are produced according to the needs of machines. People are adjusted to fit tools.⁸⁹ Finally, people are made homogeneous and interchangeable.

If people are replaceable, they have no meaning as individuals. Humans are unnecessary. There is no need for humans in this world because there is no possibility for free, conscious, purposive, life activity. What separates a human from a bee is that a bee’s life activity is algorithmic, whereas a human’s productive activity flows freely from their own imagination. This machine production excludes the human imagination and so excludes humans.

The machine process is only the simplest way to grasp money’s alienating and objectifying effects because the picture is so stark and linear.⁹⁰ We see, at the beginning of the working day, and on one side, humans entering the factory. Inside, they are processed by

⁸⁹ “This attempt to conceive of the worker as a general-purpose machine operated by management is one of many paths taken toward the same goal: the displacement of labor as the subjective element of the labor process and its transformation into an object. Here the entire work operation, down to its smallest motion, is conceptualized by the management and engineering staffs, laid out, measured, fitted with training and performance standards---all entirely in advance. The human instruments are adapted to the machinery of production according to specifications that resemble nothing so much as machine-capacity specifications” (Braverman 1988, 124).

⁹⁰ Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936).

machines that extract and refine their life activity. At the end of the working day, and on the other side, we see the finished products. Emerging from the factory, are the husks of former humans. These shadows of humanity persist only as *extra people*. But this process is not confined to the factory. Alienation and its products are visible everywhere.

IV. Extra People

Wherever money seeps into human existence the result is the same. In an age of global capitalism, the population of extra people is growing all over the planet, just as humans and their world become extinct. Evidence of this swelling population of extra people and the disappearance of humanity is most obvious in the most “developed” parts of the world market. Development is a process of mass extinction. Uneven development is a process of uneven extinction and results in an uneven distribution of extra people.

In the world-system, extra people are concentrated in the metropolises of global capitalism. At the national level, extra people are concentrated in urban centers. Within the city, extra people are concentrated in and around centers of market activity. The impersonal market is no place for humans and market activity itself creates extraneity. Cities are not only hubs of extra production; they are gravitational nodes that draw people in who have been made extra in the countryside. Extra people accumulate in cities through processes of uneven development that generate currents of rural to urban migration (Nell 2018, 14-29). Rural people made extra are severed from the landscape.⁹¹

⁹¹ “Disconnected from the soil, their social metabolism, and their production, they become alienated from their natural environment” (Conde and Walters 2015, 71).

Less than Nothing

What are extra people? What do they look like? How do we know they are extra? What does it mean to be or become extra? What does it feel like?

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines “extra” as a noun three ways:

- (1) An item in addition to what is usual or strictly necessary.
- (2) An item for which an additional charge is made.
- (3) A person engaged temporarily to fill out a scene in a movie or play, especially as one of a crowd.

In the case *extra people*, all three apply. Extra people are former humans, partial humans, and potential humans who have been severed from themselves, one another, and the world. They have lost connection and so become unnecessary. An extra person is extra to the degree that they do not matter. A person who does not matter, cannot mean and does not fit in the world.

Extra people are extras in the sense that they do not have a role. They are what psychologists refer to as “script-less.” They do not affect the plot. They are not needed by people or the world. They are denied a part in the human project. *Things* usually possess more value than extra people. At most, an extra person has a neutral value of zero. The world is indifferent to their existence.

In some cases, extra people have negative value and represent an “additional charge” to society. Their existence is not only unnecessary; it is actually a problem. These people are worth less than nothing. They are in the way. The world is not only indifferent but *adverse* to their existence. They are not merely not needed; they are negatively needed; their non-existence is needed.

Extra people are found wherever money touches human existence. Money makes people extra in relation to things. People are made extra as the world is made scarce. Extra people are visible in concrete categories. Traditionally, extra people have been thought of as the reserve army of the unemployed. This is the most obvious subset of extras. Capitalism necessarily and uniquely generates a group of people who are extra with respect to the demand for labor (the need for people). This has everything to do with money (Keynes 1936 , 235).

Money's Object

Human participation in monetary production is limited by money. As the mode of production is organized around the purpose of money, money begins to appear as a thing separate from human social relations. According to money's purpose, there are only so many roles for humans to occupy. To the extent that humans imagine money as some *thing* outside of themselves, money takes on a life of its own. In the eyes of money, people are mostly extra.

Money is how the economy is dis-embedded from society and things come to dominate people. $M - C - M'$ is the formula by which humans cast off their agency and discover themselves subject to external control. Simmel describes money's peculiar fetishism:

“Never has an object that owes its value to its quality as a means, to its convertibility into more definite values, so thoroughly and unreservedly developed into a psychological value absolute, into a completely engrossing final purpose governing our consciousness” (Simmel 2004, 249).

When the human project is seized from the human imagination, people begin to think scarcity into the world and extraneousness into themselves.

More than anything humans need *to be needed*. The endeavor of money-making employs only as many people as the market demands. And what the market demands is an arbitrary matter of money's animal spirit. When the economy ceases to be embedded in society, the need for people is not up to humans. Money is the objectified representative of human agency in charge

of the need for humans. Taken away from human control and imagined as a thing, this agency becomes scarce. Humans are evicted from the economy.

Over time, money—as the objectified need for humans—becomes scarcer through competition. Competition for money, as well as the role played by money in the competition, together lead to the concentration of money—as the ability to need humans—in fewer and fewer hands. Money, like matter, is drawn to itself as a function of mass, and accumulation begets accumulation. Concentration makes the need for humans increasingly scarce. The paradoxical result is growing hordes of idle money balances on one side, and growing hordes of idle people on the other. Inequality between humans and their own neededness emerges as a possibility when money assumes independence. This inequality is realized with the inevitability of gravity in a system propelled by the accumulation money.⁹²

In the Way

The reserve army of the unemployed is only one category of extra people. However, this category provides the most visibly obvious signs of extraneousness. Homeless and incarcerated people are especially extra. In some cases, particularly for homeless people in the city, their extraneousness is so vividly on display that passersby are forced into a momentary awareness of their own participation in the paradox of money. This is a kind of “encounter with the real” that shakes a person’s consciousness loose for an instant so that they really feel the world. The experience is unsettling, so we try to not see the homeless.

In urban centers, the homeless are violently made to feel their extraneousness. They are constantly and loudly reminded of their negative value as an “additional charge.” The landscape

⁹² Scarcity of the need for people is tied to money’s unique capacity for infinite accumulation. Keynes points out that in addition to its zero elasticity of production and substitution, money has a peculiarly “negligible” carrying-cost (1936 , 233).

is averse to their existence. Cities, and the freeways that connect them, are devised as monuments against human value. “Hostility” and “unpleasantness” are defining features of contemporary urban architecture.⁹³ Steel spikes cover surfaces where a person might rest. At night, extra people sleep on the hard, wet ground in front of towering, empty buildings. Guards are paid and security systems installed to defend the dry, warm nothing inside from the cold, desperate people in the street. Gates, locks, and fences protect nothing from people. A bare slab of concrete is worth more than a person’s existence. The message is clear: *your value is less than nothing*. The housing crisis in Seattle has nothing to do with housing.⁹⁴

Nothing *is* worth more than people. Extras are evicted from the dry nothing under a bridge (Greenstone 2018). Their belongings are thrown in the trash and hauled away in trucks labeled “human services.” Spitefully useless bike-racks are installed there to remind the evicted that they are worth less than nothing and even to suggest how much less (Groover 2017). Expensive new fencing topped with razorblades safeguards the emptiness encircled by a freeway’s off-ramp.⁹⁵ The trouble was people kept trying to exist there. Nothing itself is jealously guarded from the negative value of extras. Benches are made uncompromisingly unfit for people. Massive boulders rest on San Francisco sidewalks so that people cannot (Ho 2019). The world is made scarce.

⁹³ “Hostile architecture” and “unpleasant designs take many shapes, but they share a common goal of exerting some kind of social control in public or in publicly-accessible private spaces. They are intended to target, frustrate and deter people, particularly those who fall within unwanted demographics” (Mars n.d.).

⁹⁴ Amid a housing boom in Seattle, one in ten apartments is empty (Rosenberg 2019).

⁹⁵ I-90 exit to Rainier Avenue Seattle, Washington 2017.

Police in the city carry out the work enforcing extraneousness and keeping the world scarce. Their job is to make sure extras never forget that they do not belong anywhere. They belong nowhere and so truly do not belong. Extras are in the way and must be compelled to feel this. They should recognize themselves as eyesores. A cup of coffee is worth more than their right to urinate. Extraneousness is criminal.

Reciprocity

As capitalism develops in the countryside so too do the ranks of extra people. Beginning in the 1970s, neoliberalism dealt heavy blows to rural America. Economically upended by automation, austerity, and globalization, rural people face compounding problems of social disintegration, dislocation, and despair. Humans dispossessed of their place in the rural landscape are swept into the current of extra people flowing to the city. As humans are made scarce in the country, the money value of the life processes of the soil and forests diminishes. At the same time, the world is made scarce in the city, and the money value of the life processes of humans diminishes. The results of this uneven development are: (1) an accumulation of *extra people in the city*, and (2) an accumulation of *extra land in the country* (Nell 2018).

The actual historical response to this is so antihuman it could only be the product of money's infected imaginary. Extra people from the city are rounded-up, processed, and shipped to the extra land in the country. As a matter of conscious policy, a *prison economy* now thrives in rural America. Since the 1980s "the large-scale use of incarceration to solve social problems has combined with the fall-out of globalization to produce an ominous trend: prisons have become a "growth industry" in rural America" (Huling 2002).

Carceral Keynesianism has yielded an astonishing proliferation of rural prisons. During the 1960s and 1970s, an average of 4 prisons were built in rural America each year. In the 1980s the

average quadrupled to 16 per year. In the 1990s it rose again to 25 per year. On average a rural prison opened every 15 days from 1990 to 1999. By 2002, there were more prisoners than farmers in the U.S. “And while most prisoners in America are from urban communities, most prisons are now in rural areas” (Huling 2002). This is an “economic” win-win for town and country; a mutually beneficial exchange.

Police in the city benefit from a reduced workload of enforcing extrajudicialness and maintaining scarcity. Extras can be dealt with once and for all via deportation to the country. In exchange for warehousing urban extras, money (as the need for people) flows back to the countryside. The dehumanization industry now promises careers in *harm* for rural populations. Outsourced and concentrated in rural storage facilities, the costs of enforcing extrajudicialness are reduced, increasing economic efficiency.

Formerly *in the way*, urban extras now fertilize a cash crop of country cages. Bidding wars have flared up among rural communities in fierce competition for prison development. And beyond recession proof jobs, prisoners come freighted with political power: counted as “rural residents” for Census purposes, urban extras bring political representation and government funding to the countryside (Huling 2002).⁹⁶

Mass incarceration is one index of the rate of growth of extrajudicialness. In the U.S., the prison population has exploded since the dawn of the neoliberal era. In the early 1970s the rate of imprisonment was 100 per 100,000. By 2008, the rate quintupled to 500 per 100,000. The rise of incarceration during this period continues despite declining rates of violent and property crime

⁹⁶ Given the racial demographics of rural incarceration, prison gerrymandering bears a striking resemblance to the three-fifths representation of slaves.

(National Research Council 2014). A criminal record permanently tattoos extraness to an incarcerated person's future.

The reserve army of the unemployed, homeless, and incarcerated is only the tip of the extraness iceberg. By far the largest population is below the surface, submerged in the economy. They are hidden in offices, nailed to desks, staring at screens, filling out forms, and making decent money. As a rule, they revile their fellow extras in the reserve army, and foster resentment for workers that too obviously provide social benefit. This class of extras is employed in a rapidly growing industry that specializes in manufacturing waged, white-collar, non-existence.

Purpose

Keynes had a keen eye for paradoxes of money and capitalism. In 1930, he pointed out that economic *progress* was afflicting society with a “new disease” called “*technological unemployment*.”⁹⁷ This strange symptom of “progress” hinted at a deeper paradox regarding the meaning of money. Keynes was really calling attention to the looming prospect of solving the economic problem. “If the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose.” This is *the* paradox of capitalism. By means of money, the purpose of human existence becomes the abolition of the purpose of human existence. Money directs us to meaninglessness.

But Keynes was optimistic that humans would avoid a “general nervous breakdown” and reframe the economic problem before reaching money's inevitable conclusion. Instead, he predicted we would rid ourselves of the “pseudo-moral principles” of money and replace them

⁹⁷ “This means unemployment due to our discovery of means of economizing the use of labour outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labour” (Keynes 1963).

with “the most sure and certain principles” of human history—“that avarice is a vice, that usury is a misdemeanor, and the love of money is detestable.” Free from money’s rule, “we shall once more value ends above means.” Recognizing their agency, Keynes predicted, people will grasp the real, permanent, economic problem: how to use our freedom “to live wisely and agreeable and well” (Keynes 1963).

Keynes acknowledged that our centuries long training in money’s purpose might make adjusting our habits to the art of living difficult. Accustomed to selling “themselves for the means of life,” people may not understand how to cultivate “the art of life itself.” But the coming century would offer a gradual path of transition. As technology continued to soak up the work of “getting on,” people could begin vital training in the enjoyment of abundance.⁹⁸ During the transition, “we shall endeavor to spread the bread thin on the butter-to make what work there is still to be done to be as widely spread as possible” (Keynes 1963)

That was Keynes prediction ninety years ago.⁹⁹ Productivity gains over the coming century would make “work” obsolete in places like the US and Great Britain. In the interim, “three-hour shifts” and “15-hour weeks” would address humankind’s disorienting withdrawal from the meaning of money.

In 2020, with less than ten years left, we are not even close. Indeed, we are moving in the opposite direction. Usury has acquired social renown as the most virtuous endeavor. A distribution of wealth once “distasteful” is now *deadly*. Fair is worse than foul; it is criminal.

⁹⁸ In his chapter, *Of the Stationary State*, Mill expresses this hope, “There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on” (J. Mill 2004).

⁹⁹ “I draw the conclusion that assuming no important wars and no important increase in population the economic problem may be solved or be at least within sight of solution” (Keynes 1963).

And foul is more than fair; it is mandatory. Love of money defines the heroes of an age when *greed is good*.

The worst part is Keynes was right about productivity growth. But he underestimated the fetishistic capacity of capitalism to seize social products from the hands of humanity and transform them into their opposites. Money, machines, and work become alien authors of human destiny. They set people to “work every day to build for themselves, more ‘modern,’ more ‘scientific,’ more dehumanized prisons of labor” (Braverman 1988, 161). Given capitalist social relations productivity gains are neither pursued or directed for human purposes and thus, never realize their “legitimate effect, that of abridging labour.” So, the question remains whether, “all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day’s toil of any human being” (J. Mill 2004).

Progress

A stubborn myth of capitalist progress is that the market itself has “delivered us from excessive toil.” Debunking this unwisdom, Schor notes the emergence of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries brought us “what were probably the longest and most arduous work schedules in the history of humankind” (Schor 1991, 6). As Sahlins puts it, the market sentenced humans to “a life at hard labor” (Sahlins 1972, 4).

Prior to capitalism, humans typically worked at a more human pace. This includes hunter gatherers and feudal peasants. Reductions in the working day that began in the second half of the 19th century only “occurred because workers struggled mightily against the normal processes that determined the length of working hours. In this sense, leisure exists in spite of rather than as a result of capitalism” (Schor 1991, 7).

In the 1940s, US working hours stopped declining. After the 1960s, US working hours started rising (Schor 2003).¹⁰⁰ All the while, productivity has been increasing. In 1991 Schor explained the situation thusly:

“Since 1948, productivity has failed to rise in only five years. The level of productivity of the U.S. worker has more than doubled. In other words, we could now produce our 1948 standard of living (measured in terms of marketed goods and services) in less than half the time it took in that year. We actually could have chosen the four-hour day. Or a working year of six months. Or, *every worker in the United States could now be taking every other year off from work-with pay*” (Schor 1991, 2).¹⁰¹

Adding the last 30 years of productivity gains could only make this more striking.

Despite the obvious downsides of all these additional hours at work, they should at least be yielding a richer harvest. But Graeber’s 2018 study of US employment concludes, as much as half of work currently performed could be eliminated with no significant impact on productivity. The perversity this situation is so rich it is difficult to grasp. It is not simply that we are choosing to cash in our “productivity dividend” as consumption instead of leisure. Somehow, we get the worst of both worlds. We work more, but mostly for no reason. We found a way to not eat our cake and not have it too. It turns out the economic possibilities for Keynes’s grandchildren are mostly bullshit.

Bullshit

So, what is going on? Graeber provides an answer in a 2013 article “On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs.” Keynes was way too optimistic. Instead of discarding our pathological love of

¹⁰⁰ Between 1973 and 2003, “the average American worker added 199 hours to his or her annual schedule—or nearly 5 additional weeks per year (assuming a 40 hour workweek)” (Schor 2003, 7).

¹⁰¹ What Schor helps us conceptualize is the “productivity dividend.” Whenever productivity rises, society is presented a choice, more leisure or more stuff. The issue is that under capitalism is this is not a collective choice made in the interest humans or their world. Rather it is up to the decisions of capitalist who will always choose money (Schor 1991, 2).

money and devoting ourselves to the art of living, we chose rather to double-down on money and pursue a world of meaningless bullshit. The result as Keynes predicted, has been a “general nervous breakdown” now manifest in the crisis despair and mass extinction.

A growing portion of jobs are as the name implies “bullshit” (BS). That is, they are pointless, unnecessary, and serve no meaningful purpose. The easiest way to identify BS is to ask how the world would change if a particular class of jobs were to simply disappear? It is obvious that without nurses, teachers, bus drivers, mechanics, dockworkers, and janitors we would immediately face catastrophe. The disappearance of artists, musicians, poets, and “science-fiction” authors, generates a less urgent, but equally upsetting prospect. On the other hand, it is not obvious how (or even if) humanity would suffer from a similar disappearance of private equity CEOs, lobbyists, corporate lawyers, PR researchers, telemarketers, and swelling administrative ranks in education, healthcare and the corporate sector (Graeber 2013b). And our mental health would certainly improve if we did not fill the world with the social poison of advertising.

An important point here is that BS jobs are not generally menial. People who work in services and retail for example do not fall into this class. Most BS jobs are relatively prestigious, well-paid, and include decent benefits. They are white collar, office jobs, in HR, marketing, administration, and middle management. But despite the apparent comfort of such positions, most people who have BS jobs are miserable, depressed, confused and lonely. This indicates that prevailing assumptions concerning human nature and the value of work are off base. It turns out that *meaning* is worth a lot more than *money*.

The Purpose of Being Unnecessary

The rise of BS shows up in the changing composition of US and UK employment between 1910 and 2000. The number of workers employed as domestic servants in agriculture and industry has declined precipitously. During the same period, the share of employment classed as professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and services has increased “from one-quarter to three-quarters of total employment” (Graeber 2018, xvii). Conventional, neoliberal, interpretations of this invoke the myth of consumer sovereignty: individuals have chosen to cash society’s productivity dividend for more consumption rather than less work. But this is obviously not true if we just consider the types of jobs and industries that have been created. As predicted, real productive jobs that yield consumer goodies, *have* largely been automated away. And the new “administrative” sector does not actually produce anything (Graeber 2013b).¹⁰²

How BS proliferates in a system of monied efficiency is puzzling. Graeber proposes the answer is moral and political. The gist of his argument centers on the theological origins and political expedience of the view that identifies work’s value in sacrifice, toil, suffering, discipline, and self-abnegation.¹⁰³ For the ruling class—ever fearful of the idle mob— “the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient” (Graeber 2013b).

¹⁰² Graeber (2013b) notes this is true, “even if you count industrial workers globally, including the toiling masses in India and China, such workers are still not nearly so large a percentage of the world population as they used to be.”

¹⁰³ This view has theological roots in the Book of Genesis and was periodically reinvigorated to cope with historical moments of social upheaval such as the birth of the proletariat. In the 19th century, the task of upholding the Gospel of Work was handed off from the Puritans and Protestants to the hired prize fighters of the bourgeoisie who would reassert the sacrificial virtue of labor as a matter of economic science.

As Orwell put it in 1933, “I believe that this instinct to perpetuate useless work is at bottom, simply fear of the mob...it is safer to keep them too busy to think” (Orwell 2010, 354). Even better is keeping the mob busy propping up the ruling class. An entire class of BS workers that Graeber calls “flunkies” is exclusively dedicated to this role. A flunky’s job exists to make someone else look or feel important. In a world where corporate structures increasingly reflect feudal relations, one’s rank is marked by the number of people directly under their control (Graeber 2018, 28). A newly promoted administrator expects to be awarded a retinue of four or five assistants. Whether or not there is any actual work for them to do is beside the point. This is really about conspicuous display. As such a flunky’s real task is a matter of fealty. Insecure and self-aware of their own redundancy, flunkies must demonstrate reverence and respect for their boss. Especially when the overarching enterprise is itself meaningless or harmful, it is vital for flunkies to help rationalize the enterprise and validate their bosses own sense of self-worth. A flunky’s economic survival depends on aligning them self with the interests of their higherups.

The case of flunkies is particularly stark example the broader politics of BS. More generally, the entire stratum of BS workers acts as a buffer between the rabble and the one percent. Although they are basically paid to do nothing, BS workers occupy “positions designed to make them identify with the perspectives and sensibilities of the ruling class” (Graeber 2013b). This nourishes a divisive politics of resentment that prevents solidarity among the masses while diverting attention and anger away from elites. The indignity of doing work that one knows is meaningless fosters a sense of rage and resentment. But for those who align with elites, the only outlet for that anger runs down the economic ladder. The moral doctrine that identifies the value of work with suffering helps fuel resentment toward those with meaningful jobs. For example, if you do something like teach elementary school, you aren’t really suffering,

and therefore do not really deserve decent pay and benefits. This, Graeber suggests, is why right-wing populism targets teachers and autoworkers rather than CEOs and financiers.

Meaningless

Graeber defines BS as follows: “a bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend this is not the case” (2018, 9). By definition then, people who work in BS jobs are performing the work of *being extra*. They are not paid to produce anything. They are really paid to not be human.

This definition means BS is empirically slippery. Since it is ultimately a matter of subjective experience, the only way to really measure the BS sector is via self-reported data. Surveys show that BS is booming. Between 2011 and 2012 Gallup conducted a massive survey of how people feel about their work. Their sample included millions of people across 142 countries. The results indicate that 87 percent of people do not like what they do, and almost twice as many people hate their job as love it.¹⁰⁴ And as Hari notes, this thing “that now takes up most of our waking lives” and “that 87 percent of us don’t enjoy is spreading over more and more of our lives” (Hari 2018, 64). A recent survey of work time in the age of email shows that

¹⁰⁴ The results indicate that only 13 percent feel “engaged” in their jobs; that is, “enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and contribute to their organization in a positive manner.” By contrast 63 percent identify as “not engaged,” meaning “sleepwalking through their workday, putting time—but not energy or passion—into their work.” The remaining 24 percent are “actively disengaged.” Gallup explains these people “aren’t just unhappy at work; they’re busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish...Actively disengaged employees are more or less out to damage their company” (c.f. Hari 2018, p.64).

“nine to five is a relic of the past. Today the average worker checks their work email at 7:42 am, gets to the office at 8:18 am and leaves at 7:19 pm” (Fleming 2015, 42).

Additional polls more specifically target the meaning of work. A 2015 YouGov poll in the UK indicates that of those working full-time, only 50% felt certain their job made “any sort of meaningful contribution to the world” and 37% were “quite sure it did not.”¹⁰⁵ In 2017, a similar poll of workers in Holland “put latter number as high as 40%” (Graeber 2018, p. 6).¹⁰⁶ In addition to the rising number of BS jobs, there is also an ongoing process of “bullshitization,” colonizing otherwise productive jobs with meaningless work. This is all too familiar to teachers in higher education who devote more and more time to filling out forms about student success rates, and so have less time to help students succeed. But this is true for office workers in general. Summarizing a 2016-2017 *State of Enterprise Work Report*, Graeber remarks “if nothing else, the survey makes abundantly clear that (1) more than half of working hours in American offices are spent on bullshit, and (2) the problem is getting worse” (ibid. p. 24).

Something for Nothing

People who find themselves caught in meaningless jobs frequently describe the experience with terms like “soul-crushing” or “soul-destroying.”¹⁰⁷ Anyone who has ever had a

¹⁰⁵ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2015/08/12/british-jobs-meaningless>

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.sn.nl/inspiratie/vitaliteit-stress-en-werkdruk/4-op-de-10-medewerkers-vinden-hun-werk-niet-zinvol/>

¹⁰⁷ Marjorie, a secretary, describes her work as “absolutely soul-destroying.” Marmot who studies the relation between work and health within the British Civil Service, writes: “the thing that characterizes Marjorie’s work is...she has no discretion to decide anything at all” (Hari 2018, 68). Marmot explains how effects of this kind of work spill into your life, “when it’s deadening,” you feel “shattered at the end of the day, just shattered.” Stress comes not from responsibility, but rather enduring work that is, “monotonous, boring, soul-destroying.” Subjected to this kind of work “they die a when they come to work each day, because their work touches no part of them that is them.”” (ibid. 69).

BS job knows the feeling. I once worked in construction management and my job was to be there on the jobsite. That was it. There was nothing to do, but I had to be there. It occurred to me that I was essentially being paid for the purely negative act of not pursuing my own projects. I came to appreciate the expression “doing time.” There is something peculiarly perverse about your survival depending very specifically on you not “doing you.” When you are trapped in a BS job, your existence depends on your own non-existence.

The way BS goes to work on a person’s psyche, generating feelings of disorientation and despair is more complicated and terrible than one might expect. Enforced meaningless is a special form of cruelty that robs a person of their sense of identity and self-worth. Indeed, enforced nothingness is a disciplinary measure used to punish prisoners, who generally prefer work. And “shit jobs,” which involve onerous but meaningful work, are generally preferred to meaningless bullshit (Graeber 2018, 82). These facts run against a widespread misconception of human nature that suggests getting paid to do nothing is generally desirable; “something for nothing.”¹⁰⁸ The power of the misconception is revealed in the perplexity expressed by many who cannot understand why a BS job leaves them feeling so depressed and worthless. Ambiguity regarding the source of one’s suffering tends to compound despair.

In Hari’s 2018 investigation of the causes of mental illness, number one on the list is disconnection from meaningful work. A study of 18,000 workers in the British civil service examined the relation between stress and work. This research revealed yet another widespread misconception. Most people assume that bosses experience higher levels of stress than underlings. The study’s findings indicate just the opposite. People at the top of the hierarchy

¹⁰⁸ Veblen writes of this pervasive misconception. “According to the common-sense-ideal, the economic beatitude lies in an unrestrained consumption of goods, without work” (Veblen 1899).

were four times less likely to have a heart attack than those at the bottom and the risk of depression *fell* step-by-step as a person's rank in the civil service *rose*. Subsequent studies then controlled for rank. What they found was stress, distress, and depression are all correlated to an individual's discretion and *control* of their work. Lead researcher, Michael Marmot concludes: "Disempowerment is at the heart of poor health" (Hari 2018, 69).

A spate of suicides among tax workers in the civil service spurred a new study. This research led to the identification of different driver of workplace despair. In the tax office, the flow of work was so constant that regardless of how hard someone worked, they would never get ahead. If a tax inspector worked extremely hard and gave it their best, nobody noticed. If they checked out and did a poor job, nobody noticed, either. What Marmot concluded was that despair was a consequence of a "lack of balance between efforts and rewards." For a worker in this environment the message is you do not matter. You are irrelevant. "Nobody cares what you do" (Hari 2018, 70).

The real psychological trauma of a BS job reaches beyond meaninglessness. As Graeber's definition specifies, BS jobs are not only pointless, they entail an *obligation to conceal your true feelings and to uphold a pretense that you care*. Thus, one is forced into a kind of emotional self-betrayal while outwardly performing a lie. The word "bullshit" is precise in this context because it implies dishonesty and manipulation. To "bullshit" someone is to mislead them. As Hari notes, a common symptom of depression is "derealization—which is where you feel like nothing you are doing is authentic or real" (2018, 64). Upholding a false pretense is also socially isolating. People who cannot be themselves cannot connect with others. Lying is lonely.

Telemarketers are experts in the indignity of enforced dishonesty (see Guendelsberger 2019). Their work really comes down to attempting to trick and coerce another person into

something they know is a scam. The perversity of this particular situation as Graeber points out is that the telemarketer ultimately confronts the same coercion as their victim: both parties are being manipulated under the pressure of the employer. But for the worker, there is added shame in knowing that you are scamming someone whose side you should be on. The feeling associated with this variety of indignity is so complicated we “don’t even really have a name for it” (Graeber 2018, 74).

A critical aspect of the indignity of BS is being made to feel and perform your extraneous. This is the case especially when you are surveilled and thus obliged to “look busy.” In a relation of wage-labor what you sell to your employer is your time (i.e. existence). The essence of the contract is that your time is not your own. Regardless of whether there is any work to do, any attempt to take possession of yourself is a property crime: wage-theft. You are obliged to demonstrate that you are not pursuing any conscious purpose of your own. The contract stipulates that you are being paid to not be your human-self. Your wage is conditional on your personal non-existence.

Self-Destruction

To understand the unique harm made possible by this arrangement, it useful to consider what it means to be a human self. At the start of the 20th century, the German psychologist Karl Groos observed that infants express extreme delight upon realizing their ability to *matter* in the world by producing predictable effects, e.g. by pushing a toy across the floor. Groos dubbed this “the pleasure at being the cause.” Remarkably, this simple observation challenges a core assumption regarding human motivation that underpins western social philosophy and particularly economics (Graeber 2018, 83).

The standard account of motivation is that human's seek power based on an inherent will to dominate, or else, to ensure access to resources and reproductive success. By contrast, Groos's work suggests that "the pleasure at being the cause" is tied up with a child's development of a sense of their own existence as a discrete entity in the world. The experience of predictably being a cause of some effect in the world is the experience of discovering that you exist.¹⁰⁹ Groos's findings suggest this pleasure at *merely being*, "remains the fundamental background of all subsequent human experience" (ibid.).

Groos went on to propose a theory of human play that regards our creation of imaginary worlds in games or stories, for example, as an extension of "the pleasure at being a cause." Play reveals how we humans can become deeply invested and even lost in arbitrary worlds of our own imagination. Rules and outcomes of imaginary games have very real effects on human emotion, experience, and development (Bloch 2008). Even when we do not believe in our imagined worlds, we can still be moved by them in significant ways. Indeed, it seems the greater the capacity of our contrivances to affect us, the more delight they can bring us (Graeber 2013a, 231). The best forms of play are those we find most engaging.

Humans can and do imagine worlds in order to experience their own existence as an intentional cause. Consider artistic expression. For Groos, this is the meaning of human freedom. Humans exercise their ability to make things up for the sheer pleasure of being able to do so. Being a cause of a definite effect in the world is an end in itself. Human freedom is realized through the expression of our ability to be the cause of our own effects (ibid. p. 85).

¹⁰⁹ Through activity a child "begins a process that eventually yields the sense that the locus and origins of these achievements is in himself. When the child thus feels the change as originating within himself, he begins to have a sense of being himself, a psychologically, not simply physically, autonomous unit" (Klein 1976).

In the context of human development, the pleasure at being the cause is how we arrive at our existence as a being in the world; as a self.¹¹⁰ In the context of BS, we are concerned with what happens to a human who is denied a chance to exercise this ability? Child development gives a clue. Experiments demonstrate that “if one first allows a child to discover and experience the delight in being able to cause a certain effect, and then suddenly denies it to them, the results are dramatic: first rage, refusal to engage, and then a kind of catatonic folding in on oneself and withdrawing from the world entirely” (ibid. 84). In psychiatry this phenomena is called the “trauma of failed influence” and it is theorized that traumatic experiences of “failed influence” may cause mental illness (Broucek 1979).

The indignity of BS work is more than simply an assault on a person’s sense of self-esteem or self-importance. It is deeper than that. A person trapped in a BS job is not just being forced to do something meaningless. They are also being treated as if they are doing something meaningful and obliged to uphold the pretense that they are doing something meaningful, while being dreadfully aware that they are not. Worse than insulting one’s self-worth, this is an “attack on the very foundations of the sense that one even *is* a self. A human being unable to have a meaningful impact on the world ceases to exist” (Graeber 2018, 84).

A human who ceases to exist as a human becomes an extra person. Severed from meaning they are unnecessary. An extra person in a BS job confronts a total imbalance of effort and reward. The despair this causes is heightened by the obligation to perform a lie of meaning and balance. Humans created the Anthropocene. In the process we lost our sense of agency. The intersubjective game of money we make, and remake, daily has seized control. Mass extinction

¹¹⁰ “The primary sense of self emerges from effectance pleasure associated with the successful correspondence of intention and effect” (Broucek 1977, 86).

is the “trauma of failed influence” experienced on a global scale. Humans are withdrawing from the world entirely leaving only extra people. Mass extinction is the very real outcome of our own imaginary world.

V. Recalling the Future

Before they can get to work producing a world fit for humans, people need to be able to imagine a such a place. The trick is how to start. Our imaginary is a product of our day-to-day social activity and existence. In the increasingly commodified world of BS, we perform the work of dispossessing ourselves of our own agency. Every day, we push that agency further from ourselves and deeper into money’s alien pockets. People need a way out. We need an escape hatch.

The good news is that humans are still around despite the market, and so is a world fit for them. The human world of abundance never actually went away. Indeed, most of us secretly steal moments of our human lives back from beyond the commodity frontier (Conde and Walters 2015). We are humans with our friends and family. The problem is that the human world is increasingly privatized, surveilled, enclosed, and hidden from view. It is there but behind imaginary walls. At behest of money, we build these walls and rebuild them daily; making the world scarce.

Breaking out of money’s rule is no small feat. How do we change our minds when our minds are the products of our lives? How do we change our lives when our lives are the products of the world? The degrowth movement is an invitation for humans to help one another unlearn markets, money, scarcity and toil through dreaming up alternative worlds (Saundberg 2014). The environmental justice movement is a reminder that we do not have to start from scratch (Singh 2019). Memories of the future exist in the present (Todd 2016).

B.I.G.

Stupidly small steps can make a big difference in addressing the imaginary crisis of mass extinction. A basic income guarantee (BIG) is proposed as a way out of the market by many who recognize mass extinction is fundamentally a crisis of capitalism and human meaning.¹¹¹ Honest proponents of a BIG, present it as an escape hatch out commodified and dehumanizing market dependence. In this case, a BIG expands the zone of unconditional access to life that is nascent in welfare-state policies like universal health care and free education.¹¹² If capitalist managers no longer stand between people and money, people are free to pursue their own conscious productive activity (i.e. human activity). Essentially, a BIG *liberates work from money*.

But for some, the idea of freeing *work from money* is the wrong way to think about a BIG. So long as the meaning of “work” remains mired in the puritanical frame of self-sacrifice, then *work* itself is the thing we are trying to eliminate not liberate. “Work” understood as onerous drudgery is the bogeyman. Viewed from this perspective, the point of a BIG is rather to “detach livelihood from work” (Graeber 2018, 279). Livelihood (income) is the thing we are trying to set free; that is, *liberating income from work*. However, this cedes too much conceptual territory to the puritanical ideology of work that serves the neoliberal project. Neoliberalism wants us to view work (human activity) as suffering. Framing the BIG in this way implicitly accepts the premises of the neoliberal project.

¹¹¹ Graeber (2018), Hari (2018), Alexander (2015, 2012), Pullinger (2014).

¹¹² Unlike conservatives who see a meager basic income as a pretext to eliminate existing aspects of the welfare state.

Ideology Work

The idea that work is a bad thing, follows directly from the foundational assumptions of neoclassical economic theory. These assumptions themselves set up the argument that the impersonal market is the solution to every problem. Neoclassical economics is one big “ontological gambit” that asserts market efficiency as *the* meta-value of human existence. By way of aggressively abstruse maths and the weaponization boredom, neoclassical economists claim a special scientific status. They are authorities on the optimal organization of human society.¹¹³ But the entire enterprise rests on the very shaky frame of the *homo oeconomicus*.

The neoclassical model starts with this asocial individual as the representative human. They have a given set of preferences and a given endowment of resources. By nature, humans are assumed to be rational, self-interested, utility-maximizers. The world is scarce because individuals are assumed to be insatiably greedy consumers. As rational beings, humans are inherently averse to productive activity. Work is irksome and yields disutility. Humans will therefore only work if the utility of the wage exceeds the disutility of work. The only way to coax a human out of their naturally lazy stupor, is by offering them something like a monetary reward... Skipping ahead a few steps, it follows that the optimal way to allocate resources is

¹¹³ This is really the stuff of an “ontological gambit.” As Graeber explains: “It’s only then, when universes collide, that it occurs to anyone to cement one universe’s status by insisting that it is somehow more real than any of the others, or that it has some special purchase on the nature of reality, as in the case of science or revealed religion...After all, “reality,” if it is to mean anything, must always be that which lies beyond our imaginative constructions, or at the very least, which always contains some properties that extend beyond anything we can think or say about it. That is both undeniable, yet ultimately incomprehensible. As such they allow a similar Archimedean point, and identifying oneself with such ultimate realities, a way of claiming the authority to mediate between value spheres” (2013a, 232 - 233).

through the free market. Price signals will only work efficiently when the whole world is in the market.

The economists' depiction of human nature is obviously flawed and so is the model that flows from it. Nonetheless, it has very successfully colonized our collective imaginary. Starting with "inadequacy of means" as "the first principle" it not surprising we find scarcity in the world (Sahlins 1972, 3). But scarcity is socially instituted in the same way that needs are social products (Matthei 1984). Paleolithic societies lived in a world of abundance because they never imposed "obsessions of scarcity." Similarly, *homoeconomicus*'s aversion to work is deeply embedded in our imaginary. "Many a discussion proceeds on this axiom that, so far as regards economic matters, men desire above all things to get the goods produced by labor and to avoid the labor by which the goods are produced" (Veblen 1899). This explains the confusing despair that attends the supposedly ideal situation of being paid to do nothing. "Just as a prisoner in solitary confinement inevitably begins to experience brain damage, the worker deprived of any sense of purpose often experiences mental and physical atrophy" (Graeber 2018, 122).

The point here is these are the shoddy foundations of the model neoliberalism aims to establish. The model is clearly wrong. But apparently when the model does not fit reality there are two ways to proceed: (1) scrap the model and start over, (2) smash the world into the model. The commodification of everything is an attempt to carry out option (2). The result of this effort is mass extinction. For this reason, we should not cede the ideological terrain of *human nature* and its attendant concept of *work* to neoliberalism. Instead we should scrap neoclassical theory and its sociopathic foundations. One way to do this is by reclaiming work (Singh 2019).

Starting from the opposite view, what makes us human is our free, conscious, social, productive activity. *Work*, in other words, is what makes us human. Work is human activity.

Remembering this is a necessary part of turning our mode of production right-side-in. I say “remember” because those Paleolithic humans who never discovered scarcity also never discovered poverty and did not distinguish work from play (Sahlins 1972). BIG understood as the liberation of work from money is an important step, but it does not go far enough.

A BIG is an escape hatch. It rescues those trapped in BS jobs from economically coerced nonexistence. A BIG itself increases an extra person’s value from negative to zero. The message is: “Fine. You can be here. You are not in the way. You are no longer worth less than nothing.” “Nothing” is better than worthless, but it is still not much. Simply surviving does not make you human.

Honest proponents of a BIG do not actually believe humans are averse to work. Rather they believe that people liberated from meaningless wage-slavery will use their freedom to pursue real human activity (S. Alexander 2015). People will spend time with friends and family. People will build better more meaningful relationships. They will pursue their passion and curiosity. They will enjoy their lives. They will make music and art. They will volunteer. They will organize politically. And they will have more time to care for one another and the world. Simply, reducing the total amount of time and energy consumed by in the incessant pace of capitalist production will no doubt take pressure off the biosphere (Graeber 2018). This is the hope of BIG proponents and a kind of ideal scenario. But would it really work?

Maybe, and we should definitely try. However, this scenario might be too optimistic. It is, as Keynes’s prediction illustrates, possible to underestimate just how far we have come in forgetting how to be human. Centuries of capitalist production have forced money value deep into our consciousness. Today, many people are so disconnected from themselves, one another, and the world they may need more than a way out. They might need some help remembering

how to be human. Some people have been denied access to care for so long they might not remember how.

People who have really been unplugged, are lost. They are lost to the world. They are lost to themselves. They are alone. They do not fit *anywhere*. They do not belong and do not know how. These people need help. And we all might need more help than we recognize. A BIG can and should be more than sufficient for a person's every physiological need. But what humans really need is *meaning* not money.

Meaning Work

Mass extinction is a crisis of meaning. The crisis of meaning can be understood by thinking of mass extinction as a problem of population. People have become extra in relation to the world. The world is scarce because we produce extra people and "extra" implies *too many*. This is exactly how and why mass extinction is a problem of *meaning*. We are not anthropocentric enough.

Viewed anthropocentrically, the population crisis is the other way around. The problem is that there are not enough humans. We have created a world where money monopolizes meaning and value, and *in terms of money*, people are extra. In this world, humans are unnecessary. They are denied access to meaning and value because they are not needed.

If people are not needed and not valued, they cannot be human. A world fit for humans is one where humans are able to mean and have value. Shared meaning and value define the social world. For a person to belong to a social world, they must have a role in shared meaning and value. A person is valued when others care about them. A person finds meaning through caring for others and the world. To become human and have meaning a person must care. To care is to mean. To mean is to be needed. And above all people need to be needed.

A BIG is a way out of the crisis of meaning, but just a way out. It removes the obstacle of money that stands between people and themselves as humans. But a BIG does not offer a way forward. If someone has never been out of their cage and you open the door, they might not feel liberated. They might just be confused. The real problem for most people who are in despair is meaninglessness. A person in despair needs not only to *not be cut-off from meaning*. They need *a way to meaning*. A BIG opens the door. A way forward is something like a job guarantee JG.

The real value of a JG is in terms of meaning not money. If a BIG promotes a person from a negative value to zero, a JG offers a way to positive value. A JG becomes a revolutionary possibility to the extent that it goes to work on the meaning and value of work. By reminding people of their collective agency in defining meaning and value, it offers a way out of the colonized imaginary of mass extinction.

Make-Work

A JG should be a policy of “make-work.” It should set out to make work meaningful. It should reclaim the meaning of work. The meaning of work under capitalism is hostage to money value. For money, work is drudgery. It is what people have to do to in the market to survive. Work is puritanical sacrifice. It causes disutility. Work is the opposite of play, an onerous means to soulless existence. Satisfaction is out there in things, commodities. Having, owning, and excluding are sources of utility according to money. Pleasure becomes a function of scarcity. The opportunity cost money is human life. Human existence (time) is exchanged for money. Extra people’s activity/existence is endured as a sacrifice to money and things. Thinking this way is how we come to see our lives as a means to an end that is forever deferred. This concept of work is just one piece of the bigger ideology that makes the world scarce and people extra; the antihuman ideology of the capitalist mode of mass extinction.

But this one piece is terribly important because work is our day-to-day existence. Its meaning defines the possible ways we can fit into the collective human project of creating ourselves and the world. As the center of our social existence, work plays the essential role in shaping our social consciousness. In order, to imagine a way out of capitalism we have to start by acting our way out. BIG opens the door. A JG is a place to go. A BIG means you are not in the way. A JG means you belong.

A JG will help us reclaim human existence and create an anthropocentric economy to the extent that we recognize this potential. A JG is not and should not be viewed as a part of a Green New Deal. The New Deal of the 1930s was a way to save capitalism.¹¹⁴ The goal of an anthropocentric economy is the opposite. It is to save humans and the world from capitalism. An anthropocentric JG is not about a quantitative increase of output and employment. It is about a qualitative transformation work and the economy. The Great Depression involved a failure to “account for the *level* of employment.” Now we must “account for the *content* of employment” (Robinson 1972, 6). This might sound like a lot to ask of a reformist, Keynesian, employment policy, but if you think about it, the whole premise fits in a historical materialist framework.

Revolutionary Work

Marx identifies the perversity of capitalism in *production*. The labor theory of value exposes how humans are means of producing wealth and not the other way around. The core of

¹¹⁴ Bernes writes: “The goal of the New Deal was to get capitalism to do what it already wanted to do: put people to work, exploit them, and then sell them the products of their own labor. The state was necessary as a catalyst and a mediator, setting the right balance between profit and wages, chiefly by strengthening the hand of labor and weakening that of business. Aside from the fact that it involves capital outlays that are much larger, the Green New Deal has a more difficult ambition: rather than get capitalism to do what it wants to do, it has to get it to pursue a path that is certainly bad for the owners of capital in the long run” (Bernes 2019).

Marx's critique of focuses on the labor process and what it does to humans. In the commodified world of monetary production, human activity is set against itself. Social relations start to appear as the relations between things. Workers become alienated from themselves, each other, and the world. The critique of the capitalist mode of *production* is a critique of the *labor process*. It is a call for workers of the world to reclaim *work*.

A JG can go to work on our daily activity, redefining it and revaluing it. Our mode of production is inside out. To turn it right-side-in we need to remind ourselves what we are doing. We produce and reproduce ourselves and our world. Work is the activity of social reproduction should be valued in relation to this goal. What counts as productive when we think of work this way is care. Caring for each other and the world is how we create meaningful lives for ourselves and a world fit for humans.¹¹⁵

Care is a human activity defined by its humanness. Care is the conscious direction of human energy toward the production of humans and their world. The activity of care resists markets, money, and measurement. Care's value is strictly a qualitative matter of life-giving and cannot be quantified, reproduced, or even counted by a machine. Care cannot be automated. Care is why we still have humans and a world. Care is the way humans resist *impersonal* market forces. Care is anti-capitalist struggle.

¹¹⁵ As Singh explains: Caring for nature plays an important role in human well-being. Care work is not only important for sustenance of life, but also from the perspective of producing subjectivities and a sense of being in common with the world. In caring for nature, the self is transformed from isolated to relational, and nature is drawn in as a dynamic actor shaping human subjectivity and conditions for life. Expanding the realm of care from human to more-than-human communities helps us to imagine ecological restoration work as potential venue for engaging creative energies for human labour beyond alienated wage labour. In view of the critical importance of ecological restoration for the future of life on the planet, it helps to visualize the task of ecological restoration as the work of our times and as future work that is meaningful and restorative – not only to humans but to the rest of the planet – and an alternative to production that erodes earth's regenerative capacities (Singh 2019, 141).

Care cannot be assigned a money value. But that does not mean it should not be recognized, encouraged, promoted, and rewarded. The real reward for care is meaning. Humans who provide care matter. They are needed because what they do matters. People realize human meaning through being needed by other humans and the world. Capitalism is antihuman because it is anti-care. When people work for money, care and compensation move in opposite directions. As Graeber puts it, “there seems a rule general that, the more obviously one’s work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it” (2013). The other side of the coin is that the more harm one does the more one is likely to get paid.¹¹⁶

The way we can recognize and reward care, then, is through a *meaning* guarantee. A BIG liberates work from money. A meaning guarantee is a promise that anyone who is willing and able to care, will be provided a way to care. Universal access to care is a universal right to be human. This reverses the capitalist logic of bullshitization. The surge of the BS sector is the latest way to soak up the growing surplus population of extra people created by fetishized human productivity turned against humans. BS jobs pay people to not be human. A *meaning guarantee* offers a way to be human. The reward is meaning in place of despair.

Human Work

A JG is a BIG plus a meaning guarantee. People are given an income and offered a way to mean. Some people only need to be set free from capitalist production. They already care and know how to mean. But some others need help. The JG accompanies the BIG by guaranteeing

¹¹⁶ Veblen makes a similar argument: “With more or less sincerity, people currently avow an aversion to useful effort. The avowal does not cover all effort, but only such as is of some use; it is, more particularly, such effort as is vulgarly recognized to be useful labor. Less repugnance is expressed as regards effort which brings gain without giving a product that is of human use, as, for example, the effort that goes into war, politics, or other employments of a similar nature” (Veblen 1899).

people a role in the social project of mutually creating ourselves and the world. This means beyond redefining work a JG should be “make work” in another sense. To transition from a world where most people are extra, to one where everyone is human, we need to make—that is imagine and create—lots of new ways for people to care for one another and the world.

An anthropocentric mode of production is organized in the interest of humankind. If our collective project is human flourishing, then people should be “paid” not only to care one another and the world, but also themselves. If we want a rich healthy world filled with lots of happy healthy friends and neighbors, then we should pay people to be healthy, to socialize, to pursue their passions, to go to school, to make friends, to exercise, to visit the doctor, to talk to a therapist, to sleep-in, to eat healthy food. People need to play. We should pay them to.

Play is work in an anthropocentric economy because play produces humanness. We need to come up with lots of new ways for people to be human. We should pay people to think of more and better ways for people to play and communicate and connect. Caring for ourselves is caring for one another. Caring for one another is caring for the world. Caring for the world is how we belong. This is the work of being human.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I started this project almost a decade ago. Long stretches of time, thought, teaching and reading separate each essay. The chapters are related, but also reflect changes in my thinking. The final essay, in particular, indicates how my thought has evolved since leaving Kansas City. Sprawling and philosophical it lacks the precision of the first two essays. However, in my mind, it is the richest most honest part of the text. It attempts to deal with big questions that lurk in the shadows of the first two essays.

All the ideas here are preliminary sketches, food for thought. They are intended to provoke. Criticism and rejection are welcome in as much as they entail consideration. The degrowth movement is appealing on account of its humility and pluralism. It only has one commitment: the current system is not working. From there, the movement is incredibly open-ended; welcoming various disciplines, competing proposals, opposing ideologies, and contending strategies. The goal of the movement is not a silver bullet, but rather to bring together, examine, consider, and discuss every possible way forward. Hopefully, in the process a future emerges. My dissertation is offered in this spirit.

I

The proposed DGJG model of the first essay is a thought experiment that I began during the Great Recession. The question is how to restore employment without making the environmental crisis worse. The model measures degrowth narrowly as a reduction of GDP. The DG movement rightly argues for a rejection of GDP and its replacement with measures that both (better) reflect human well-being and account for the environment. However, the movement also acknowledges that degrowth will require a reduction of GDP. The notion of “reducing GDP” is

useful in terms of communicating this reality. Like “degrowth” it is a provocative slogan meant to reassert the impossibility of techno-optimist, win-win, green growth solutions. Degrowth is not about reducing GDP but it does require a reduction of GDP.

The use of GDP also serves a different purpose. Part of my goal was to bring vital research coming out of UMKC to the degrowth movement. The JG is more than just a policy. It is rooted in an understanding of monetary production (following Marx, Veblen, and Keynes) as well as modern money theory (MMT). Most importantly, the DGJG is built on an understanding of Keynes’s theory of effective demand. The theory of effective demand explains why a capitalist economy must grow, why it is not likely to grow fast enough, and how jobs are related to GDP. Finally, it elucidates key paradoxes of a monetary economy that place capitalism at odds with the planet and its inhabitants.

The model, while highly simplistic and politically far-fetched, provides a way to start thinking about what reducing production and consumption might look like outside of economic collapse. In other words, what would it actually mean to *voluntarily* degrow? The model also raises important questions about the nature of employment, labor markets, and the meaning and value of work. At the deepest level, it asks: what is the point of the economy? There are two arguments: (1) the economy is about something other than growth, and (2) people want to work for something other than money. Both represent radical challenges to conventional economic theory.

The takeaway from the model is that degrowth leads away from capitalism and a JG can offer a pathway for this transformation. Everything hinges on the specification of the “valve” in terms of non-monetary benefits that must outweigh the opportunity cost of the private sector wage. Here again, the significance is in the questions raised.

A future requires critically rethinking of employment. “Work” must cease to be a means to increased consumption and instead become an end in itself. This is the qualitative transformation of the economic system that must come about to achieve degrowth both in reality and in the model. Counterintuitively, the model uses GDP to show why a *quantitative* reduction in scale of an otherwise unchanged economy is not possible. Quantitative degrowth is only possible via *qualitative* transformation.

II

The second essay situates the JG in the broader discourse of DG. It reemphasizes the importance of transformation and examines various DG proposals. Here, the JG is not presented as *the* pathway. Instead, the essay explores to what extent a JG is compatible with others. The DG movement has been prolific in terms of imagining, assembling, and compiling proposed strategies. However, the results are subject to two consistent critiques.

The first is ambiguity. Obviously, no one has a ready blueprint for a post-capitalist future. Nonetheless, a fair criticism is that DG promises only a future, but little in the way of a roadmap to it. This is not to slight the work of envisioning. We need envisioning. But we also need ways to move from *here* to there. This task is easier said than done and terribly urgent. There is an unfortunate taboo in the academy—perhaps particularly among the radical left—against any proposal that gets too serious about change. The closer to concrete action you wander, the more naïve and idealistic you start to sound. By contrast, smug cynicism is a mark of intellectual seriousness. This is why the DG movement’s humility, openness, and invitation to think big are so vital.

The second critique of DG involves feasibility. On this front, the JG and its theoretical foundations have a lot to offer. A surprising amount of discussion in DG lacks an analysis of

monetary production and thus overlooks the problem of effective demand. Those that do address demand constraints, often oppose degrowth on the basis of unemployment. For obvious reasons then a JG is worth consideration. However, the real significance of the JG for DG is its role as scaffolding for other strategies.

Criticisms of the feasibility of DG strategies center on accessibility and scalability. DG often proposes that individuals voluntarily downshift, adopt simplicity, reduce workhours, consume less, exchange income for leisure, and alter their lifestyles. The problem is these are not choices accessible to many who lack basic economic security. Ironically, “bottom-up” strategies can resemble the depoliticizing ideology of neoliberalism embodied in slogans like “vote with your dollars.” Reducing political struggle to consumer choice is precisely the kind of economism DG rejects.

Problems of scalability and accessibility overlap. To achieve system-wide change, bottom-up proposals require a critical mass of individuals to act. In some cases, critical mass is not attainable because proposed strategies function on the margins of the existing system. More frequently, the problem of scalability stems from accessibility itself. Finally, even if these obstacles are overcome, effective demand presents a catch-22. Either, (1) an insufficient number of individuals downshift to address the environmental crisis, or (2) a significant number of individuals do downshift, creating a crisis of overproduction and depression.

Thus, a JG or something like it is required as a platform for DG. This is a different argument than the first essay. Here the point is that a JG makes otherwise unfeasible strategies viable. By provisioning economic security, the JG universalizes the *choice* to downshift. At the same time, it eliminates the catch-22 of effective demand.

The JG is a way to begin thinking about transition from *here* to there. One of the important questions this exercise raises is how to actually initiate the rapid, dramatic change needed. Is such change possible via bottom-up mobilization or does it require centralized top-down policy?

A JG works from both ends and only works from both ends. It will not be adopted without pressure from the bottom. At the same time, it relies on the capacity of top-down policy to move quickly and finance system-wide transformation. But the goal is to expand the realm of universal freedom for bottom-up choice. The amphibious character of the DGJG makes it a non-reformist reform; one that uses capitalist institutions (money and wage-labor), but with a view to dismantling capitalism.

III

The final essay is notably distinct. The problem is unchanged—how to reconcile the economy and the environment; however, the approach and emphasis are different. The essay moves in two directions. On one hand, it zooms out to a broader level of analysis that aims to address foundational philosophical questions. On the other hand, it zooms in, taking a deeper dive into theories and concepts that underpin the other essays. In particular, my appreciation of Marx and Keynes, alienation and money, has radically evolved. This was less a change of interpretation than novel recognition of connections that were always present.

In some sense, the final chapter appears as a fresh start. But it grew directly out of problems that presented themselves while writing the first two. The DGJG model was a thought experiment designed to point out contradictions and provoke. From the standpoint of DG, the immediate response is: Why not an income guarantee? If the goal is to reduce throughput, why pay people *to produce*? If we are going to think big, are jobs really something we want to save?

These are foundational questions concerning the meaning and value of work and they point to even deeper questions about the nature and purpose of the economy.

Likewise, the second essay runs from practical policies to big philosophical questions concerning capitalism and social agency. Facing mass extinction, why do we find ourselves seemingly powerless to act? Despite decades of U.N. treaties, nothing changes and we remain on course for devastation. An explanation requires confronting big questions. The third essay is an attempt to confront the elephantine questions that haunt the first two essays and, more generally, the discipline of economics.

IV

In my first year at UMKC, I read “Turning Modes of Production Inside Out” where Graeber condenses from Marx: *the economy is about producing people not things*. The profound simplicity of this insight struck me at the time, but it was subsequently buried in the avalanche of ideas that constitute graduate school. Years later while teaching, it spontaneously resurfaced, taking on a new significance.

My transition from UMKC to teaching community college was disorienting. First-year business students are not terribly interested in the transformation problem or the Cambridge capital controversies. On quarters, I had ten weeks to make a point. My students would ignore or forget most of what I wanted to convey, but they might retain a few themes. So, I began whittling down my content, trying to distill one or two core ideas. Through trial and error, I arrived at the following: (1) People produce the economy (2) The economy produces people.

Students can get this in ten weeks. And, whatever the topic—the environment, inequality, alienation, unemployment, poverty—these principles apply. I say “can” because while they appear simple and obvious, actually allowing them to sink-in and effect the way you think

requires considerable effort. The difficulty lies in unlearning the hegemonic idea that the economy is about producing things. This thing-centric approach is so deeply entrenched, it operates even when you consciously aim to avoid it. Ideologically it is everywhere, infesting thought the way sand gets in your shoes at the beach.

How this view acquired such force is interesting to consider. After all, the notion that the economy is about producing people is not particularly complicated or controversial. Indeed, Marx notes that it dominates history, whereas the thing-centric approach is anomalous to our time. In economics, the issue emerges not as a matter wrong-thinking, but rather of non-thinking. Economics begins by side-stepping what is arguably the first, most basic question, and then advances by refusing to let it back in. An exception is John Stuart Mill who managed to raise the question although it was ignored:

“[I]n contemplating any progressive movement, not in its nature unlimited, the mind is not satisfied with merely tracing the laws of the movement; it cannot but ask the further question, to what goal? Towards what ultimate point is society tending by its industrial progress? (Mill, 1848).

“What is the point?” is certainly a foundational question for any endeavor. Without a sense of purpose, no enterprise can proceed in a meaningful sense. But economics, along with the economy, does proceed which indicates an answer surreptitiously slipped in. The economists’ trick was to assume that answer before the question was raised.

As manifestations of human nature, capitalism and growth are as natural as any environmental limit, so pick your poison. On the table are population, technology, and another planet. Growth’s obvious alternate *redistribution* is more unimaginable than the end of the world and political power picks up where assumptions leave off.

If the question “what is the point?” is allowed back in, Marx’s answer is hard to avoid. What we produce is people: our lives, one another, our world. This simple observation throws

everything else into perspective. Material conditions such as environmental limits exist as real constraints, but they are not totalizing. People still make their own history. The true power and threat of Marx's analysis is its reminder of our agency to do things otherwise. Awareness of agency shatters all the paradoxes of capitalism and money.

V

Effective demand, modern money theory, and the job guarantee may appear as weak medicine for the project of degrowth. Yet, this is not a cynical argument. Although Keynes had different goals than Marx, *The General Theory* also reminds us of our agency. If government is accountable to people and not to money, then poverty amidst plenty is not merely a paradox, it is unacceptable. Neoliberals rightly recognized the peril of Keynes's argument. "A somewhat comprehensive socialization of investment," is at least the thin end of a wedge. The scope and ferocity of their reaction against Keynes indicates their fear.

Whatever the origins of MMT and the JG, they contain revolutionary possibilities. The more I think about and teach these ideas, the more I see this potential. When I was introduced to MMT, I was immediately impressed. The argument was simple, provocative and powerful; a refreshing departure from the scholastic sterility of so much twentieth-century macroeconomics. The job guarantee was less profound, but provided a bold solution to a real problem. Overtime, however my enthusiasm for the whole project of full employment dwindled.

The more I studied capitalism, the more radical I became. If MMT was merely an argument against austerity, and the JG merely an employment policy, then what was the point? Even setting aside the environment, capitalism is an indefensible form of social madness. The system requires that we ceaselessly consume things we do not need, in order to keep working jobs we do not want. Meanwhile, actual needs go unmet on a massive scale. So, why prop-up or

perpetuate this system? Once ecological crisis is added to the equation, there is no argument for palliatives of employment and growth.

Such was my thinking as I neared the end of my course-work. One response was to reject the goal of full employment altogether. An alternative was a radical reconsideration of MMT and the JG. I opted for the latter and it became the basis for my dissertation proposal. I admit I set about this task somewhat reluctantly. By then, I was a committed anti-capitalist and my focus for the past year had been Marx, alienation, and degrowth. A radical take on MMT and the JG sounded like a dissertation topic, but it was not clear what that actually meant, or if it made any sense.

Perhaps I was attempting to square the circle. Before me was a list of contradictions: the environment and the economy; degrowth and full employment; wage-slavery and a jobs policy; revolution and reform. Wrestling with these contradictions, I came to see that Marx and Keynes were as much theoretical allies as ideological enemies.

Both thinkers place money and work at the center of their analysis. Both are astute observers and sharp critics of the paradoxes $M - C - M'$. Perhaps most surprisingly, Marx and Keynes make the same over-arching point. What appear to us as immutable, external forces dictating economic life, are in fact arbitrary social institutions. Socially and politically then we have the capacity to control and change the economy.

On the issue of work, Keynes emphasizes quantity and Marx quality, but they are not at odds. Involuntary unemployment is paradoxical, socially destructive, and entirely avoidable. For Keynes poverty amidst plenty, and unemployment, are socially instituted and can be socially eliminated. Exploitation and alienation present a more damning indictment of work. Marx's goal

is different, but his point is the same. The organization of production is a matter of social choice. Wage labor is no more a necessity than slave labor.

Marx and Keynes are most closely allied in identifying money as the symbolic representative of transcendent authority that robs people of their sense of agency. For Keynes the existence of money, with its peculiar role and properties, is the cause of involuntary unemployment. For Marx, money is the fetish *par excellence*; a new monotheism for the rising religion of capital. Under the reign of money, society's resources and especially human lives are sacrificial means to an external end.

MMT and the JG embody the money-work-agency nexus between Marx and Keynes. And they are equally suited to serve Marx's radicalism as Keynes's reformism. In some respects, the fact that these labels lack the baggage of Marx, makes them more effective rhetorically, politically, and ideologically. I teach Marx and I teach MMT. Unfortunately, even young students are suspicious of anything "Marx." On the other hand, MMT is an astonishingly powerful tool of critical pedagogy. I would not even attempt to teach commodity fetishism. But after one week of MMT, students understand the core of it. Money is a social relationship not a thing. People control it, not the other way around. *People produce the economy.*

MMT and the JG strike at the core of capitalism, alienation, ideology and fetishism. MMT overthrows capital's strongest line of defense. It takes down the thing-in-itself and disrobes the ultimate scapegoat of injustice. If money is something we make and control, then it can no longer serve as a wall between desperate needs and ready resources. The message is way bigger than jobs or austerity. If people recognize that money is not an external authority, they will demand that the extra food laying around go to feed starving people.

The JG is an equally provocative teaching tool. Even as a thought experiment, it politicizes the economy. Suddenly, it is up to society to decide what work is, how it should be valued, and what we want to produce. In this context, students can really begin to rethink work. What is it we are trying to accomplish? What kinds of things is it important for people to do? What kind of “jobs” do we want? *The economy produces people*: our lives, our neighbors, our world.

In practice, a JG could be even more radical. Here, I will betray the extent of my naïve, idealism. Given an opportunity, I believe people would exchange income and consumption, for time, meaning, and connection. The actual politicization of work that a JG would entail is the kind of catalyst urgently needed for a real transformation of the economy. The real goal is not full employment, but a radical recollection of human agency. It is a way to let Mill’s question in, and it is a way out of the capitalist mode of mass extinction. It is a way to understand that *people produce the economy and the economy produces people*.

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VITA

BJ Unti was born February 17th, 1983 in Portland, Oregon. After completing high school in Portland, BJ studied philosophy, art, and economics while attending multiple undergraduate institutions: Montana State University, Bozeman, MT; Otago University, Dunedin, New Zealand; Central Oregon Community College, Bend, OR; Portland State University, Portland, OR. During undergraduate study BJ worked for the U.S. Forest Service and as a woodworker. After earning his B.A. in economics from Portland State University in 2006, BJ worked as a carpenter for several years before enrolling in graduate school.

BJ received the Harold Goodhue-Vatter Award from the Economics Department at Portland State University in 2006. At the University of Missouri – Kansas City he received the Chancellor’s Doctoral Fellowship in 2011 and 2012. BJ has presented papers at The Summer School for Economic Philosophy and Economic History in Lille, France; The International Degrowth Conference for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity in Venice, Italy; and at the Association for Institutional Thought in Salt Lake City, Utah and Portland, Oregon. BJ’s writing on degrowth has been published in two book chapters.

BJ currently lives in Seattle, Washington where he teaches economics and interdisciplinary studies at Bellevue College. He was promoted to Associate Professor of Economics and received tenure from Bellevue College in 2016. In 2018, BJ was Visiting Assistant Professor of Economics at Eastern Oregon University.

Mountains, forests, streams, and the coastline of the Pacific Northwest inform BJ’s life and work. His dog Ancho is at his side always. Together they spend free time exploring the landscape that is their home.

