

**Notes on Transition Towns, Degrowth,
Buen Vivir, Ecosocialism and How to Get There**

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Emerging alternatives, North and South

These increasingly interwoven movements will need inspiring visions of the kinds of society they want to attract people to fight for. And these will necessarily be specific to the diverse social contexts in which they find themselves. Of the many alternative visions that are emerging around the world today, four seem to me sufficiently prominent to be at least part of this visioning project. I have chosen these particular ones because they are among the alternatives that recognize the scope of our global crises and propose alternatives, however challenging they would be to implement. And both of these things are important: having alternatives that are adequate to the task, and for which we could at least imagine a path to getting there.

One of these, the Transition Town movement, is already making change on the local level, particularly in the global North (for key references see Alloun and Alexander, 2014; Giangrande, 2018; Hopkins, 2018; Trainer, 2018; van Hook, 2017). This idea originated in a permaculture course that Rob Hopkins taught in Kinsale, Ireland, in 2005, where the class project was to design an “energy descent

action plan” for the community, one that would make it possible to meet their needs with less energy and little use of fossil fuels. The concern at the time was the idea of “peak oil,” that the world was depleting fossil fuels and would soon be past the point where half of the known reserves were used, and with rising demand, prices would go up and up and up.

As it turned out, the fracking boom and the development of other extreme oil technologies like deep-water drilling, Arctic drilling, and the tar sands altered that forecast, but the idea is partly validated because we have now reached the point where conventional oil is probably past its peak, even as demand continues to rise – and this rising demand, of course, is a primary factor driving the climate crisis. Meanwhile, Hopkins was invited to the English village of Totnes, in Devon, and the community there decided to see what they could do. And it turned out that they could do a lot – grow more food in community gardens, create cooperatives, start their own local currency, and a host of other projects.

The basic idea in Transition is that of “localization,” or perhaps “relocalization,” which means providing as much of the food, energy, services (including the care professions, health, and education), and economic activity as possible with the resources in the local area, which could be a street, a neighborhood, a town or a city, or a group of places in the same region or natural ecosystem. Another key concept is “resilience,” which refers both to greater self-sufficiency within the community, and the building and sharing of the skills and resources needed as the climate changes the conditions of life on the planet.

Over time, a network of such projects grew up, and the basic ideas were made widely available in a series of handbooks and stories about what worked and what didn’t (Hopkins, 2008; Hopkins, Thomas, & Transition Network, 2016). There are today Transition initiatives in more than 50 countries. In the US, there are more than 150 such initiatives. Attending the first US Transition Town National Gathering in the summer of 2017, one of the things I heard was how hard it sometimes is to keep a group going after it has started. Activists also referred to “Inner Transition” as the process of cultivating one’s own resilience in this work, and one of the hallmarks of a successful transition initiative is that it involves community celebrations alongside the hard work of transition. It should be stressed that each initiative looks different, as it grows out of local concerns, who shows up, and what they decide to do. Importantly, there are countless local alternatives all over the world that don’t call themselves by the name of Transition but that move along some of the same pathways.

One of the concepts underlying Transition Towns (and *buen vivir*, discussed below) is that of “the commons,” the sector of the economy and of social life that is neither privately nor publicly owned (Aguiton and Beltrán, 2017). The original commons in feudal England consisted of land that everyone could graze their sheep on and forests which were open to people to get firewood and food. The rise of capitalism led to privatization of these commons and added to the large landholdings of the rural elite. Today, the concept is coming back. We see examples of it in the on-line project of Wikipedia, in the freely available articles and books published under the Creative Commons, and in the transfer of technology and software on the web for free. These examples are expanding into cooperative ventures in services and production in many parts of the world (Bollier, 2018; Hopkins and Bauwens, 2018).

Another idea that has emerged in the global North is that of “degrowth.” This concept addresses the excessive carbon footprint of the societies of the global North, on the premise that people could have good qualities of life without constant economic growth and resource depletion by making major cuts in certain economic activities, and curbing the wastefulness that consumer culture and lifestyles endorse (this section builds on this literature, including Bliss, 2018; D’Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015; Escobar, 2015; Kallis, 2017; Mastini, 2018; Rutherford, 2017; Schwartzman, 2012).

One such sector, especially prominent in the United States, is the military, which absorbs more than a trillion dollars a year and produces nothing of social value (the argument that it makes the United States safe can be countered in numerous ways, including that maintaining a small part of its nuclear arsenal would deter invasions from any quarter). Such a change in U.S. foreign policy would reduce wars abroad and allow societies to find their own ways and eliminating the export of arms to foreign countries would reduce military spending and shrink militaries abroad as well. This principle could be applied to other arms producing nations in the North, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Other powers such as Russia and China might follow suit, with much the same effect. A massive reduction in global resource use and greenhouse gas emissions would follow, helping on the climate change front while reducing the likelihood and human costs of wars.

A major objection would be the loss of jobs, both in the military itself and in the arms industries and their allied activities in steel-making, electronic components, and the fossil fuel industry. But repurposing the millions of men and women in the militaries of the world could create the labor force necessary for the transition to a post-fossil fuel world, while industries that made arms could be

converted into the production of renewable energy, public transportation infrastructure, and retrofitting of houses and businesses.

The fossil fuel industry is also a prime candidate for degrowth, if the political will existed. The massive subsidies that the governments of the world, again led by the U.S., lavish on the main drivers of global warming (Abraham, 2017), if redirected to renewable energy production and research and development could hasten the global transition in energy, heating and cooling, and transportation that is required in the next two decades, while creating safer and cleaner jobs for the workers displaced. The stranglehold which the industry has on politicians in the global North would also be broken, leading to a more democratic space to enact projects for change.

Large industrial agriculture is another area for degrowth, combined with a transition to less meat in diets in the North. The use of pesticides and fertilizers, the waste produced by grazing animals, and the land and water use associated with these activities could all be reduced enormously, freeing land for edible crops and improving health as well. And agriculture built around smaller farms, more organic methods of production, and permaculture principles would feature jobs and feed the world in a healthier manner. The 15-18 percent of greenhouse gas production that comes from agriculture could be cut, perhaps drastically (Bailey, Froggatt, & Wellesley, 2014).

The degrowth principle could be applied to many other sectors of the economies of the North, including advertising and the technology sector. Less products produced for rapid obsolescence, less disposable items made with plastic and shipped great distances, more ecologically appropriate processes in making necessities like clothing, housing, and transportation would reduce resource depletion and pollution, enhance the general health of societies, and lead to further cuts in emissions. Technology could be redirected to less damaging ends and help solve the many obstacles in the way of truly green energy, transportation, and housing.

Sectors that could grow with more funds and better policy would include all the caring services, health care, and education. These investments would boost the quality of people's lives, provide meaningful jobs, and create a population prepared to innovate more and consume less. Public transportation and urban redesign would help relocalize economic and social life and divert resources from wasteful personal travel in cars (going electric will not necessarily result in less emissions unless the transportation sector is redesigned to make public and lower impact travel to work and recreation the better choice) and the high ecological

costs of aviation, shipping, and trucking. There is much room for creative planning, ecologically sound economic activity, and more meaningful jobs that opens by starting from the principles of degrowing the economy.

The global South figures prominently in imagining more just and earth-friendly societies. One of the most exciting principles for this is that of *buen vivir/vivir bien*, a translation of Andean indigenous principles such as *suma qamaña* (Aymara) and *sumak kawsay* (Quechua). Drawing on long-standing indigenous principles which have survived under 500 years of Western occupation and its national successors in the independent states of Bolivia and Ecuador, this is based on reciprocity, co-existence in a harmonious relationship with nature, consensus decision making, and communal solidarity. Pablo Solón captures some of the subtlety of the terms in rendering them as “plentiful life,” “sweet life,” “harmonious life,” “sublime life,” “inclusive life” or “to know how to live” (Solón, 2016, 2018).

In addition to its indigenous roots, a key document in the elaboration of *buen vivir* was “The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth,” which came out of the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in Cochabamba, Bolivia in April 2010. This manifesto defended the principle that all living beings, human and non-human, had certain rights, among them: “*the right to life and to exist; the right to be respected; the right to regenerate its bio-capacity and to continue its vital cycles and processes free from human disruptions; the right to maintain its identity and integrity as a distinct, self-regulating and interrelated being; the right to water as a source of life; the right to clean air; the right to integral health; the right to be free from contamination, pollution and toxic or radioactive waste; the right to full and prompt restoration the violation of the rights recognized in this Declaration caused by human activities*” (World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, 2010, April 27).

The new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia enshrined the principle of *buen vivir* as an ecological model of development based on recognition of the diversity of “nations” inside a plurinational framework (Vibromancia, 2015), though they have had trouble living up to the ideal in actual practice. Meanwhile, Latin American scholars and activists have written extensively on the concept, establishing its relevance for climate justice and conceptions of political economy that go beyond capitalism.

Though reluctant to codify *buen vivir* into a program or a set of principles to apply everywhere, Solón focuses on what it might mean in the Bolivian context, worth quoting at length:

Where could our efforts have been directed? Toward ensuring that the new economy be centered precisely on the peasant and indigenous economy and small-scale local economies. Toward ensuring a real redistribution of the wealth concentrated in the hands of the financial, extractivist and agro-industrial sectors. To do this it was fundamental to go back and redistribute the property of the big landlords, to regulate private banking more effectively and gradually bring it under state ownership, to make more efficient use of the resources of the extractive industries in order to promote projects that would help us escape extractivism, and to promote the strengthening of the local and communitarian economies and small and medium business owners through strengthening their capacity for self-management and complementarity.

The true potential of countries like Bolivia is in agro-ecology, agro-forestry, the strengthening of food sovereignty based on the indigenous and peasant communities.... In the Vivir Bien framework, the objective is to generate greater resilience in the local and national economies faced with the vagaries of the crisis-ridden global economy. It is not a question of abandoning exports but of ensuring that the economy does not revolve around the export of a handful of products. The goal is to be more sovereign, strengthening the local human communities and ecosystems of the Earth.... Without a real and effective democracy, it is not possible to advance in the self-management, self-determination and empowerment of the communities and social organizations that are essential to Vivir Bien. The exercise of democracy entails limiting the power of the powerful and the state itself.... To that extent the future of Vivir Bien largely depends on the recovery, reconstruction and empowerment of other visions that to varying degrees point toward the same objective in the different continents of the planet. Vivir Bien is possible only through complementarity with and feedback from other systemic alternatives (Solón, 2016).

The redesign of economies in both the North and the South around the principles of degrowth in the North and *buen vivir* in the South makes them allied visions for a global transition away from capitalism toward a better future for the people of the

world, economically, politically, culturally, and ecologically (Escobar, 2015). In this way, these are the seeds of hope that we must plant and nourish.

How might these promising ideas for local regeneration be supplemented at the level of the state? A number of “blueprints” for a radical governmental policy of the future already exist. One perspective on this is that of ecosocialism (for a recent discussion see Löwy, 2018 and Daly, et al. 2018). Ian Angus and Simon Butler have written: “In every country, we need governments that break with the existing order, that are answerable only to working people, farmers, the poor, indigenous communities, and immigrants – in a word, to the *victims* of ecocidal capitalism, not its beneficiaries and representatives” (quoted in Angus, 2016; Angus and Butler, 2011, pp. 198-199).

They continue by suggesting some of the first measures that ecosocialist governments might take (quoted in Angus, 2016; Angus and Butler, 2011, pp. 198-199):

- Rapidly phasing out fossil fuels and biofuels, replacing them with clean energy sources such as wind, geothermal, wave, and above all, solar power;
- Actively supporting farmers to convert to ecological agriculture; defending local food production and distribution; working actively to restore soil fertility while eliminating factory farms and polluting agribusinesses;
- Introducing free and efficient public transport networks, and implementing urban planning policies that radically reduce the need for private trucks and cars;
- Restructuring existing extraction, production and distribution systems to eliminate waste, planned obsolescence, pollution, and manipulative advertising, placing industries under public control when necessary, and providing full retraining to all affected workers and communities;
- Retrofitting existing homes and buildings for energy efficiency, and establishing strict guidelines for green architecture in all new structures;
- Ceasing all military operations at home and elsewhere; transforming the armed forces into voluntary teams charged with restoring

ecosystems and assisting the victims of floods, rising oceans and other environmental disasters;

- Ensuring universal availability of high quality health services, including birth control and abortion;
- Launching extensive reforestation, carbon farming and biodiversity programs.

Other basic socialist points include eradicating the exploitation of labor, abolishing sweatshops, ending class domination and its wealth and income inequality, as well as racism and the oppression of women. Each of us will have their own list, and mine would add free lifelong education to the above, along with some kind of guaranteed income or provision of basic needs such as food and shelter.

Undoubtedly, many conversations lie ahead in which such lists are compared and synthesized into the powerful manifesto that we may one day craft.

How do we get there? Notes for transformative practices of social transformation

What is the potential of the transition, degrowth, and buen vivir ideas, visions, and alternatives? Are they viable models? Do they help us think our way through the capitalism-socialism binary? That is, the difficulty of reforming the capitalist economy and the state to the degree and with the speed we need that to happen on the one hand, and the seeming utopianism of a socialist or anti-capitalist revolution on the other. Is some form of democratic ecosocialism possible?

My own best idea is that what is needed to transform global societies is the emergence of new kinds of social justice-oriented parties that come out of and are more tightly coupled with diverse social movements than in the past, so that they are at once more accountable to the social forces that comprise them, and broader.³ We have caught glimpses of these social movement-driven parties in the long experience of Kerala, India with left-wing governments (Franke and Chasin, 1994), the more recent rise of Podemos in Spain out of the Indignados movement (Flesher Fominaya, Forthcoming), or the experiment in left-green rule in Iceland after the Saucepan Revolution overthrew the conservative party of the bankers that brought on the crash of 2008 there (Chataigne, 2009; Júlíusson and Helgason, 2013; R. Solnit, 2008; Wade and Sigurgeirsdottir, 2010). But what we seek is a new *kind* of party, not just another party, one that would be both more global in its ecological vision and more empowering of the local in its domestic policy than parties or movements have been in the past. The role of transition towns in this scenario

would be to create local spaces for a cooperative economy that self-governs with a profound sense of the need for resilience and transition away from fossil fuels. Buen vivir complements this from a Southern perspective that is very much in line with its Northern counterpart and draws on indigenous values through the lens of the multiple crises of the present. Ecosocialism might be a national-level goal for a new kind of party.

How to build from these local alternatives to a participatory confederation on the scope of a nation without sacrificing their autonomy would be one question such new parties would have to engage. How to integrate local cooperatives into regional and national level economies based on degrowth would be another. Working together with and supporting like-minded governments on the global scale would be required to coordinate action on the climate crisis. The best guarantee that such parties could work toward all these ends would be the autonomy of the social movements and economic cooperatives that enabled their rise to a position of power to confront the entrenched political and economic elites and international institutions that set the rules of the game today.

These are huge questions, made visible by the joint contributions of the new movements for radical transformation of the twenty-first century. Seeking answers to them is a worthy task for engaged scholars and activists.

The world that is coming can take innumerable forms. We cannot map it because we cannot see it. Knowing what we want is a crucial step but knowing that what we design will emerge only in the process of going towards it is a useful check on thinking in the old ways about how to transform the present into the future.

Will we get what we want? The world will warm, and there is no escaping the fact of the Anthropocene that we have landed ourselves and future generations in. So, what we can get is circumscribed by the transgression of planetary boundaries, an inexorable constraint on any better future. But within those hard terms lies a range along which humanity will strive to place itself as far in the direction of living differently as possible. What seems impossible today might become otherwise, if we are wise enough to let our actions and imaginations emerge together.