The Transition to a Post-Capitalist World

Draft, Bob Thomson, April 10, 2017

An exciting new paradigm of transition to a post-capitalist world is unfolding in the forms of platform cooperativism, open source peer to peer manufacturing, agricultural and production technologies and convivial degrowth. It proposes a reduction of our societal and industrial metabolism to a level that is sustainable on our limited planet, based on the commons, i.e. resources and governance more in the hands of community and social movements than of individuals or corporations or authoritarian and/or sectarian political elites. I present here an overview of why we need this transition, some elements of what it might look like and an introduction to the largely European peer to peer and convivial degrowth movements.

Why do we need this transition?

Under capitalism, the accumulation and concentration of capital, resources and infrastructure into or controlled by a limited number of hands is based on wages that are lower than the exchange value of goods and services produced (surplus value). It has reached epic and grossly inequitable proportions. (Piketty) New computer guided manufacturing technologies (robots) have significantly reduced the actual human labour, both physical and intellectual, needed to produce goods and services. This has created a crisis for capitalists, since continued accumulation of surplus or capital depends on the surplus value taken from decreasing numbers of real workers. (Quijano, Carson, Bauwens) Capital(ists) has/have moved to maintain capital accumulation at the rates they've become accustomed to via financial speculation, securitization, property scams, etc., as well as by growth of ephemeral consumption of superficial unnecessary glitz -- rather than accumulation just from surplus labour from the production of necessary and unnecessary goods and services. They have been able to expand superficial consumption and cheap labour production via advertising and cultural manipulation. They have convinced governments to reduce their taxes and reimburse them for speculative financial losses out of tax revenues (too big to fail). This has led to state/public service austerity and cutbacks in social security networks, on top of the reduction of decent paying, secure employment.

There are many responses to this growing crisis: increased rejection and protests against austerity and resentment of corporate greed and neo-liberal politicians. But at the same time, in the face of forced austerity, we see increased recourse to support within self-organized local mutual aid efforts for the pooling of resources, within cooperatives, extended families and community sharing. (Carson)

Andean peoples coined a single Quechua word, Pachakuti, which captures this dynamic – "Pacha" their term for Mother Earth, and "Kuti" a word for upheaval - but upheaval which could be either chaos or rebalancing - or both. It has evolved in Spanish to "buen vivir", living well but not better.

Climate change is one major factor in this crisis of capitalism. Our exploitation of and dependence on 300 million years of fossil fuel accumulation via photosynthesis and geological compression has resulted in its near exhaustion after only some 200 years of industrial development. The carbon emissions from this highly concentrated ancient energy are warming the planet at rates that now threaten life as we know it, through massive and destructive storms, drought, rising ocean levels from glacial melting, and air pollution that causes millions of premature deaths per year. Mass migration caused by these disruptions to the lives of millions is fueling nationalist isolationism and racism, with their resulting political turmoil.

UK MP Rupert Read recently noted: "*The coming catastrophic climate change—inevitable unless we act rapidly, intelligently, together, in an unprecedented manner—is a white swan, an expected event. If, as at present seems likely, we let it approach and overwhelm us, no-one can say we weren't plainly and*

straightforwardly warned. To not see this nemesis coming is akin to putting a telescope to one's blind eye, or to mistaking black for white."

It seems inevitable that both a collapse <u>and</u> a (hopeful) rebalancing are coming. However there are obstacles to a major transition away from the crises generated by this grossly unequal wealth and capital accumulation by vested interests. Nor would the rebalancing be a simple or painless process. Capitalist control of media, education, culture, and a general public acceptance of unlimited growth on a limited planet as a virtual religion includes state military and police forces and will present considerable opposition to any transition.

What might this transition look like?

I believe that the transition to a post-capitalist world will require the taming, regulation and erosion of capitalism through a progressive replacement of private capital by peer to peer based cooperative commons. It will also require a significant reduction of our social and industrial physical metabolism to a scale that is sustainable on our limited planet.

A path to a rebalancing transition is laid out in recent publications of the <u>Peer to Peer Foundation</u> and the work of the <u>Research and Degrowth Group</u> at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

- A February 2017 two day <u>conference on the collaborative economy</u> in London *"imagine[d] a transparent, democratic and decentralised economy which works for everyone. A society in which anyone can become a co-owner of the organisations on which they, their family & their community depend. A world where everyone can participate in all the decisions that affect them."*
- A civil society call has been launched for the formation of a <u>European Commons Assembly</u> to create, manage and sustain the Commons.
- The degrowth "movement" has promoted six biannual <u>international convivial degrowth conferences</u> since 2008.
- There are thousands of initiatives all over the world experimenting with self and community organized alternatives characterized by reciprocity, cooperation, mutual aid, etc. and which pool resources and create value for both consumption and investment equitably and democratically.

This is not to downplay the fact that the transition will be one of both chaos, disorder and conflict, as well as constructive rebalancing. The current explosion of internal U.S. and international opposition to the Trump agenda in the United States provides ample evidence of both the negative and positive paths this may take.

Which path or paths will prevail are not obvious at this point, but discussion and work for a postive transition is crucial to avoid the worst we might imagine. Violent opposition in the current context is not enough or perhaps even viable in many societies. And while resistance and defensive action against capitalist and state attacks on workers is absolutely necessary, it is not sufficient.

It would be irresponsible to avoid the well know frog in a pot question: Can we jump out of the saucepan before we are boiled. We also have to ask what we can do to prepare a hospitable kitchen table to land on?

Unions, social democracy and much of the left have failed to limit this advance of capitalist overconcentration. In their efforts to publicize and defend workers against the depredations of the system, perhaps they have forgotten that the point is to change the system, not just reform it or give it a "human" face. How do we develop decentralized, non-partisan, democratic community and social movements as the loci of change in the face of our failure to regulate and control capitalists? Both resistance and leadership of a new alternative are needed, and can't be limited to just electoral politics.

The transition will be facilitated by the inherent inability and failure of capitalism to reform itself or even to redirect and democratize surplus distribution in order to assuage the crises inherent in its very nature. Efforts to promote "green capitalism" or "steady state economics" which simply paint a human face on it abound. But people have begun to realize "how Uber, Airbnb, Taskrabbit and countless other [proprietary] network platforms are distressingly predatory, using venture capital money and algorithms to override health, safety and labor standards and municipal governance itself." They merely appropriate personal, individual or decentralized property or labour through license fees and other mechanisms and cannot be a serious part of post-capitalist rebalancing in the long run.

Elements of community control existed in the not so distant past. Canada's farmer owned wheat pools, socialized health insurance, vibrant local and networked credit unions, etc., etc. *(add a list of a few more here)* More recent examples of partner state vs capitalist state policies include Minnesota's tax incentives for farmer owned sugar beet bio-refinery produced ethanol and Sweden's tax incentives for repair over replacement of consumer goods. New municipal governments in Catalonia and Emilia-Romagna have shown what regional or municipal partner state policies can do to advance community control and production.

Paul Mason in a 2015 Guardian article noted that "*Almost unnoticed, in the niches and hollows of the market system, whole swaths of economic life are beginning to move to a different rhythm. Parallel currencies, time banks, cooperatives and self-managed spaces have proliferated, barely noticed by the economics profession, and often as a direct result of the shattering of the old structures in the post-2008 crisis.*"

The explosion and potential of peer to peer generated "commons" in relation to "traditional" proprietary technology and capital is generating the promise of a potential major rebalancing of power, accumulation and distribution in global production of the "necessities" of life. This rebalancing is not necessarily a futuristic pipe dream. A 2010 industry study for the computer communications industry found that fair use-related industry value added in 2007 was already $2.2 trillion based on revenues of $4.4 trillion, accounting for one sixth of U.S. GDP and employing more than 17 million workers.

What are P2P and the Commons?

Peer to peer production (P2P), like open source software, is characterized by consensual networks, reciprocity and multiple forms of collaboration and exchange. It is as much about relationships as about technology - a tool for cooperation and sharing, involving small, local group dynamics *and* global organization. It is generally, but not always, outside the neoliberal market/state mode of production based on capital and labour. It is decidedly anti-capitalist. (Bauwens & Kostakis)

Computers and computer communications have facilitated open technological and design sharing. Smallish computer numerically controlled machine tools such as 3D printers, laser cutters, routers, bending machines and induction hearths have replaced a lot of human labour and million dollar equipment in many factories. Think Wikipedia vs the Encyclopedia Britanica, or Libre Office vs Microsoft Works or robots vs simple hand or power tools. New digital technologies have lead to automated automobile factories and driverless transport trucks, but also to the potential for alternative contributory commons accounting systems. These could allow complex, decentralized, locally controlled and equitable coordination and reciprical cost and income distribution, in contrast to the now dominant undemocratic accounting systems of transnational corporate and state hierarchies and inequitable markets.

Peer to Peer is different as a mode of value production from capitalism. Vast networks are forming based on a dynamic in which peers freely collaborate to create new or added value based on freely shared resources, with the understanding that that new or added value can only be exchanged in turn under the same widely used GNU General Public License, i.e. is also free for all.

This rapidly growing added value becomes a form of "commons", not "capital". It can be in the form of knowledge or goods and resources. It can involve rivalrous goods and services (i.e. which cannot be shared by individuals at the same time) or non-rivalrous goods and services (i.e. whose use does not deplete them). (Bauwens and Kostakis)

Natural resources are another form of commons, for example water, land and the "gifts" of nature, which have increasingly been privatized and contaminated by "capital".

Human use and exchange of the commons is the subject of a long history of ever evolving relationships, social and cultural "contracts". More recently, i.e. in the past 200 years, they have taken the form of very unequal global and local accumulations of power and political "capital" which have made the commons anything but "common".

While this commons "movement" will and is being opposed by capitalists, access to the Internet and open source computer resources is as important to the state and corporations as it is to the peer to peer "threat" to their dominance of the world economy. It has reached a point where it cannot be suppressed without creating serious dangers to the capitalist mode of production itself.

The idea of "platform co-operatives" – launched at a seminal New York City conference in November 2015 has quickly found a following internationally. Among the tools mentioned for achieving this goal: Mondragon and Catalan style co-ops, local government procurement policies to favor local co-ops, shifting deposits to local credit unions, and crowdfunding or partner state support of citizen-led community development projects.

Many initiatives are already moving in this area: worker and locally controlled manufacturing and services, cooperatives, promotion of partner state institutions vs a capitalist dominated state at municipal, regional, national and international levels, replacement of chambers of commerce by chambers of commons, incentives for open source technology instead of private patenting.

Examples abound: the Catalan Inegrated Coop, Barcelona En Comú, the Bologna Regulation, Transition Towns, Reciproka, FarmHack, thousands of maker spaces or FabLabs, Wikipedia, plummeting solar and wind energy costs, biotechnology advancing a carbohydrate economy over a hydrocarbon economy. The changing expectations of a millenial generation of young people wanting meaningful work instead of precarity drives much of the search for and building of these alternatives. The isolation and marginalization of these examples by corporate media, science and academia in the "church of growth" is starting to break down.

Peer to Peer Production

Michel Bauwens of the Peer to Peer (P2P) Foundation wrote a Manifesto in 2005 on "the P2P relational dynamic as the premise of the next civilizational stage". An updated version entitled "Peer to Peer: A Manifesto for Commons Transition" is currently in preparation, the first chapter of which is available on the Foundation's blog site and the latest 39 page draft of version 3.7 can be read here.

> The P2P Foundation is a global network of researchers, activists, and citizens monitoring and promoting actions geared towards a transition to a Commons-based society. We are a decentralized, self-organized, globally distributed community building an information-commons ecosystem for the growing P2P/Commons movement. We examine both the digital and the material worlds, their

freedoms and restrictions, scarcities and abundances. We are an incubator and catalyst, focusing on the "missing pieces" and the interconnectedness that can lead to a wider movement.

Their web site consists of:

- a wiki database which "pools their resources through commons, creating prosperity for all, documenting thousands of initiatives going in that direction on order to create Hope with evidence"
- a blog focusing on critical thinking informed by current contexts and commons-oriented solutions, managed and enacted by those communities most affected by the problems they face
- a P2P Lab - an independent media lab interested in interdisciplinary research on free/open source technologies and peer-to-peer practices whose mission is to:
  - strive for integrative insights on the open technologies and the peer-to-peer practices.
  - provide consultancy support to organisations and institutions regarding open technologies and relevant socio-economic trends.
  - produce innovative, global techno-economic solutions to local problems.
  - write, edit and publish articles, reports and books in the diverse range of topics we investigate.
  - organise open events for reflection and action as well as to educate people about critical and creative tools for society-changing.

Convivial Degrowth

An important, often seen as heretical, element of this transition is **convivial degrowth**. The basic expectation of unlimted growth on a limited planet is very much entrenched in the "church of growth" ideology, which dominates the predominant "cultural narrative" we live with today. We talk about decolonizing our economies but rarely about decolonizing our consumer ethos or our egos. Tackling that "cultural narrative" is one of the most difficult of tasks we face, and is seen by some on the left as potential political suicide.

In a paper presented to the Institute for New Economic Thinking, William Rees of UBC, one of the founders of the ecological footprint concept, noted:

All cultural narratives, world views, religious doctrines, political ideologies, and academic paradigms are 'social constructs.' They are products of the human mind massaged or polished by social discourse and elevated to the status of received wisdom by agreement among members of the social group who are creating the construct... By the time most people have reached mature adulthood they will have accepted their culture's overall 'narrative' and will subscribe, consciously or not, to any number of subsidiary religious, political, social and disciplinary paradigms

Marx noted that "*men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.*" He added however, that "*they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history*" - i.e. they can create new scenes.

Charles McKelvey notes that Marx viewed automated industry as a new mode of production that would constitute the material foundation for a fifth stage in human history, that of socialism. Marx had a long-range view of automation from the vantage point of the worker. He saw it as establishing conditions for a society in which human beings would be freed from work in its conventional [exploitative] form.

Objectively, peak oil, peak uranium, peak bauxite, peak iron, etc. are realities which force us to recognize that a serious reduction in consumption, i.e. degrowth, must be part of the transition. I go back to the fact that we have almost exhausted 300 million years of fossil fuel accumulation via photosynthesis and geological compression after only some 200 years of industrial development.

Fortunately, there exists much serious literature on the inability of money (capital) to buy happiness, which makes "convivial degrowth" a more "saleable" part of the transition. We can envisage less food and more convivial time with friends and family. How we balance that with the complexities of maintaining a complex computerized economy required to rebalance and (re)build the commons while reducing production and expanding "leisure", is a question that will require much thought, dialogue and work.

The Research and Degrowth group at the Autonomous University of Barcelona has been at the forefront of much of the literature on convivial degrowth and have organized or facilitated six international conferences on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity. Joan Martinez-Alier, a mentor and member of the group, was awarded the 2017 Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought on March 28 at Tufts University in Boston.

From Ten Proposals for the New Left

> *Degrowth is a call to decolonize the social imaginary from the ideology of a one-way future consisting only of growth. Degrowth is not the same thing as recession. It is the hypothesis that we can achieve prosperity without economic growth.*
>
> *In other words: that we can have meaningful work without the need for ever-lasting growth; sustain a functional welfare state without the economy getting bigger every single year; and increase equality and eliminate poverty, without having to accumulate more and more money each year.*
>
> *Degrowth challenges not only the outcomes, but the very spirit of capitalism. Capitalism knows no limits, it only knows how to expand, creating while destroying. Capitalism cannot and does not know how to settle. Capitalism can sell everything; but it can't sell "less".*
>
> *Degrowth offers a new narrative for a radical left that wants to go beyond capitalism, without reproducing the authoritarian and productivist experiences of real existing socialism (or what some may call "state capitalism").*

Recent Research and Degrowth books, "Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era" and "In Defense of Degrowth: Opinions and Minifestos", and the proceedings of the six international degrowth conferences provide a wealth of proposals, research and inspiration for this transition.

Summary

The following appendix/table outlines examples of "minifestos" proposing directions, policies and examples which have been put forward by the convivial degrowth and peer to peer production networks as a part of a transition to a post-capitalist world. The rebalancing and transfer of "power" from "capital" to "commons", as already noted, will not be simple or easy. And the paths it might take are not yet obvious. There is no doubt however, that we are in an ever warming pot and it would be irresponsible not to get out, and to prepare a hospitable kitchen table to land on. Our grandchildren will want to know what we did, or tried to do, to save them the current crisis.

Appendix: Ten proposals for Prosperity, the Commons Manifesto & the Canadian LEAP Manifesto

10 Proposals for Prosperity without growth

1. Citizen debt audit – distinguish between personal and investment and speculative debt
2. Work-sharing – reduced work week
3. Basic and maximum income – Maximum income no greater than 30x the basic income
4. Green tax reform
5. Stop subsidizing and investing in activities that are highly polluting
6. Support the alternative, solidarity society
7. Optimise the use of buildings
8. Reduce advertising
9. Establish environmental limits
10. Abolish the use of GDP as an indicator of economic progress

Index: A Manifesto for Commons Transition V3.7

Fifteen calls from the LEAP Manifesto

1. We must respect the inherent rights and title of the original caretakers of this land
2. Canada can get 100% of its electricity from renewable resources within 2 decades; by 2050 we could have a 100% clean economy
3. We must build new infrastructure projects that don't lock us into increased extraction for decades into the future.
4. The time for energy democracy has come – communities should control their energy
5. We want a universal program to build energy efficient homes, and retrofit existing housing to reduce poverty over the long term.
6. We want high-speed rail powered by renewables and affordable public transit to unite every community in this country
7. We want training and resources for workers in carbon-intensive jobs to ensure their participation in the clean energy economy
8. We need to invest in our decaying public infrastructure
9. We must move to a far more localized and ecologically-based agricultural system
10. We call for an end to all trade deals that interfere with our attempts to rebuild local economies, regulate corporations and stop damaging extractive projects.
11. We demand immigration status and full protection for all workers.
12. We must expand the sectors of our economy that are already low carbon: caregiving, teaching, social work, the arts and public-interest media
13. We call for a debate about the introduction of a universal basic annual income
14. We declare that "austerity" has become a threat to life on earth – end fuel subsidies, increase resource royalties, tax financial transactions, higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy, cut military spending
15. We must work swiftly towards a system in which every vote counts and corporate money is removed from political campaigns.

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Appendix: Some examples

The Bologna Regulation

The thirty-page [Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons](#) outlines a legal framework by which the city can enter into partnerships with citizens for a variety of purposes, including social services, digital innovation, urban creativity and collaborative services. Taken together, these collaborations comprise a new vision of the "sharing city" or commons-oriented city. To date, some ninety projects have been approved under the Bologna Regulation. Dozens of other Italian cities are emulating the Bologna initiative

Reciproka

"[Reciproka facilitates the development of a co-owned network of open co-operatives](#) through ownership transfer, network building and co-operative accumulation." It proposes a legal, financial and governance structure for federating a network of co-ops, each of which would mutually own portions of the others through a jointly owned trust. The idea is to build a "counter-economy that is able to perpetuate itself on its own, explains one of the coordinators Janosch Sbeih. They anticipate the coming retirement of millions of baby boom entrepreneurs around the world represents an enormous opportunity to catalyse a transition towards a sustainable and community-empowering economy. By transferring ownership from retiring entrepreneurs to their employees, we ensure owners that their enterprises remain active and anchored in their local community, managed by the very people who have built it up over their lifetimes... Traditional co-operatives tend to adopt the logic of their market environment by focusing on individual organisational gain rather than the build-up of an integrated, ethical economy. [Reciproka](#) functions as a structure to align interests by mutualising ownership of each co-operative under a common trusteeship legal structure.
[But what % of "production" does this represent?]

The Catalan Integrated Coop http://cooperativa.cat/en/

By Patricia Manrique, writing in ["Diagonal"](#) in 2012:

"The Catalan Integrated Cooperative (CIC) began two years ago; it now has 850 members and several thousand people who participate in debates and projects. Under the label "integrated," the Cooperative functions as a political project seeking to tie together consumer and labor initiatives "and many others, such as education, mechanisms to create a cooperative basic income, eco-stores, collective stores, meetings and events, and a legal structure to help the formation of eco-networks and other similar projects in Catalonia," explains its communication team.

The Catalan Integrated Cooperative is a step beyond consumer cooperatives, because it also seeks out the contribution of services, creating a network of trust that allows the people associated with the Cooperative to cover many of their basic needs, with a will to transform" explains Gema Palamós from the legal team. Legally, the CIC is a 'mixed cooperative' according to Spanish and Catalan law, meaning that it doesn't limit itself to any one activity.

The European Commons Assembly http://europeancommonsassembly.eu/

Civic and community initiatives are working to vitalize our urban, rural, scientific and digital commons, and promoting a future guided by democratic participation, social equity and environmental sustainability. At the heart of these acts of "commoning" are satisfying, joyful social relationships that regenerate our interpersonal and physical surroundings. We reject the idea that we are merely self-interested individual consumers or competitors in a fierce market jungle. Instead, we also consider ourselves active and cooperative citizen caretakers working for healthy and fair neighbourhoods, cities and societies.

In times when European institutions are losing support and in deep crisis, we as European citizens are reclaiming Europe. We are concerned that many of our governments tend to favour the narrow interests of dominant market forces instead of catering to the common good of people and the planet.

We are alarmed that growing global social inequality and exclusion, along with climate change, are threatening our very future. We regret that massive privatization and commodification have already deprived us of much of our shared commons that is essential for our physical, social and cultural well-being, and our dignity.

Commoning relates to the network-based cooperation and localized bottom-up initiatives already sustained by millions of people around Europe and the world. These initiatives create self-managed systems that satisfy important needs, and often work outside of dominant markets and traditional state programmes while pioneering new hybrid structures.

The transition from a hydrocarbon to a carbohydrate economy

David Morris in 1992 and 2006 outlined how "less than 200 years ago, industrializing societies were carbohydrate economies. In 1820, Americans used two tons of vegetables for every one ton of minerals. Plants were the primary raw material in the production of dyes, chemicals, paints, inks, solvents, construction materials, even energy"... For the next 125 years, hydrocarbon and carbohydrate battled for industrial supremacy – and hydrocarbons won this "battle".

In 1984, Clive Thomas of the University of Guyana wrote a review of the battle between cane and high fructose corn syrup for IDRC. It includes a good review of sucrochemistry that I would like to use as a starting point for a challenge to the P2P production network.

It is theoretically possible to produce anything from carbohydrates that we currently produce from hydrocarbons. It "just" involves "juggling" of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen atoms. Transnational corporations have cornered and privatized most of the technologies for doing this. Could we develop village scale open source P2P technologies that could produce ethanol and plastics from sugar, corn or soya? Could it be controlled by the farmers, at a village scale, not a TNC scale?

Maybe this is dreaming in technicolour but ...