

## The internet of threats and promise: Can big data help define an alternative transition?

Bob Thomson, draft of 15 January 2020 See also the pdf version at <https://tinyurl.com/svwvldz>

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### Abstract

Social media and the internet provide us with both "information" and "fake news". Our growing capacity to analyse old and new economic and political models brings both despair and hope that we can define new low carbon models of cooperation and solidarity. Here I look at the potential for progressive use of "big data" to provide social and cooperative movements with the analytical tools to begin this huge challenge. I begin with Mike Cooley's learning curve within the exploding internet and Bill Rees' note of how our "cultural narratives" stand in the path of change. The obstacles include "big data" challenges like Google and Facebook's algorithms and sale of personal data to shape and reinforce our consumer desires and manipulate elections to maintain the status quo. But Piketty's 1% vs 99% and Vettese's analysis of the economy of half earth show how "popular" access to and analysis of historical economic, energy, climate and other data can be used to develop alternative models and behaviors for a transition. I briefly review some alternatives: the P2P Transition to the Commons, Green New Deal(s), Degrowth and the indigenous "buen vivir", and the promise and difficulties of implementing them. Thousands of individual and confederated local, community and regional examples already exist as lived examples of alternatives and progressive social media and cooperative networks which challenge the capitalist mainstream. As pluralistic cultural, political and lived alternatives and systems, they show that people can live well together and with nature. 249 words

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With all the hype these days about social media and the internet providing us with both "information" and "fake news", new overviews of global economics and politics bring both despair and hope that we can escape the threat of climate change through new low carbon models of cooperation and solidarity.

Thomas Piketty's 2013 *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*<sup>1</sup> and his use of big data to document the grossly unequal 1% versus the 99% is one element of these visions of hope and despair. New models like the P2P Transition to the Commons, the Green New Deal(s), Degrowth and the Great Transition show paths away from the control and depredation of capitalism, but also set the stage for an epic battle for influence on the hearts and minds of populations and politicians. Can we overcome the "cultural narrative" of Thatcher's "there is no alternative", and start to build one?

Here I try to bring together an understanding of this challenge through a look at the potential for progressive use of "big data" to provide social and cooperative movements with the analytical tools to begin this huge challenge. I look at Irish engineer Mike Cooley's process of learning in the context of what Bill Rees called "cultural narratives"<sup>2</sup>, which stand in the path of change. I review some of the alternatives, and the difficulties of implementing them.

To begin this process, it is important that we understand a few basic concepts about human knowledge and our learning process, to put today's overwhelming flood of "information" into a context we can deal with in our daily lives.

### Mike Cooley's Learning Curve(s)

In a presentation to the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT) in Kilkenny Ireland in April 1991<sup>3</sup>, Michael Cooley presented a graph showing the process whereby we sort the raw data which comes into our lives through our eyes, ears and other senses, over time and with experience, and how each of us continuously turns this data into information, knowledge and eventually, wisdom. This is the learning process and we all use it every day.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Thomas Piketty: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Piketty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Piketty)

2 Bill Rees: <https://www.ineteconomics.org/research/research-papers/toward-a-sustainable-world-economy>

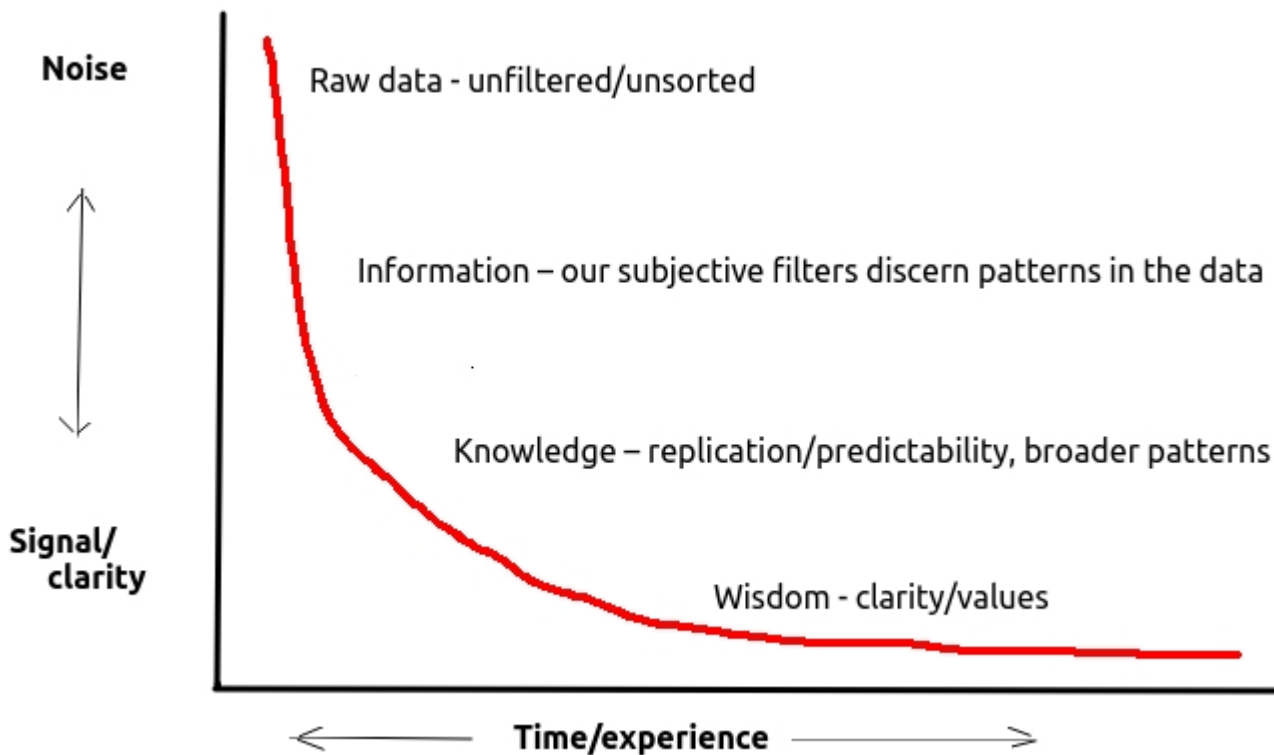
3 Mike Cooley: [http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/geocities/information\\_revolution\\_1994.html](http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/geocities/information_revolution_1994.html)

4 Mike Cooley, [Architect or Bee](#): The Human Price of Technology, 1980 (Acquisition of knowledge p.12)

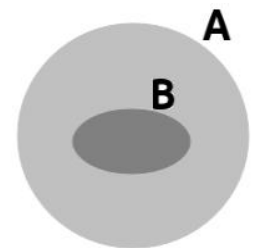
The graph below shows how we use our own individual and highly personal filters to discern patterns in a mass of unsorted data. The patterns discerned in this data in our memory “banks” becomes information, which when subjected to further broader filters and patterns, becomes knowledge, then wisdom.

The left axis of the graph shows "noise" or a measure of unintelligibility at the high end, and "signal" or clarity of understandable patterns, at the low end. The greater the signal, the potentially more “useful” the information. These filters are individual, many and varied. For example: gender, race, language, religious and political beliefs, scientific methodology, and previous sets of patterns that we may have stored for future reference. The patterns we discern in this filtered data thus become “information” in our memory banks, and when subjected to further broader filters and patterns, become knowledge, then wisdom. The transition from data to information to knowledge and wisdom is a continuous, highly individual and subjective process, hence the bi-directional arrows on the x axis below.

This Cooley calls the learning curve.



Cooley further describes this process of knowledge accumulation as progressing from A to B, i.e. from novice to beginner to competence to proficiency to expertise, under which everyone “advances” from specific beginning analytical “rules” (i.e. sphere B) to the recognition of more complex situational or contextual patterns, seeing broader patterns without decomposing them into their narrower components. (i.e. sphere A) He outlines a broad sphere of knowledge (A) with an inner sphere (B), which is based on “rules” or “science”, and the light grey A-B annulus based on experience, intuition and acquired “know-how”<sup>5</sup>



Cooley rejects the notion that the ultimate objective of knowledge and educational systems should be to expand B so that it totally subsumes the whole of A. He develops this critique in what he calls the “abolition of childhood”, under which our reductionist “rational” education systems focus on the “human operating unit”, prepared scientifically for the “factory”, bent on scientific principles and engineering precision, reducing all knowledge to rules or recipes.<sup>6</sup> He deplores the devaluation of childhood’s marvellous complex developmental, experimental, learning-by-doing progression without any

5 op. cit. Mike Cooley, [Architect or Bee](#): The Human Price of Technology, Spokesman Books 1980 p.12

6 Mike Cooley, [Delinquent Genius: The Strange Affair of Man and His Technology](#), Spokesman Books, 2018, p.39

knowledge of scientific “rules”, under which, for example, we learn to stand by balancing our weight from side to side with no knowledge of theories of momentum or centres of gravity. Or how we learn to talk without dictionaries or rules of grammar. That is, how we move from B to A either intuitively or as we “mature”.

This “childhood” way of experiential vs rule based learning - a hands on grasp of sense, shape, size and form, without scientific rules, is far broader and more complex and diverse than the world where everything is supposedly “science” or rule based, predetermined, highly structured and regulated, largely determined by corporate control of academic curricula and the media. Further, Cooley warns that a “child’s” experiential learning might, heaven forbid, result in diversity and pluralism, creating a dangerous oppositional base and threat to “the system”.

He sees this corporate “educational” process as well in hand.

*“Schooling will start earlier and earlier. Childhood will be highly structured and regimented. That destructive process of exams will start earlier and earlier. Pastimes such as they are, will be increasingly passive. Average television viewing time is now significant. Sports will be highly specialized and systematized. The capacity to make our own toys, entertain ourselves and organize our own play will go and this will be allocated to professionals who will do it on our behalf.”*<sup>7</sup>

One overwhelming aspect of the information revolution and social media is that there is now so much data available that we are prone to give up trying to sort it ourselves. In doing so we give up personal empowerment and knowledge to “gurus” who claim to have it sorted, and to serve it up to us in intelligible packages, using their own filters and “know-how”, with no effort required on our part to do any of our own sorting with our own filters. This leaves us potentially locked into the “cultural narratives” of the class, race, gender, religious, etc. filters of our parents, teachers, employers, newspapers, television, politicians, etc.

I have deliberately shown the time/experience axis in the above graph as bi-directional. At any point in the process of learning, we might, and often will, or should, discover a flaw or necessary refinement in the often subjective filters and patterns we used to move from one step to another on this learning curve. At this point we should go back and re-sort the original “data”, along with any new, more current “data”, to arrive at new “information” and eventually new “knowledge” and new “wisdom”. The problem is, this can be an onerous and time consuming process.

Several years ago an Algonquin First Nations colleague challenged my interpretation of a situation, saying “You don’t get it because your first language is English.” She went on to explain that most of the words in English are nouns, while most of the words in Anishinaabe languages are verbs. Thus they have a view of the world based on action and process, while we have a world view based on things. The advance of feminist world views has made some progress in many men’s recognition of their biased gender filters and encouraged many to re-analyze the “data” and develop new sets of information and knowledge. I find this questioning quite profound and an excellent example of the importance of Mike Cooley’s explanation of the “learning process”, our personal filters and the **cultural narratives** that we grow into, develop and live within, often from birth to death.<sup>8</sup>

The corporate mainstream cultural narrative which “helps” us “learn” is everywhere. Bill Rees has noted that:

*All cultural narratives, world views, religious doctrines, political ideologies, and academic paradigms are ‘social constructs.’ 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<sup>9</sup>.*

With our now almost global access to information through television, the press and the internet, the incredible diversity and complexity of the world and humanity becomes very evident, while at the same time, giving power to anyone with control of television, press and internet content to spoon feed us with pre-sorted, simplistic “information” or even “fake news”, based on their own religious, gendered, political or economic filters, patterns and interests, which are often unknown to us.

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7 Cooley, op cit, p.43

8 Bob Thomson, Pachakuti: Indigenous perspectives on degrowth, [Development, Vol.54 No.4 December 2011](#)

9 Bill Rees: <https://www.ineteconomics.org/research/research-papers/toward-a-sustainable-world-economy>

Arwa Mahdawi notes in a recent Guardian article<sup>10</sup> that the all pervasive consumer cultural narrative we now face is fed by targeted advertising, the [proliferation of fake news](#) and clickbait, which has fuelled surveillance capitalism and has normalized pervasive [tracking and data-mining](#).

A recent Guardian article by Samantha Subramanian on “The Empire of the Box”<sup>11</sup> shows how:

*“The apparatus of buying will soon be everywhere in our lives. It is already under her thumbs in her apps and in most delivery vans in most streets. Soon it will be in our fridges, washing machines and printers, ordering refills; it will be beneath our feet in storage canyons and delivery tunnels; it will tower above us a multi-story city blocks. Under our beds we will have sheds.”*

She adds:

*Amazon is responsible for nearly half of all the 165 billion packages delivered each year. The packaging of home-delivered products now accounts for 30% of the solid rubbish the US generates annually and the cardboard alone costs 1 billion trees. And there are numbers for frenzied growth: the \$3.8 trillion in global online sales in 2017 will near \$6 trillion by 2024. We have already with great alacrity given up far more meaningful social interaction in our lives as consumers. Many of us do not know anything about our grocer or butcher. We wouldn't recognize our postal clerks or bankers if we sat next to them in the bus. A ride hailing company's 'bus' system urges us to forget that we ought to expect public transport from our governments.*

In addition to this “Amazonization” of consumption, local 'fake news' websites spread 'conservative propaganda'<sup>12</sup>, Cambridge Analytica influences elections around the world<sup>13</sup>, Google and Facebook monitor our internet searches and “likes” and sell personalized data for ads to shape, reinforce and reward our consumer desires<sup>14</sup>

Much of the hype about the information revolution and the information superhighway focuses only on the increased availability of data, and not on this process by which we (and they) sort, accumulate and use all this data, information, knowledge and/or “wisdom”.

While it is useful, and even necessary, that someone help us to sort the masses of data now available through global communications, we give up personal power if we do not retain some control over the sorting/filtering process and remain skeptical and questioning in our daily lives. Simplistic, pre-sorted, attractively packaged and anonymous information, as we all know, can be deceptive and manipulative.

At the very least, we should be aware enough of the overall process of learning and individual acquisition of data or information that we recognize our own personal filters and those of the people or powers that feed information to us every day. Unfortunately, most people are too busy scrambling to earn a living to step back from daily struggles to see what is happening to themselves and their "knowledge" process, much less to challenge it and spend some time learning about learning.

The education system, in teaching us and our children how to operate computers, does not put enough emphasis on these basics of learning and the recognition and development of selective data/information "filters" in the learning process. Often we only learn how to acquire or get access to data, or how to manipulate its presentation via printed or audio/visual formats using word processors, spreadsheets, accounting software and multi-media or graphics. We don't learn enough about the philosophical, cultural, economic, political, religious, racial, gender, etc. filters that also sort information in ways that are more subtle than print or audio/visual formats.

A recent article on artificial intelligence and the frontiers of economic theory notes:

*Until recently, data sets were small and costly, and computers were slow and expensive. So it is natural that as gains in computing power have dramatically reduced these impediments, economists have rushed to use big data and artificial intelligence to help them spot patterns in all sorts of activities and outcomes.*<sup>15</sup>

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10 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/05/targeted-ads-fake-news-clickbait-surveillance-capitalism-data-mining-democracy>

11 Samantha Subramanian, [The Empire of the Box](#), Guardian Weekly, 29 November 2019, p.36

12 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/19/locality-labs-fake-news-local-sites-newspapers>

13 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/04/cambridge-analytica-data-leak-global-election-manipulation>

14 <https://www.komando.com/kims-column/how-to-beat-googles-personalized-ads/490628/>

Physicists have used big data to identify the rules of the natural world, likened by some to be a game played by the gods.<sup>16</sup> Since corporate access to computing power is privileged for the 1% over the 99%, corporations use the internet to game the economy, markets and politics as a major marketing tool. In their own words, they “conduct experiments to study how a hypothetical change in the rules of the game or in a pattern of observed behavior by some ‘players’ (say, government regulators or a central bank) might affect patterns of behavior by the remaining players.”<sup>17</sup> [i.e. consumers and profits]

### **Is there an alternative?**

Can we use big data to approximate how much money would be needed for a transition, where might it be invested and what models of consumer behavior might drive a transition. Just as important, how are we going to be able to take the necessary accumulated wealth and technology away from the 1% who control it now?

Piketty’s documentation of capital accumulation and inequality show that both global and national data is now available to identify patterns in global economic, physical and human resources, as well as behaviours, which could be used to identify and promote alternative ways of human organization, as well as to expose the negative and dangerous exploitation of capital with respect to climate change, militarization and consumer manipulation. New economic, social and political models like the P2P Transition to the Commons, Green New Deal(s), Degrowth, the Great Transition and “Buen Vivir” show paths away from this control and depredation of capitalism.

One interesting use of big data outside the corporate “cultural narrative” is Troy Vettese’s analysis of historical climate, population, biological and energy data and science to speculate on the political economy of half-Earth.<sup>18</sup> He shows that the killing of 54 million indigenous peoples in the Americas and the removal of some 12 million west Africans along slavery’s “Middle Passage” left millions of hectares of cropland fallow, and that their subsequent natural reforestation sequestered sufficient carbon to lower northern hemisphere temperatures by nearly one degree centigrade – ‘a little seventeenth century ice age’. He goes on to calculate that if 800 million ha. of land were reforested, billions of new trees would sequester 215 gigatons (GtC) over the next century, bringing atmospheric carbon to a much safer level, in the low 300s ppm compared to today’s 410 ppm, providing us with a bit of a reprieve in developing alternative planetary scenarios.

But how long will it take for the collapse of our natural environment to force local collective survival efforts to replace clothes from Bangladesh and food from Mexico and California? Will we be able to use some of our accumulated wealth, taken from Bangladesh, to help them build their own local collective self-reliance? How might we convince ourselves that we can live better without more, as the key to our local survival? How can we overcome our ingrained “cultural narrative” of northern superiority and technological dependence in time to put such an adaptation for planetary survival in place? We have burned up 300 million years of photosynthesis in 200 years of the industrial revolution. Current renewable energy technologies require too much of those ancient accumulated fossil fuel sources to make a green new deal feasible without revolutionary changes in technology and in public and private infrastructure.

Some critics of the status quo conclude that manipulation of information by corporate power requires the destruction, not the development of the information superhighway. Others want to use computers as tools for the democratization of information and respect for pluralistic realities vs highly centralized and regulated “virtual” realities. The latter insist that our governments and educational institutions prepare us for this new potential technical “democracy” and integrate it with the centuries old mechanisms of political, economic and community democracy, which, although they don’t always work perfectly, certainly work better than corporate autocracy and the global “free” market.

*In 1995 Ulrich Duchrow noted:*

*The argument about whether the community should be a lived example of an alternative, or means to the end of political struggle, is central to the concern of this book and to the strategy discussion within the social movements. Do we want all or nothing, politically, or to live our lives differently where we are? Are rejections and small-scale,*

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15 Project Syndicate <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/artificial-intelligence-new-economic-models-by-thomas-j-sargent-2019-11>

16 Project Syndicate: Richard Feynman: “you don’t know the rules of the game, but you’re allowed to look at the board from time to time, in a little corner, perhaps. And from these observations, you try to figure out what the rules are.”

17 Project Syndicate op.cit.

18 Tony Vettese: <https://socialistproject.ca/2019/01/the-political-economy-of-half-earth>

*lived alternatives in a totalitarian context more important than the prophetic use of possibilities offered by limited political influence? This question will remain with us to the end of the book.*<sup>19</sup>

It's probably safe to say that any transition to an alternative world must involve both daily lived examples **and** political action within the bowels of the monster for change. One could say we need a new 3 Rs: Renounce, Redesign, Rebuild, because Reduce, Recycle, Reuse are no longer enough.

### **So what might an alternative solidarity economy imply or look like.**

It must begin with a belief that we have to stop introducing carbon into the atmosphere to arrest the planetary and local climate changes which are creating floods, droughts and massive migrations due to the disruption of global warming. To do this, it must also include a restructuring of economic and social relations and tackle the gross economic and social inequalities which have accumulated over the past decades or even centuries of human expansion on the planet. That climate disruption is caused by capitalism, in particular capitalist accumulation dedicated to growing production using fossil fuels, is no longer even controversial except in right wing and some corporate circles. It was noted above that even under slavery and colonial genocide in the Americas, long ago manifestations of capitalism, reduced populations and therefore agricultural production with enough consequent reforestation to cause a mini-ice age in Europe.<sup>20</sup> A transition to a cooperative solidarity economy and respect for the commons will require massive investments in alternative production and consumption, redistribution of physical wealth and services and a restructuring of control over the governance of infrastructure and decision making at local, regional and global levels.

Even supporters of capitalism now recognize that climate change resulting from global over-production and over and unequal consumption has become a major issue and the need to return to collective not just national positions within the global economy.<sup>21</sup> But "collective" must be based on local, not just national "collective concerns", and certainly not the on collective concerns of global corporations and billionaires - the 1% elite of Thomas Piketty's "Capital in the 21st Century".

How much new and redirected investment in alternative structural, production, distribution and social infrastructure will be needed for this transition? How can we transfer (or take) it from the 1% who own most of it. Will the trillions of dollars in war and so called defence spending be enough? Would the US Troubled Assets Fund<sup>22</sup> with US\$700 billion in outstanding loans used to save banks in 2008, be available for system change? What about the trillions in taxes not paid by corporations.<sup>23</sup>

Where should this new and redirected investment go: public transport, alternative energy, local food, equitable distribution, housing, health and education? How can we overcome the expectations of lifestyle and consumption which drive the existing threatening climate disruptions? Can we change our cultural narrative that the strongest get the best deal, to the collective good and well being that guides many indigenous and communal communities? As mentioned earlier in this article, a certain democratization of technical access to "big data" and computer analysis of patterns and behavior can now be used to test different investment, redistributive and sustainable models, instead of calculating marketing advantages for corporate profits. The use of corporate dominated social media to manipulate political decisions however goes beyond just having number crunching computer capacity.

In traditional left-wing discourse, much is said about class differences and giving priority to the working class majority over the 1% (or 10%) of elites. But our current political and economic systems and their infrastructure do not favour the majority. Ursula Huws notes that we mustn't think that there are simple political solutions to what are, in reality, very complex problems. "Real [historical] divisions within the working classes, based on structural as well as cultural differences, cannot be wished away so simply by glib sloganising. In the longer term we will have to start the patient work of building new movement[s], not based on simplistic notions like 'the many' but on a recognition of the specificities of the positions that different groups of workers occupy in the global division of labour, their cultures and the real conflicts of interest that exist between them. This is heavy work, requiring a lot of careful listening and building from the bottom up."<sup>24</sup>

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19 Ulrich Duchrow: p.247 "Alternatives to Global Capitalism: Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action", International Books/Kairos Europe, Utrecht 1995 ISBN 90 6224 976 0

20 <https://socialistproject.ca/2019/01/the-political-economy-of-half-earth/>

21 NYT Peter Goodman <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/01/business/global-economy-growth.html>

22 <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-218R>

23 <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/04/27/canadians-put-40-billion-in-tax-havens-last-year.html>



The recent defeat of the UK Labour Party and the election of Donald Trump in the USA are excellent examples of this difficulty and complexity.

It will also require heavy work to identify and negotiate the many common and conflicting demands for investment, jobs, training, distribution and resources, not only at a local level, but also regionally, nationally and globally. This will require a level of commitment to collective interests and even a learning, testing and respect for what those interests are, in addition to new political and communication systems which facilitate more democratic forms of negotiation at many levels. The alternative to success in this difficult process is increasingly likely to be the end of life on Earth as we know it. Or the failure of negotiations which lead to destructive conflict to the collective detriment. To this we could say “there is no alternative”, with a completely different meaning from Margaret Thatcher’s use of that phrase.

There are however examples of alternatives. Thousands of local, community and even regional examples exist. I don’t want to even pretend that this makes this difficult transition possible, but I will present here a few examples that give me some hope that there are indeed alternatives.

## **The Transition to the Commons**

The Peer to Peer Foundation<sup>25</sup> looks at how basing civil society on peer to peer (P2P) dynamics and Commons practices could enable a more egalitarian, just, and environmentally sustainable society. It began in 2005 as a network promoting open source manufacturing technologies, co-creating an open knowledge commons and a resilient, sustainable human network. It has expanded to include a Primer or Manifesto for the Transition to the Commons<sup>26</sup> as well as a research network which empirically explores and expands the theoretical work produced on commons-oriented peer production, governance and property to ascertain its viability in real-world applications.<sup>27</sup> Foundation members are active all over the world, with representatives in Europe, Asia, Oceania, Africa, South America, and North America.

The Transnational Institute (TNI) a member of the P2P network<sup>28</sup>, is an international research and advocacy institute committed to building a just, democratic and sustainable world. For more than 40 years, TNI has served as a unique nexus between social movements, engaged scholars and policy makers.

The P2P primer or manifesto looks at a range of paradigm shifting elements toward a commons society: a partner vs capitalist state<sup>29</sup>, distributed manufacturing<sup>30</sup>, open cooperativism, copyfair vs copyright technology licensing, cooperative contributory accounting<sup>31</sup>, platform (resource sharing) cooperatives<sup>32</sup>,

The solidarity economy network of Catalonia is a living example of a group bringing large numbers of local and regional cooperatives together across a wide spectrum of consumer, productive and social activities. One of the most interesting autonomous projects associated with the Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC)<sup>33</sup> is Calafou, the self-proclaimed “post-capitalist colony” which settled in 2011 in the ruins of an abandoned industrial village in the Catalan county of l’Anoia, about 65km away from Barcelona.<sup>34</sup> Another regional example is the autonomous self-governing Kurdish enclave of Rojava in northern Syria.<sup>35</sup>

## **The Green New Deal(s)**

The Green New Deal (GND) is more a phenomenon than a single specific, coherent proposal or movement. Taking its name from US President Roosevelt’s 1930’s “New Deal” investments to counteract the impact of the “great depression”

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24 Ursula Huws: Socialist Project - <https://socialistproject.ca/2019/12/the-unwoke-are-awake>

25 <https://p2pfoundation.net>

26 <https://degrowthcanada.wordpress.com/2018/02/01/the-commons-transition-and-p2p-some-links/>

27 <https://p2pfoundation.net/the-p2p-foundation/about-the-p2p-foundation>

28 <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/commons-transition-and-p2p>

29 [https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Partner\\_State](https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Partner_State)

30 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distributed\\_manufacturing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distributed_manufacturing)

31 <http://commonstransition.org/p2p-accounting-for-planetary-survival/>

32 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platform\\_cooperative#Organizations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platform_cooperative#Organizations)

33 <http://commonstransition.org/catalan-integral-cooperative/>

34 <https://degrowthcanada.wordpress.com/2016/08/04/cics-autonomous-projects-of-collective-initiative-5-calafou-p2p-foundation/>

35 <https://roarmag.org/essays/eyewitnesses-to-the-rojava-revolution-hevalti-and-dignity/>

and WWI, it ranges from a May 2019 Congressional resolution by Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez<sup>36</sup> across a broad spectrum of capitalist reformers, even the New York Times<sup>37</sup>, to Naomi Klein’s social democratic critique of capitalism<sup>38</sup> and Bernie Sanders GND<sup>39</sup>, to even more radical anti-capitalist manifestos or proposals.

There is a lot of discussion, bordering on sectarianism, about whether the GND should be supported as an initial tactical thin edge of a wedge against capitalism or is a sell out to green capitalism.<sup>40</sup> It has nevertheless attracted a large following in Canada, with Our Time<sup>41</sup>, the LEAP Manifesto<sup>42</sup>, the Green Party and parts of the NDP, the Council of Canadians and some 150 GND town halls held across Canada in 2019.<sup>43</sup>

The US version of the Green New Deal as a Democratic Party resolution, however “radical” in the US context, neither calls for the cooperation of the nations of the world nor places any limits on the activities of the energy corporations. Quite the opposite, it insists on “making the United States the international leader on climate action” by calling for “investments to spur economic development [and] deepen and diversify industry and business in local and regional economies.” These investments would be allocated by means of “community grants, public banks, and other public financing.” In other words, more public funds will be handed over to the US energy monopolies and other corporate interests, the same institutions that are responsible for climate change in the first place. Any measures ostensibly aimed at reducing climate change will have to be acceptable to corporations and banks and their wealthy shareholders.<sup>44</sup> ....

## Degrowth

The degrowth movement grew in France out of the work of Romanian mathematician Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen and his 1971 treatise on *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*<sup>45</sup> written while a professor (and refugee) at Vanderbilt University. Translated to French in 1979 with the title *La Décroissance: Entropie – Écologie – Économie*, Georgescu-Roegen’s work influenced a diverse French network of supporters which, following the first international conference on Economic De-Growth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity in Paris in April 2008<sup>46</sup>, expanded across Europe, with biennial international conferences in 2010 (Barcelona<sup>47</sup>), 2012 (Montreal<sup>48</sup> and Venice<sup>49</sup>), 2014 (Leipzig<sup>50</sup>), 2016 (Budapest<sup>51</sup>) and 2018 (Malmo<sup>52</sup>, Mexico<sup>53</sup> and Brussels<sup>54</sup>). Conferences are planned for Vienna and Manchester in 2020. From the Research and Degrowth web site (Autonomous University of Barcelona)

*Sustainable degrowth is a downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet. It calls for a future where societies live within their ecological means, with open, localized economies and resources more equally distributed through new forms of democratic institutions. Such societies will no longer have to “grow or die.” Material accumulation will no longer hold a prime position in the population’s cultural imaginary. The primacy of efficiency will be substituted by a focus on sufficiency, and innovation will no longer focus on technology for technology’s sake but will concentrate on new social and technical arrangements that will enable us to live convivially and frugally. Degrowth does not only challenge the centrality of GDP as an*

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36 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_New\\_Deal#cite\\_note-OcasioCortez\\_HR109\\_20190212-8](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_New_Deal#cite_note-OcasioCortez_HR109_20190212-8)

37 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/opinion/letters/green-new-deal.html>

38 <https://www.thenation.com/article/naomi-klein-green-new-deal-book-interview/>

39 <https://socialistproject.ca/2020/01/bernies-green-new-deal-stands-out-and-now-labor-must-step-up/>

40 <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/03/05/deal-m05.html>

41 <https://our-time.ca/>

42 <https://leapmanifesto.org/en/leap-news/>

43 <https://greennewdealcanada.ca/>

44 <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/03/05/deal-m05.html>

45 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas\\_Georgescu-Roegen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_Georgescu-Roegen)

46 [http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/dcroissance/paris\\_april\\_2008\\_contents.html](http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/dcroissance/paris_april_2008_contents.html)

47 <https://web.archive.org/web/20180423114817/http://barcelona.degrowth.org:80/>

48 <https://web.archive.org/web/20160702001816/http://www.montreal.degrowth.org/index.html>

49 <https://www.degrowth.info/en/conferences/venice-2012/>

50 <https://www.degrowth.info/en/leipzig-2014/>

51 <https://www.degrowth.info/en/conferences/budapest-2016/>

52 <https://www.degrowth.info/en/conferences/conference-2018/>

53 <http://degrowth.descrecimiento.org/>

54 <https://www.postgrowth2018.eu/>



*overarching policy objective but proposes a framework for transformation to a lower and sustainable level of production and consumption, a shrinking of the economic system to leave more space for human cooperation and ecosystems.*<sup>55</sup> A good overview, some say even a history, of degrowth thinking can be found in the July 2010 issue of Ecological Economics, Volume 69, Issue 9.<sup>56</sup> You can find a degrowth bibliography on the website of Degrowth Canada.<sup>57</sup>

## **The Great Transition**

The Great Transition Initiative is a forum of ideas and an international network [of scholars] for the critical exploration of concepts, strategies, and visions for a transition to a future of enriched lives, human solidarity, and a resilient biosphere. By enhancing scholarly discourse and public awareness of possibilities arising from converging social, economic, and environmental crises, and by fostering a broad network of thinkers and doers, it aims to contribute to a new praxis for global transformation.<sup>58</sup>

Their network, funded by the Telus Institute, includes an extremely diverse mix of (mostly) scholars, with contributors ranging from the UN, the Club of Rome, academia, politicians, green growth advocates, ecological economists, trade unions, degrowth activists, a few marxists and former corporate executives. They look at policy reform but recognize the daunting task and problems of political will, and ask if we want a well engineered global mall or a place of human fulfillment. One of their major focii seems to be a rewriting of the relationships between corporations and society and they have just opened a new GTI Forum on transnational corporations: from reform to redesign.

Note: There is another group called The Great Transition Collective based in Montreal<sup>59</sup> which is associated with Historical Materialism Montreal.

## **Buen Vivir/Sumaq Kawsay: Indigenous perspectives on alternatives**

Buen Vivir can be translated as ‘good life’ or ‘living well’. This ‘good life’ has always been a pluralistic concept, namely ‘good lives’: different ways of ‘living well together’. This is therefore not about opening the gates to a single, homogeneous, unrealisable good life, but far more about people living well together in a community, different communities living well together, and individuals and communities living well with nature. In some indigenous communities, there is no concept analogous to the ‘modern’ Western concept of development. There is no concept of a linear life with a former and subsequent state (in this case underdevelopment and development). Nor are there concepts of wealth and poverty based on the accumulation or lack of material goods.<sup>60</sup>

An Algonquin first nations colleague once challenged my interpretation of a situation, saying “You don’t get it because your first language is English.” She went on to explain that most of the words in English are nouns, while most of the words in Anishinaabe languages are verbs. Thus they have a view of the world based on action and process, while we have very different cultural narrative and a world view based on things.<sup>61</sup>

Uruguayan scholar Eduardo Gudynas notes that: “With buen vivir, the subject of well being is not [about the] individual, but the individual in the social context of their community and in a unique environmental situation.”<sup>62</sup> It is ironic of course that this quote comes from a Guardian article under the topic of sustainable business!

5068 words to here (20 January 2020)

CONCLUSION ?

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55 <https://degrowth.org/definition-2/>

56 <https://degrowthcanada.wordpress.com/2018/08/23/an-overview-of-degrowth-research/>

57 <https://degrowthcanada.wordpress.com/bibliography/>

58 <https://greattransition.org/about/aims-and-background>

59 <https://thegreattransition.net/>

60 <https://www.degrowth.info/en/dim/degrowth-in-movements/buen-vivir/>

61 Bob Thomson, Pachakuti: Indigenous perspectives on degrowth, [Development, Vol.54 No.4 December 2011](#)

62 <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/buen-vivir-philosophy-south-america-eduardo-gudynas>

Some notes for expansion on the above draft:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/05/thomas-piketty-and-the-end-of-our-peaceful-coexistence-with-inequality/371154/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capital\\_in\\_the\\_Twenty-First\\_Century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capital_in_the_Twenty-First_Century)

*If 800 million ha. of land were reforested, billions of new trees would sequester 215 gigatons (GtC) over the next century, bringing atmospheric carbon to a much safer level in the low 300s ppm. (compared to today's 410 ppm) But this can only come about if the richest make drastic cuts to their energy consumption and it cannot be fixed by the market. He presents the Swiss '2000-Watt Society' (48 kWh/person/day) vs the 12,000 W of average US citizens, 6,000 W for Europeans and 1,000 W in India and discusses the eco-socialist accomplishments of Cuba's transition after the collapse of the USSR based on an average Cuban consumption of much less than 2000 watts.*<sup>63</sup>

[Self-Determination As Anti-Extractivism: How Indigenous Resistance Challenges World...](#)

By [Manuela L Picq](#)

Pachakuti: Indigenous perspectives on degrowth, Bob Thomson 2011

[http://web.ca/~bthomson/degrowth/pachakuti\\_for\\_sustainability\\_18dec12.html](http://web.ca/~bthomson/degrowth/pachakuti_for_sustainability_18dec12.html)

Half Earth

<https://degrowthcanada.wordpress.com/2019/01/30/the-political-economy-of-half-earth-the-bullet/>

[Two new books on the Green New Deal](#)

<https://degrowthcanada.wordpress.com/2019/11/14/two-new-books-on-the-green-new-deal/>

Jim Bendell's Deep Adaptation Agenda paper

<https://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>

<https://www.thefutureisbeautiful.co/2018/12/27/e45-jem-bendell-on-deep-adaptation-climate-change-and-societal-collapse-acceptance-and-evolution-in-the-face-of-global-meltdown/>

The woke vs the unwoke

[we] risk suggesting that there are simple political solutions to what are, in reality, very complex problems. Real divisions within the working classes, based on structural as well as cultural differences, cannot be wished away so simply by glib sloganising. In the longer term we will have to start the patient work of building a new movement, based not on simplistic notions like 'the many' but on a recognition of the specificities of the positions that different groups of workers occupy in the global division of labour, their cultures and the real conflicts of interest that exist between them. This is heavy work, requiring a lot of careful listening and building from the bottom up. In the meanwhile, I guess many of us will end up, as we did after Thatcher's election in 1979, reduced to wearing badges that say "Don't blame me. I voted Labour."<sup>64</sup>

Herman Daly and the Sustainable Economy

Can there be a "non-growthist" capitalism?

<https://www.resilience.org/resilience-author/herman-daly/>

<https://www.resilience.org/stories/2017-03-01/thoughts-pope-francis-laudato-si/>

<https://www.degrowth.info/en/2015/06/laudato-si-as-signalling-towards-degrowth/>

<https://greattransition.org/>

Do red and green mix? [https://greattransition.org/roundtable/ecosocialism-author-response?](https://greattransition.org/roundtable/ecosocialism-author-response?highlight=WyJjYW5hZGEiLCJjYW5hZGEncyJd)

[highlight=WyJjYW5hZGEiLCJjYW5hZGEncyJd](https://greattransition.org/roundtable/ecosocialism-author-response?highlight=WyJjYW5hZGEiLCJjYW5hZGEncyJd)

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<sup>63</sup> Trevor Vettese, [The Political Economy of Half Earth](#), The Bullet, 30 January 2019

<sup>64</sup> <https://socialistproject.ca/2019/12/the-unwoke-are-awake>

Degrowth: The Mauss that roared

<https://degrowthcanada.wordpress.com/degrowth-the-mauss-that-roared/>

Mauss's essay focuses on the way that the exchange of objects between groups builds relationships between humans. After examining the reciprocal gift-giving practices of each, he finds in them common features, despite some variation. From the disparate evidence, he builds a case for a foundation to human society based on collective (vs. individual) exchange practices. In so doing, he refutes the English tradition of liberal thought, such as utilitarianism, as distortions of human exchange practices. He concludes by speculating that social welfare programs may be recovering some aspects of the morality of the gift within modern market economies. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Gift\\_%28book%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gift_%28book%29)

Indigenous concepts of “development”

<https://greattransition.org/publication/roundtable-vivir-bien>

<https://www.degrowth.info/en/dim/degrowth-in-movements/buen-vivir/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rights\\_of\\_Nature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rights_of_Nature)

<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/buen-vivir-philosophy-south-america-eduardo-gudynas>

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057%2Fdev.2011.86>

The fallacies and evasions of the Green New Deal

This is part of an international process. Earlier this year the British charity Oxfam reported that in 2018, just 26 people controlled as much wealth as the 3.8 billion people who comprise the bottom half of the world’s population.... No genuine social reform can be enacted today outside of a direct assault on social inequality and the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate-financial oligarchy. That includes the political parties it controls.

<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/03/05/deal-m05.html>

(From a comment on the above online article) Global Warming activists and politicians are trying to instill self-guilt among population blaming their lifestyles for coming calamity while pushing unfounded supposedly God-like ability of science and technology of reversing natural component of physical reality of today which is presented with cultish technological attitude of to need to pray and sacrifice of population on altars of scientific tribe. And hence they are dividing people and most of all dividing working class that is told their economic are tethered to particular economic model of Green Capitalism

How Long Will the Shale Revolution Last?: Technology versus Geology and the Lifecycle of Shale Plays

<https://www.postcarbon.org/publications/how-long-will-the-shale-revolution-last/>

*A definition or what does “degrowth” mean to us?*<sup>65</sup>

By “degrowth“, we understand a form of society and economy which aims at the well-being of all and sustains the natural basis of life. To achieve degrowth, we need a fundamental transformation of our lives and an extensive cultural change. The current economic and social paradigm is “faster, higher, further“. It is built on and stimulates competition between all humans. This causes acceleration, stress and exclusion. Our economy destroys the natural basis of life. We are convinced that the common values of a degrowth society should be care, solidarity and cooperation. Humanity has to understand itself as part of the planetary ecological system. Only this way, a self-determined life in dignity for all can be made possible.

Essential for degrowth is:

- Striving for the good life for all. This includes deceleration, time welfare and conviviality.
- A reduction of production and consumption in the global North and liberation from the one-sided Western paradigm of development. This could allow for a self-determined path of social organization in the global South.
- An extension of democratic decision-making to allow for real political participation.
- Social changes and an orientation towards sufficiency instead of purely technological changes and improvements in efficiency in order to solve ecological problems. We believe that it has historically been proven that decoupling economic growth from resource use is not possible.

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65 <https://www.degrowth.info/en/what-is-degrowth/>

- The creation of open, connected and localized economies.
- This definition of degrowth is based on the definition of **Research and Degrowth**, which the organizational team of the degrowth conference in Leipzig adapted and which was further edited by the [editorial team](#) of the web portal.  
We distance ourselves from forms of growth critique which do not aim for the good life for all. We object to all right-wing, racist and sexist forms of growth critique.

Abstracts from the Historical Materialism conference SOAS, 7-10 November 2019

[http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/List%20%281%29\\_compressed%20%281%29.pdf](http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/List%20%281%29_compressed%20%281%29.pdf)

Riccardo Mastini (Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA), Autonomous University of Barcelona)

To limit global warming to 1.5 compared to pre-industrial levels, the IPCC latest report warns that countries must reach net zero CO2 emissions by 2040. Scholars and activists debate which policies are best suited for the deployment of renewable energy infrastructure and the socio-economic changes that need to accompany it. I review and compare two prominent decarbonization discourses: the Green New Deal and degrowth. Here I show that both discourses have internal contradictions and present possible synergies and trade-offs between them. Green New Deal advocates propose a plan to coordinate and finance a large-scale overhaul of the energy system, but they disregard the issue of scale in energy use. Degrowth researchers and activists address also other environmental issues beyond climate change and place social justice at the centre of their analysis, but they fall short on discussing policy and financing measures. Economic growth plays a pivotal role in setting these two discourses apart from each other: it is the engine of the renewable energy transition in the case of the Green New Deal, whereas it should be abandoned as a policy goal from a degrowth perspective. However, both discourses already converge on two policy proposals: rethinking the ownership structure of the energy system and expanding the welfare state. I posit that these two discourses should enter in a dialogue and that this can be mutually enriching.

### **Utopia, degrowth, and ecosocialism**

Aaron Vansintjan (Birkbeck, University of London)

This panel will explore the links and tensions between utopian thought, strains of ecosocialism, and the degrowth movement. Climate breakdown, presented to us as a crisis of the modern world-system, has brought forth a wide diversity of leftist and socialist proposals. From the Green New Deal to ‘half-Earth’ to socialist ecomodernism, there is a willingness to ‘think big’ and envision a desirable, liberatory future. In the tradition of Gorz political ecology and feminist ecosocialism, the degrowth movement, for its part, has pushed forward the need to include collective, political deliberation of limits and questioned the colonial and patriarchal conditions for social-ecological reproduction that enable wealth rooted in (a no matter how green) productivism. Critics on the left argue that any call for limits goes against the goals of communism: to improve on the human condition, to go beyond capitalism rather than react against it. In this panel, we will explore the role that limits (to growth, but also to utopias and to communist futures) may have in any utopian project for an ecosocialist future. Drawing on science and speculative fiction literature, philosophy, Marxist and post-Marxian thought, political ecology, world ecology, decolonial thought, and feminist political economy, our panelists will seek to put forward the necessity for politicizing limits in any desirable socialist system and discuss alternative conditions for cohabiting the Oikos.

- Troy Vettese (chair), New York University, [tg208@nyu.edu](mailto:tg208@nyu.edu) [Half Earth]
- Barbara Muraca (virtual), University of Oregon, [Barbara.Muraca@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Barbara.Muraca@oregonstate.edu) Liberation from the Addiction of Limitless Growth: Degrowth as a Concrete Utopia against Neoliberalism
- Rut Elliot Blomqvist, Gothenburg University, [rut.elliott.blomqvist@sprak.gu.se](mailto:rut.elliott.blomqvist@sprak.gu.se) Through an analysis of how unlimited economic expansion is seen as limiting human freedom in indigenous Smi poetry, I sketch an

understanding of the relation between limits and liberation that can inspire degrowth visions of the future.

- Anna Saave-Harnack, University of Jena, [anna.saave-harnack@posteo.de](mailto:anna.saave-harnack@posteo.de) Two basic pillars for ecosocialist utopian theory-crafting: standpoint epistemologies and a practice first approach
- Aaron Vansintjan, Birkbeck College, University of London. [avansintjan@gmail.com](mailto:avansintjan@gmail.com) Futurist communism and degrowth utopianism: a review of recent debates
- Emanuele Leonardi, Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, [lele.leonardi@gmail.com](mailto:lele.leonardi@gmail.com) Bringing Class Back In: Autonomist Marxism as a Bridge between Ecosocialism and Degrowth
- Sam Bliss, University of Vermont, What role do markets play in utopian thought and desirable futures?
- Bengi Akbulut, Concordia University, [bengi.akbulut@gmail.com](mailto:bengi.akbulut@gmail.com) Rojava, the state, and utopia
- Giorgos Kallis, Autonomous University of Barcelona, [giorgoskallis@gmail.com](mailto:giorgoskallis@gmail.com) Topic TBA
- David Ravensbergen, York University, [dravensbe@gmail.com](mailto:dravensbe@gmail.com) Topic TBA
- Vijay Kolinjivadi, Universite du Quebec en Outaouais, [vijay.kolinjivadi@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:vijay.kolinjivadi@mail.mcgill.ca) Time, temporality, and degrowth

The Carbohydrate Economy,

Sugar: The threat and the promise, Clive Thomas, IDRC