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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
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Degrowth and Self-Realization:  
Direct Democracy, Village Economies, and Human Flourishing

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

by

Heba Hodaly

December 2022

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Farah Godrej, Chairperson

Dr. John Medearis

Dr. Bronwyn Leebaw

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2022

The Dissertation of Heba Hodaly is approved:

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## Dedication

This project is dedicated to my late father, Yousef Hodaly, a Palestinian immigrant who worked tirelessly and without complaint to ensure that his wife and daughters could lead lives of dignity and purpose. His practical and emotional support of my academic pursuits was generous and ultimately indispensable to my success. I owe him everything.

And to my mother, Mona Hodaly, who has saved my life both literally and figuratively, and who has been my anchor, my biggest supporter, and my ultimate inspiration. Without her, I would not have occasion to write this dedication.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Degrowth and Human-Flourishing:  
Direct Democracy, Village Economies, and Self-Realization

by

Heba Hodaly

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Political Science  
University of California, Riverside, December 2022  
Dr. Farah Godrej, Chairperson

This project evaluates the relationship between human well-being and collective institutions. Specifically, using the combined and essentialist wisdom of Aristotle, Marx, and Nussbaum, I argue in favor of human well-being understood as ‘human flourishing,’ which can be roughly characterized as the complete fulfilment of uniquely human potential. Because material conditions are determinants of one’s ability to flourish, I further argue that current societal institutions preclude real and equal opportunities for individual flourishing. Namely, I argue that large-scale, representative democracy and its complementarity of global capitalism are detrimental to the project of human flourishing, as they prohibit the adequate provision of the material preconditions for such flourishing. The project is written in the context of worsening environmental crisis. In order to salvage our planet and make real the equal opportunity for individual flourishing—which corresponds to greater societal flourishing—there must occur a radical reimagining of



democracy and market economies. In the spirit of Rousseau, Pateman, and others, I argue in favor of small-scale, direct democracy. Using the innovative research of international degrowth scholars, I argue for a transformation in the relationships between humans and the natural world, humans and the supply and consumption of resources, as well as current generations and future generations, ultimately arguing in favor of Gandhian ‘village economies’ as a way for individuals to maintain autonomy, and in turn, the material preconditions for enduring human flourishing.

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## Chapter 1- Introduction

### Introduction

Modernity is often regarded as beneficial to the human condition. Advances in medicine and technology have liberated humans from the diseases, ailments, and creative or productive limits they once collectively suffered. Innovative forces of production have helped lift billions from poverty. New ideas about human nature, liberty, equality, and democracy have freed once oppressed peoples from their literal and proverbial shackles. This characterization of modernity, however, obscures some concerning truths. Far from the utopian human condition implied by modernity in this characterization, many compellingly argue that our current modern circumstances are, in fact, dystopian.

As I write, I do so with the knowledge that in the here and now, millions have died from plague, climate crisis, and violence both between individuals and collectives alike. The habitats of wildlife are disappearing at an irrevocable rate. Economic inequality both in and between nations is staggering as children in the richest nation in the world go to sleep hungry and without clean water. Democracy has lost its legitimacy throughout the world as fascists and plutocrats plunder their way to power. Our present circumstances are, arguably, apocalyptic. In contemporary language, we use “apocalypse” to mean End Times, catastrophe, dystopia. The true meaning of the word is “revelation.” Apocalypse is an uncovering, a situation in which the truth has been revealed to us. Apocalypse is an opportunity to build the world anew with the knowledge that has been unveiled. In the wreckage of modernity lie the answers to a better world, the path towards utopia.

What follows is an exploration of the forces that have led to our current dystopia. I probe the frameworks, ideologies, and movements that have informed the historical development of our institutions. I argue that these institutions have failed to produce the conditions of utopia that might be possible in and as result of the fruits of modernity. What I glean from the following exploration is that a reimagining of human nature is in order if we are to truly live well. This reimagining must understand humans to be temporally, socially and environmentally situated in order for humanity to flourish.

#### Political theory and well-being

This project is an argument in favor of the elevation of well-being as the aim of our collective institutions. I argue in favor of the essentialist understanding of well-being as human flourishing, using the combined wisdom of Aristotle's Eudaimonia, Marx's self-realization, and Nussbaum's capabilities approach. This is a perfectionist project which posits that, since there are elements of human life that are common to all humans, there are in fact better ways to live, and that politics should be in the business of promoting and providing equal and real opportunities for good living. I reject the postmodern relativism that insists against a universal and essential understanding of humans. I also reject the incomplete, modern understanding of autonomy that sees the absence of coercion and inadequate, negative or protective rights as the path to liberation. Based instead on this more essentialist understanding of human nature, I argue that the provision of equal and real opportunity for flourishing is the most important job of any governing body, opportunities without which we are doomed to governmental, economic,

ecological, and psycho-spiritual dystopia. The entire project is written with the understanding and in the context of the existential threat that is planet death, which I argue necessitates immediate and robust action in the realms of democracy and economics.

The argument suggests that material well-being is a necessary condition for the achievement of human flourishing, and that our current organization of mass society undermines not only equal access to physical well-being, but also political, social, and ecological well-being. A radical transformation of our economies and democracies is required to make more real the potential for human flourishing. Specifically, I argue that human flourishing, which is inextricably linked to the flourishing of nature, requires that humanity undergo a universal downsizing in our fundamental collective undertakings.

## Project Plan

In this first chapter, I probe existing and prevailing discussions and conceptions of the good life. Namely, I outline and critique deontological liberalism's dominant doctrine of state neutrality in the adjudication of citizen conceptions of the good life. I also identify a superior conception of well-being, rejecting liberal utilitarian, neoclassical economic, and hedonistic understandings of well-being in favor of theories of human flourishing, like Aristotle's Eudaimonia, Nussbaum's 'capabilities' approach, and Marx's arguably essentialist self-realization. Additionally, I introduce the concept of degrowth, which I argue is the best path towards equal opportunities for self-realization and ecological salvation.

In chapter 2, I make the argument for economic degrowth, asserting that global capitalism, propelled by the logic of growth, precludes the possibility of citizen self-realization, since large-scale economies create conditions of economic inequality and domination, poverty, psychological alienation and, importantly, ecological devastation. The chapter includes an exploration of self-realization as it relates to work, as explicated by both Aristotle and Marx. In the chapter, I also discuss the negative effects of poverty, globalization, and technology on the possibility of self-realization, using the combined wisdom of Gandhi and Marx to argue for a shrinking of economies to the village level. The chapter includes a discussion of actually existing steady-state and small-scale economies, revolutionary technologies, and emerging, subversive communities as examples of not only the plausibility of degrowth, but also its desirability towards the ends of self-realization and ecological preservation.

In chapter 3, in the spirit of Rousseau, Pateman, Mill and others, I assert the positive implications for equal opportunities to self-realization of small-scale, participatory or direct democracy. That discussion is based largely on the self-realizing benefits of democracy, which include its educative potential as well as its positive consequences for moral development. My argument includes a critique of large-scale, representative democracy through the astute lens of not just the aforementioned intellectual giants, but also through the lens of advocates for degrowth, who see direct, participatory democracy as the only path towards ecological salvation. Degrowth scholars redefine democracy in a comprehensive way, asking society to reconsider our collective

goals, institutions, and perhaps most interestingly, what is meant by ‘the people’, calling for ‘earth,’ ‘intergenerational,’ and ‘inclusive democracy.’

Human Nature: a defense of essentialism and competing conceptions of well-being

The goal of this project is not to critique the whole of liberalism, but more specifically, its understanding of the individual, from which flow a supposed commitment to state neutrality with regards to the good life and arguably, as result, the logic of the growth paradigm. The liberal theoretical paradigm addressed in this project is best exemplified by the works of deontologists like John Rawls, who is informed by a Kantian logic of the self.<sup>123</sup> This brand of liberalism stresses an ethical and political neutralism regarding citizen conceptions of the good life.<sup>4</sup> This supposed neutrality is rooted in the claim that there are many diverse and legitimate definitions of what type of life is best, so what is “good” or best” is somewhat relative. There is no one true good life. This belief and its accompanying discourse, termed “emotivism” by McIntyre, is the doctrine that “all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as

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<sup>1</sup> Kymlicka, Will. "Rawls on teleology and deontology." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1988): 173-190.

<sup>2</sup> Freeman, Samuel. "Utilitarianism, deontology, and the priority of right." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 23, no. 4 (1994): 313-349.

<sup>3</sup> Sandel, Michael J. *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. Harvard university press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Revised edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. Rawls says that a state should possess “moral neutrality on the definition of good,” p. 404



they are moral or evaluative in character”<sup>5</sup> Following in the tradition of MacIntyre, I critique this doctrine as false, and like Nussbaum, argue “in defense” of an Aristotelian “essentialism.”<sup>6</sup> As others have asserted, there do exist “some features of humanity that all human beings share, and that these are features whose cultivation produces a good human life.”<sup>7</sup> Currently, members of modern society have no shared conception of the human good and no obvious or effective path towards collectively pursuing a human good. Instead, critics assert, collective institutions claim neutrality with regards to the good life and as such, liberal democracy removes debate about the good life from the public to the private sphere.<sup>8</sup>

This neutrality doctrine can largely be found in deontological liberalism, of which the works of Kant, Locke, and Rawls are arguably exemplar.<sup>9</sup> Deontological liberal neutrality has been critiqued as a fiction for a number of reasons. In his communitarian critique of this liberal neutrality, Neal concedes that perhaps liberal theory can be neutral with regards to citizen conceptions of the good, but “it has a very distinct conceptualization of what it means to have a conception of the good”<sup>10</sup>. Neal is arguing

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<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. pp 11-12

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism.” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 202–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591792020002002>.

<sup>7</sup> Holma, Katariina. “Essentialism Regarding Human Nature in the Defence of Gender Equality in Education.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 1 (2007): 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00543.x>.

<sup>8</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Kymlicka, Will. “Rawls on teleology and deontology.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1988): 173-190.

that if liberal theory has no conception of the good, it has what he calls “a meta-theory” of the good, whereby it is only autonomous individuals that possess conceptions of the good. In other words, according to liberal meta-theory, even if our conceptions of the good can be “contingently and aggregatively” shared, they cannot be “essentially and collectively” shared<sup>11</sup>. He illustrates this point with the example of Ralph, who desires to live in a society that has prioritized those virtues known as excellences in the context of the Athenian city and who claims that he simply cannot pursue that good within the neutral framework for the liberal state. Neal writes:

“The liberal says this is fine; Ralph may pursue those virtues, whatever they are, and in company with others who choose to do so, just so long as he leaves other individuals free to pursue their ends. But Ralph objects; he claims that what is noteworthy about these virtues is not merely their substance, but the meta-theory of the good they presuppose. He claims that these virtues cannot be pursued within the neutral framework of the liberal state.... They can be pursued only insofar as this pursuit is collectively undertaken upon the basis of essentially shared ends which are understood by the participants to be definitive of themselves as selves....He cannot pursue the good as he understands it.... Because his conceptualization of conceptions of the good deny the very thing which liberalism presupposed—that conceptions of the good are born primarily by separate selves.”<sup>12</sup>

To better understand this critique, we can consider the roots of the neutrality doctrine. Of course, this conversation cannot be had without mention of the Enlightenment, which Kant described as “man's emergence from his self- incurred

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<sup>10</sup> Neal, Patrick. “A Liberal Theory of the Good?” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (1987): 567–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1987.10716454>. Pp. 571-572

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

immaturity.”<sup>13</sup> Enlightenment thinkers ‘disabused’ themselves of the notion that nature provided ready-made answers to questions of meaning or of value, waiting to be discovered by those passively searching for truth. While pre-modern thought allowed for sweeping claims about the good life based on a pre-existing natural order, modern metaphysics insisted upon reason and individual perception as the bases for interpreting the world and meaning making. In other words, whereas humans once discovered the “good” in the natural laws of God’s Kingdom, modern thought rejects ‘faith’ as a suitable vehicle for understanding the world. It is now the individual’s responsibility to define herself and her good where it was once God’s. This distinction matters for a few reasons. With the insistence upon self-definition, choice becomes central to modern thought. This development is often regarded as positive, and modern thinkers are loath to articulate any moral or ethical doctrine that threatens the centrality of choice. This, of course, is the popular notion of individual autonomy, which will be addressed shortly. Deciding how to live becomes a matter of preference instead of ethics. Put differently, the questions of “how should I behave” or “what should I do” were once directly informed by the question “what is the good life?” In other words, politics was simply an extension of an ethical sphere of concern over the highest human good. Aristotle explicitly identified politics as the science concerned with this supreme human good. In modernity, the

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<sup>13</sup> Kant, Immanuel. Hans, Reiss and H. B. Nisbet. "An answer to the question: what is enlightenment." *Hans Reissds (org, Kants political writings, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 54* (1991).

answer to “what should I do” is entirely informed by the question “what is the good life for me.”<sup>14</sup>

This major shift sees autonomous moral agents making rights claims in a public sphere that is wholly separate from a private sphere. The only ethic of the public sphere in this paradigm is supposed state neutrality with regards to citizen conceptions of the good. Lost to modernity is any meaningful understanding of the good life as a shared characteristic.

By now, we are all familiar with the myriad critiques of deontological liberalism and the Kantian self, which is thought to be the basis of liberal democracy. There is of course the communitarian critique, which holds the atomized, “unencumbered”<sup>15</sup>, autonomous liberal individual as incoherent on account that the self “is 'embedded' in and partly constituted by communal commitments and values which are not objects of choice.”<sup>16</sup> Deontological liberalism is critiqued as a politics of alienation, wherein increased and dubious distinctions between public and private spheres<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup> separate one from her community--without which, according to Taylor, she is simply not fully human-

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<sup>14</sup> Evans, Mark Andrew. “The Concept of Self-Realization in Political Theory.” University of Oxford, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Sandel, Michael J. *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. Harvard university press, 1998. 28

<sup>16</sup> Buchanan, Allen E. "Assessing the communitarian critique of liberalism." *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (1989): 852

<sup>17</sup> Marx, Karl. "On the Jewish question." In *Nonsense Upon Stilts*, pp. 137-150. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, Patricia J. "Commercial rights and constitutional wrongs." *Md. L. Rev.* 49 (1990): 293.

- and in turn, herself.<sup>19</sup> The liberal self and the public sphere require only that the public secure protective, or negative rights, which are perpetually in conflict<sup>20 21</sup> and do little to promote true human flourishing, which we will see is one important conception of the good life.

Some critique neutrality through the lens of participatory theory, arguing that greater participation in decision-making will help build consensus around a conception of the good life and will replace the self-interest inherent modern societies<sup>22 23</sup> which has allowed for little more than negative freedoms by way of property and contract rights, and has ultimately denied individuals the opportunity for real emancipation.<sup>24 25 26</sup> As

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor, Charles. "Atomism" In Powers, Possessions and Freedom: Essays in Honour of C.B. Macpherson edited by Alkis Kontos, 39-62. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019.  
<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487589417-005>

<sup>20</sup> Raban, Ofer. "Conflicts of rights: when the Federal Constitution restricts civil liberties." *Rutgers L. Rev.* 64 (2011): 381.

<sup>21</sup> Beiner, Ronald. "The moral vocabulary of liberalism." *Virtue*, edited by John W. Chapman and William Galston. *Nomos* 34 (1992).

<sup>22</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "The Social Contract and Discourses, translated by GDH Cole (London: JM Dent & Sons, 1973)."

<sup>23</sup> Barber, Benjamin. *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Univ of California Press, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Marx, Karl. "On the Jewish question." In *Nonsense Upon Stilts*, pp. 137-150. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton University Press, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Crenshaw, K., 2018. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics [1989]. In *Feminist legal theory* (pp. 57-80). Routledge.

Wendy Brown, paraphrasing Marx, strikingly puts it, “Rights emblemize the ghostly sovereignty of the unemancipated individual in modernity.”<sup>27</sup>

Relatedly, and perhaps most importantly for this project, critics argue that in fact, supposedly neutral liberal societies have internalized market logic, applying it in their theory of the individual as well as the resulting relationships between individuals and between individuals and institutions.<sup>28</sup> The argument is that the liberal individual, as explicated by such thinkers as Hobbes and Locke, is based on a set of assumptions about human nature drawn from the budding capitalist relations these thinkers observed in the seventeenth century.<sup>29</sup> These relations included certain property rights and the necessary accompanying institutions brought by the Whig revolution.<sup>30</sup> With the creation of the possessive individual, who is seen as “essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them,”<sup>31</sup> and who is able to “sell the use of their energy and skill on the market, in exchange for the product or the use of others’ energy and skill,”<sup>32</sup> comes the justification of the existence of and expansion of these burgeoning market relations, which include a possessive relationship between the individual and her

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton University Press, 1995, 170

<sup>28</sup> Macpherson, Crawford Brough. "The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke." (2010).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Macpherson, Crawford Brough. *Burke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980,

<sup>31</sup> Macpherson, Crawford Brough. "The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke." (2010), 3

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 11

labor, between separate possessive individuals, and produce a possessive market society at large.<sup>33 34</sup> This internalized market logic precludes consideration of other understandings of human nature and reduces liberal democracy to competing negative rights aimed at protecting possessions, like property. In other words, one is free so long as they possess themselves and are permitted to accumulate other possessions in an unlimited fashion. These egalitarian critics assert that, while deontological liberalism and actually existing liberal democracies claim neutrality with regards to conceptions of the good life, in fact, there exists a very clear liberal prescription for the good life, “a commitment to “acquisitive, market-oriented behavior.”<sup>35</sup>

These combined critiques raise questions about what it means to be a free human. The deontological liberal understands freedom through the ethic of individual autonomy, or the right to choose a particular conception of good life and to be free from arbitrary domination of government or tyrant of the majority. Put simply, liberal individual autonomy, which is conflated with freedom, is understood as the right to choose an individual conception of the good life, a right which is protected in a neutral public sphere. Liberal democracy, based on these autonomous and arguably possessive individuals, is then simply a competition between free-choosing rights claimants. Admittedly, it is now probably unlikely that one could make a compelling argument

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<sup>33</sup> Macpherson, Crawford Brough. "The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke." (2010).

<sup>34</sup> Marx, Karl. "On the Jewish question." In *Nonsense Upon Stilts*, pp. 137-150. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Downing, Lyle A., and Robert B. Thigpen. "A defense of neutrality in liberal political theory." *Polity* 21, no. 3 (1989): 502-516.

against an ethic of choice. For obvious reasons, a rejection of choice offends our sensibilities. As westerners initiated into the classical liberal paradigm, we are wary of powerful states that strip us of our agency. History is replete with state tyranny, struggles for personal freedom, revolts against arbitrary rule. But it is not impossible to problematize free choice. As Neal suggests:

“a person's theory of what his life should be like, his hopes, dreams and fears, do not arise out of thin air. A person's conception of alternative life possibilities is never an infinite set; it is constrained by the social context, the form of collective life, of which he is part and from which he draws a conception of himself and his future.”<sup>36</sup>

This critique is important. What one thinks she wants is in large part determined by the commitments already constraining her and the options in front of her, there is the question of whether or not choice is actually possible under a regime of global capitalism. This critique poses questions about individual autonomy. Typically personal autonomy is understood to mean simply that we have free choice, that the only thing that can be called “the good life” is one that is freely chosen. But what critics of and adherents to the classic liberal notion of freedom-as-personal-autonomy often neglect is a dimension of autonomy that can be gleaned in part by Hume’s understanding of the self as “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”<sup>37</sup> The question becomes whether or not one can be said to be making an informed choice, given the

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<sup>36</sup> Neal, Patrick. "Liberalism & neutrality." *Polity* 17, no. 4 (1985): 664-684.671, 665

<sup>37</sup> Barry Stroud; *Hume. The Philosophical Review* 1 October 2016; 125 (4): 597–601.  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-3652033>



limited human capacity to understand causal relationships, the perpetually in flux nature of one's understand of themselves. Individual autonomy is problematized if we argue that it is not simply the right to choose that matters, but also that the good life one has chosen is a genuine expression of what one wants. A similar critique is offered to us by Frankfurt's notion of authenticity as it relates to autonomy. He writes, "Autonomy...is essentially a matter of whether we are active rather than passive in our motives and choices—whether, however we acquire them, they are the motives and choices we really want and are therefore in no way alien to us."<sup>39</sup> The issue at hand is whether or not the options in front of an individual allow for genuine expression, via choice, of their preferences, of their conception of the good life.

For the purposes of this project, I consider whether or not choice is actually possible under a regime of global capitalism. In other words, is autonomy, robustly defined, possible under a regime of global capitalism? For instance, if I am an artist who desires to spend the bulk of my time composing music, then an autonomous life would allow me to do so. In order to compose, I will need at the very least, the basics of life: shelter and sustenance. Beyond what I need for the project of composition, it would be difficult to argue that a typical person has a preference for destitution, to exist without shelter and sustenance. Instead, I will choose an option that protects me from destitution. Perhaps this is a life that doesn't allow for music-making at all and has me laboring constantly, or a life in which music-making is relegated to the small portions of time I

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<sup>39</sup> Oshana, Marina. "Autonomy and the Question of Authenticity." *Social Theory and Practice* 33, no. 3 (2007): 411–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23558483>.

can dedicate to the endeavor when I am not working. If, on the other hand, collective institutions allowed for artists to create while sheltered and fed, then I am able choose my preferred life. Then I am genuinely autonomous.

Autonomy is more capacious than choice; it must include an understanding of individuals as socially situated, bound by material conditions and obligations that inform their preferences and constrain their decisions. The goal of maximizing individual autonomy and the liberal justice that accompanies this goal follow from a thin but distinct understanding of humans as unencumbered that produces which produces a specific approach to communal institutions. I will say more on autonomy shortly, but for now, I ask: Can we not imagine institutions tasked with reaching ends besides autonomy defined as the unencumbered individual's freedom to choose—say, equality, happiness, patriotism, or any number of other ends--? And how should we determine what those ends ought to be? One way to determine ends is to reject the incoherent liberal individual in favor of some other understanding of human nature. In other words, determining the good life is an essentialist project.

### Essentialism

Essentialists, inspired by Aristotelian telos, suggest that this liberal neutrality with regards to citizen conceptions of the good life is incoherent and disastrous, citing the

social ills of the neoliberal world order as a prime example.<sup>41</sup> Nussbaum, like McIntyre, is a defender of modern essentialism, famously writing:

Essentialism is becoming a philosophically ‘dirty’ word in the academy and in those parts of human life that are influenced by it. Essentialism—which for these purposes I shall understand as the view that human life has certain central defining features—is linked by its opponents with an ignorance of history and with lack of sensitivity to the voices of women and minorities. It is taken, usually without extended argument, to be in league with racism and sexism and with ‘patriarchal’ thinking generally, whereas extreme subjectivism is taken to be a recipe for social progress”<sup>42</sup>

Nussbaum goes on to illustrate the problems associated with ‘subjectivism’ and ‘culturalism,’ essentialism’s most popular alternatives. Of subjectivism, which holds that human nature is relative to each situation and individual and cannot be generalized, Nussbaum quips “So, if I want to play around with torture and slavery and you want to stop me, nothing can be said about the moral superiority of you to me. You have your way of playing, I have mine.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, if human nature is relative, then moral claims about any given behavior hold no water. Without some universal beliefs about human nature, how can anyone make any claims about the goodness or badness of any action which has consequences for humans? Slavery is no better or worse than philanthropic endeavors for the subjectivist.

While culturalism, or historical accounts of human nature, don’t suffer from the exact problems of subjectivism, culturalism too has some scary implications for human

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<sup>41</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue : a Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism.” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591792020002002>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

well-being. Culturalism basically asserts that humans are merely the product of their cultures, or of historical circumstance. It allows for the notion that what we might consider ‘essential’ features are the result of a shared value system or cultural framework. As culture or civilization develops, what is considered ‘essential’ can change. Maybe this means that over time, people in the West come to understand women as fundamentally equal to men. But what happens when for some reason, this changes, and Westerners increasingly come to believe that actually, women are meant to submit to men, to be subjugated by them? To illustrate the potentially negative implications for human well-being that follow from this understanding of humans, Nussbaum writes, “Torture should be illegal only because at this time of our history, the majority votes that way.”<sup>44</sup> It also follows from this view that we cannot try to impose our own values onto cultures different from ours. The Indian village needs protection from “western contamination,” even if the Indian village practices subordinating its women.

Somewhat ironically, Nussbaum is saying, scholars who think of themselves as radical, as aiming to protect the historically marginalized, are greenlighting further oppression by refusing to accept some account of humans and what they need. The impulse to reject essentialism is understandable, as history furnishes us with many examples of tyranny justified by some philosophical or biological or religious account of truth, of human nature. We will see how Nussbaum herself gets around this issue with her own articulation of human well-being.

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<sup>44</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism.” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 202–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591792020002002>.

Of course for us to embrace or reject essentialism based on its consequences, we have to care about those consequences in the first place. We have to decide first that we care about the wellness of people. Most theorists, analysts and public policy makers tend to agree that human well-being is or should be the overarching objective of most societies. There are different conceptions of human well-being, and we can see these conceptions informing institutional arrangements around the world.

## Competing Conceptions of Well-Being

### Liberal Well-Being

For the neoclassical economist, human well-being is directly linked to consumption. This is a consequence of deontological liberalism and its conception of the self, which has created the “egoistic man,”<sup>45</sup> concerned chiefly with gratifying his own needs and desires. Often this is illustrated with discussion of modern consumerism, wherein the average person is in unquestioned pursuit of things. The ‘good’ in this paradigm is then understood as material wealth. Familiar to us is the image of the too-big American in his too-big house, which is brimming with useless consumer items, that he procured by driving his too-big car to the too-big shopping center. Citizens of the West do consume at staggering rates, and in 2021, Americans bought more goods than ever before.<sup>46</sup> And they are working more to afford these goods. The OECD claims Americans

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<sup>45</sup> Colletti, Lucio. "Karl Marx: Early Writings." *New York* (1975).

<sup>46</sup> Hoffower, Hillary. “Americans Are Buying More Stuff than Ever before, and It's Jamming up the Supply Chain.” *Business Insider*. Business Insider, October 18, 2021. <https://www.businessinsider.com/americans->

are the most overworked nation in the world.<sup>47</sup> This conception of the good is critiqued as vacuous, unfulfilling. One's worth hinges on his ability to engage in conspicuous consumption.<sup>48</sup> These are false needs, critics assert. The possessive individual becomes a "one-dimensional man," as Marcuse put it, one that is blind to the totalitarian nature of "affluent society" owing to the capitalist class's ability to convince us to "buy" our way to freedom and happiness.<sup>49</sup> The American works an increasing number of hours in order to make enough in wages to buy their freedom, ignoring their physical, psychological, spiritual needs and the havoc wrought on the planet by such consumerism.

Still, GDP, which reflects a nation's aggregate consumption and investment, is invariably used as a liberal measure for well-being. Greater GDP is associated with greater well-being. This is despite the fact that GDP fails to capture important dimensions of human well-being and ignores the negative effects to well-being of production and consumption.<sup>50</sup> These negative effects include environmental degradation and an observable association between the importance placed on material gains and emotional

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spending-goods-versus-experiences-supply-chain-crisis-2021-10#:~:text=While%20both%20categories%20have%20since,in%20the%20same%20time%20frame.

<sup>47</sup> Oecd. "Average Annual Hours Actually Worked per Worker." OECD.stat. Accessed August 30, 2022. <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=ANHRS>.

<sup>48</sup> Veblen, Thorstein, and C. Wright Mills. *The theory of the leisure class*. Routledge, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man : Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Second edition. London: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Lepenies, Philipp. "Happiness and Inequality: Insights into a Difficult Relationship—and Possible Political Implications." (2012).

disorders.<sup>51</sup> It's true that GDP growth has been robustly associated with a decrease in poverty, but it has also been associated with inefficiently high levels of consumption and production. This inefficiently high level of production has led to a worsening waste crisis, with the UN estimating the creation of 3.4 billion tons in waste by 2025.<sup>52</sup> It also has the world sprinting towards planet death, as scientists warn of irreversible damage to Earth if mitigating actions aren't taken, and in fact, many argue it is simply too late. The earth will be uninhabitable in short order according to many. What's more, well-being stops increasing and may even decrease once a certain threshold of accumulation or consumption has been reached, bolstering claims of inefficient production and consumption.<sup>53</sup>

GDP is used as a sort of aggregate utilitarian welfare function, meaning that unjust and unequal outcomes are not only possible but also observable, especially when we consider GDP per capita or the GINI coefficient.<sup>54</sup> A standard utilitarian approach allows for the imposition of harm on some people, in favor of benefits to others, so long as the aggregate and inadequate indicator of GDP continues to rise. This is evident when we observe the enormous wealth created for the capitalist class by our current paradigm.

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<sup>51</sup> King, Laura A., and Christie K. Napa. "What makes a life good?." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 75, no. 1 (1998): 156.

<sup>52</sup> "Loneliness Is a 'Giant Evil' of Our Time, Says Jo Cox Commission." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, December 10, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/dec/10/loneliness-is-a-giant-evil-of-our-time-says-jo-cox-commission>.

<sup>53</sup> King, Laura A., and Christie K. Napa. "What makes a life good?." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 75, no. 1 (1998): 156.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

By the time of this writing, the richest one percent of Americans held more wealth than the entire middle-class combined. Increasingly, working Americans are required to engage in a so-called “gig” economy that sees them taking on multiple, temporary work assignments that provide little stability and no benefits packages. Capital is able to subvert traditional and organized labor and instead underpay desperate workers mired in precarious economic and employment conditions. Wages for full-time employees have been stagnant for 3 decades while the rich amass previously unimaginable fortunes.

There have been pushes within the study of classical economics to remedy some of the deleterious effects of consumption by asserting that distributing wealth more evenly can create better well-being outcomes. Political theorists like Rawls are proponents of more equitable distribution on moral grounds. But progressive reforms are politically unfeasible in many Western nations where society has been embedded into the market and where those with wealth are able to use their fortunes to control government. Studies find that elected officials are overwhelmingly responsive to the policy preferences of elites and only—yes, only—legislate in ways favored by the average citizen when policy is favored by elites as well.<sup>55</sup> Attempts to mitigate plutocracy have been resounding failures, as tax legislation, court rulings, and international economic policy further institutionalize rule of the rich.<sup>56</sup> The crowning example of this institutionalization is the stunning Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United vs. FEC*. In essence, the ruling gives corporations personhood,

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<sup>55</sup> Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. "Testing theories of American politics: Elites, interest groups, and average citizens." *Perspectives on politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 564-581.

<sup>56</sup> Baynes, Kenneth. "Rights as critique and the critique of rights: Karl Marx, Wendy Brown, and the social function of rights." *Political Theory* 28, no. 4 (2000): 451-468.



and as such a virtually unlimited “right” to speech in the form of monetary political contributions. The ruling has served to further dilute the power of ordinary Americans to influence political elections, as monied interests are able to flood election cycles with unlimited funds and capture the loyalties of elected officials. In fact, the decade that followed the 2010 ruling was the most expensive in the history of U.S. elections.<sup>57</sup>

Repeatedly, efforts to curtail plutocracy are defeated on the basis of the liberal self and liberal rights, especially those of property rights, which throughout American history have allowed for such things as slavery, the hoarding of wealth, and relatedly, crises of food, housing, and healthcare insecurity. Marx was especially critical of capitalist property rights, writing, “in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths.”<sup>58</sup> We have to look no further than our already bad and deeply worsening housing crisis to see that this is true. Half a million Americans are unhoused as 16 million homes stand vacant, owned by folks with money and kept from those without.<sup>59</sup> As we will see, other scholars believe basic shelter is a non-negotiable condition of their conceptions of human well-being.

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<sup>57</sup> Evers-Hillstrom, Karl. “A Look at the Impact of Citizens United on Its 9th Anniversary.” OpenSecrets News, January 22, 2019. <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2019/01/citizens-united/>.

<sup>58</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. “The communist manifesto.” In *Ideals and Ideologies*, pp. 243-255. Routledge, 2019

<sup>59</sup> Kolomatsky, Michael. “Vacant Homes Everywhere.” The New York Times. The New York Times, March 10, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/10/realestate/vacancy-rate-by-state.html>.

In the developing world, dependence on western collective institutions precludes governments from enacting progressive reforms, as cooperation from these institutions requires developing governments to implement liberalizing reforms instead.<sup>60</sup> And in any case, even as neoclassical economics attempts to broaden its understanding and analysis of human well-being by accepting the importance of mitigating inequality, it still fails to capture some important dimensions of well-being, like “health, education, or political rights and freedom,”<sup>61</sup> as it is chiefly concerned with opportunities for consumption, equitable or not.

Eudaimonic approaches to well-being, on the other hand, emphasize the elusive concept of ‘human flourishing’ as the basis of well-being. For these thinkers, human flourishing can be roughly defined as the actualization of human potentials. The idea, which is both ancient and seemingly perpetually relevant, can be traced back most meaningfully to Aristotle, who rejected another persistent philosophical and psychological approach to well-being: hedonism. Broadly speaking, hedonism can be understood as equating pleasure and happiness with well-being. Aristotle robustly rejects this understanding of well-being, assessing hedonic pleasure as a “vulgar” ideal that enslaves humans to their simple desires.<sup>62</sup> In the next section, I will evaluate what many deem the most compelling and enduring political theories of human flourishing.

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<sup>60</sup> Oatley, Thomas. *International political economy*. Routledge, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Jakob, Michael, William F. Lamb, Jan Christoph Steckel, Christian Flachsland, and Ottmar Edenhofer. "Understanding different perspectives on economic growth and climate policy." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 11, no. 6 (2020): e677.

<sup>62</sup> Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. "On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being." *Annual review of psychology* 52 (2001): 141.

## Human Flourishing as Well Being: Aristotle, Marx, Nussbaum

### Aristotle and Eudaimonia

As an introduction to the concept, I will turn my attention to what is likely the first account of self-realization in political theory, Aristotle's 'eudaimonia'. For Aristotle, the greatest of all goods achievable by human activity was "eudaimonia." The term has typically and insufficiently been understood to mean "happiness," but can more adequately be understood as the center of an ethical doctrine that is meant to guide human behavior. Eudaimonics is a system of ethics that attempts to answer the question "How should we live?"<sup>63</sup>. Aristotle's centering of happiness, or eudaimonia, requires him to define it in a thorough and nuanced way, rejecting certain understandings of happiness and ultimately emphasizing one rooted in self-realization. Of incorrect understandings of happiness, he writes:

Both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it [the highest of all goods achievable by action] is happiness and identify living well and faring well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor"<sup>64</sup>

But happiness, for Aristotle, was not a plain and obvious thing. Someone devoted to satisfying their appetites was not working towards eudaimonia but was living a life

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<sup>63</sup> Ryff, Carol D, and Burton H Singer. "Know Thyself and Become What You Are: A Eudaimonic Approach to Psychological Well-Being." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006): 13–39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9019-0>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 3

“suitable for beasts.”<sup>65</sup> The pursuits of social and political power, wealth accumulation, consumption, and amusement were not endeavors that would lead to the attainment of ‘the highest of all goods achievable by action.’ The mass of mankind, who were “quite slavish in their tastes,” would not achieve eudaimonia when occupied by these “laughable things,” instead, the highest human good was “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.”<sup>66</sup> By virtue, Aristotle can be understood to mean “excellence”<sup>67</sup> He writes, “If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us.”<sup>68</sup> To achieve happiness, or eudaimonia, one must exercise the best in her. She must aim towards her telos. For Aristotle, every thing, living or not, has a characteristic function. For humans, in his view, this characteristic function is reason. Reaching one’s telos then means exercising excellence in reason. In order for one to experience eudaimonia, she must self-realize by reaching her potential for reason, which encompasses her true self. This understanding of Aristotle becomes clearer when we linguistically examine ‘eudaimonia’. The daimon or “true-self,” refers to the potentialities that each person possesses, and eudaimonism urges people to live in accordance with the true-self. In order to achieve eudaimonia, one must always work to realize both her own potential for excellence and the shared potentiality of the human species.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 679

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

Aristotle believed that society's institutions should be geared towards this ultimate good of eudaimonia, the center of which is self-realization. Politics is explicitly identified as the science concerned with this supreme human good. He writes, "The end and purpose of a polis is the good life, and the institutions of social life are means to that end."<sup>69</sup> In chapter 2, I further discuss Aristotle's human flourishing as it relates to work and economics more broadly, but presently, it's important to note that Aristotle's writings on human essence and self-realization have permeated works across time and space, from ancient thinkers to contemporary scholars in both the East and West. Among these thinkers is the ever-relevant Marx, whose writings have influenced not just scholarship but real-life movements for collective justice and liberation.

### Marx's Self-realization

Like Aristotle, Marx's conception of self-realization deals with man's potential. He asks, "What is wealth if not the absolute unfolding of man's creative abilities?"<sup>70</sup> Though many argue against the notion that Marx is an essentialist, in my estimation, stronger arguments have been made detailing the essentialist features of his work. Marx will be more explicitly and robustly discussed in Chapter 2, but a brief introduction to his concept of self-realization is in order here.

For Marx, human nature and production cannot be separated from one another. In other words, the characteristic function of man is his capacity for free, conscious activity,

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*. Penguin UK, 2005, 411-412

which is engaged in for its own sake, irrespective of any end, and beyond immediate need. For Marx, self-realization is possible only when humans are freed to engage in chosen activity that makes full use of their creative productive potentials.<sup>71</sup> He understands capitalism to be a great hindrance to man's free, conscious activity, and thus, his self-realization. On this point, Marx and Engels write explicitly of a human nature, arguing that:

“The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement...The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. It is ... abasement the indignation at that abasement, an *indignation* to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human *nature* and its condition of life, which is the outright, resolute and comprehensive negation of that nature.”<sup>72</sup>

Conditions that would be appropriate to closing the gap between Marxian human essence and material reality are further discussed in Chapter 2, which contains a deeper exegesis of Marx on self-realization as it relates to 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. These conditions were explicated prior to Marx by Aristotle himself, as we will see in chapter 2, and have been echoed by contemporary scholarly giants. One of these is Nussbaum, who helped flesh out, popularize and modernize Sen's “capabilities approach.”

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<sup>71</sup> Evans, Mark Andrew. “The Concept of Self-Realization in Political Theory.” University of Oxford, 1993.

<sup>72</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The holy family*. Рипол Классик, 1975.

## Nussbaum's Capabilities

For Sen and Nussbaum, a moral society is one that makes real the opportunity for people to develop the capabilities inherent to most humans, irrespective of time and place. Nussbaum explicitly places herself in cohort with Aristotle and Marx, arguing that humans should be able to function in a “truly human way.”<sup>73</sup> She argues that her essentialism, which is rooted in an ethic of intuitionism, is preferable to relativism or the tyranny of absolutism that relativists aim to avoid.<sup>74</sup> She gets around the issue of prescribing a specific conception of the good life by instead focusing on ensuring that a person is actually capable of pursuing whatever conception of the good life they might have.

Nussbaum's framework is a list of ten “capabilities” required for a human to live a realized life.<sup>75</sup> As I will discuss in chapter 2, Nussbaum's ‘capabilities’ resemble Aristotle's assertion that excellence and in turn eudaimonia can only be achieved when certain external conditions are met, such as access to sustenance and leisure. They also resemble Marx's prescription for a realized life, which emphasizes creativity and communal commitments. It's important to note that she doesn't claim this list to be exhaustive or unamendable, and even more important to note that she intends for policy to create real capabilities, not just freedom from obstruction of these capabilities. For

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<sup>73</sup> Nussbaum, Martha. "Women and equality: The capabilities approach." *Int'l Lab. Rev.* 138 (1999): 227.

<sup>74</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. "Human functioning and social justice: In defense of Aristotelian essentialism." *Political theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 202-246.

<sup>75</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2jbt31>.

instance, we can say that someone has the capability to have shelter, and we might mean that they are not barred from doing so. But a real capability to have shelter requires the actual means to secure shelter.

These capabilities center on things like bodily health and integrity, which includes shelter and medical care, cultivation of our senses, which requires the capability to think and create freely, and affiliation, which deals with the ability to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others regardless of biological or social characteristics as well as the opportunity to create positive social relationships nourished by institutions that facilitate such relationships. We can see how these capabilities are precluded by our current paradigm. For instance, bodily health remains an elusive goal for much of the world, including Americans who are significantly sicker than their counterparts in other rich nations<sup>76</sup>, owing in large part to consumerism, individualism, for-profit healthcare, as well as poverty and inequality. In the so-called developing world and in middle-income nations, colonization and global capitalism create enduring, structural economic inequality between nations that keeps the basics of life necessary for bodily health out of reach for much of the world population.<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps most importantly for our present project are the capabilities of being able to control one's political and material environment and the ability to "to live with concern

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<sup>76</sup> Thompson, Derek. "Why Americans Die so Much." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, September 15, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/america-life-expectancy-spans-death-europe/620028/>.

<sup>77</sup> Oatley, Thomas. *International political economy*. Routledge, 2018.



for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.”<sup>78</sup> These capabilities are crucial to ensuring the other capabilities, and ultimately, to making real the opportunity for a realized life. Without political influence, individuals are unable to create institutions that prioritize things like bodily health, education and leisure for cultivation of our senses, and so on. Instead, institutions are subject to the whims of those who monopolize political power. Without the capability to maintain concern for other species and nature more broadly, we end up in the situation we are in currently: potentially irreversible ecological crisis. If the planet is uninhabitable, not one of the other capabilities can be created. This brings me to the subject of degrowth.

## Degrowth

The link between environmental degradation and so-called “growth” is straightforward. Greater economic activity requires greater use of energy and other resources. Fossil fuels--the use of which is directly linked to the increase of greenhouse gas emissions and as such, global warming and resource depletion--remain the largest energy source used in global production. The connection between greater economic activity, or growth, and environmental degradation was understood half a century ago, but given the once observable benefits of growth to human welfare, political and economic stability, as well as the bottom lines of the capitalist class, growth remained an imperative of most nation-states. Instead of curtailing growth, there was a pivot towards

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<sup>78</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2jbt31>, 34

sustainable growth, which maintained the logic liberal growth. Sustainable development was an attempt to harmonize environmental preservation, social welfare, and economic growth.<sup>79</sup> Decades later, it appears that this attempt has largely failed, as, for example, absolute resource use has not declined, and we delve deeper into ecological crisis. Human activity continues to drive earth into a new state of imbalance. Furthermore, wealth concentration and inequality have steadily increased under the ‘green growth’ paradigm.<sup>80</sup>

A possible solution to the problem of environmental degradation brought on by the growth paradigm is *décroissance*<sup>81</sup>, or degrowth. The modern movement for degrowth is a utopian push for the radical transformation of the so-called social imaginary.

Advocates for degrowth argue that economic growth and sustainability are incompatible, and that economic growth does not correlate significantly or positively with social well-being.<sup>82</sup> In other words, the central claim of degrowth literature is that continuous economic growth is ecologically ruinous, economically unsustainable, and is no longer improving social welfare and happiness. What’s more, the so-called growth paradigm has helped to render democracy increasingly obsolete for a number of reasons

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<sup>79</sup> Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer. "Research on degrowth." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018): 291-316.

<sup>80</sup> Kothari, Ashish, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. "Buen Vivir, degrowth and ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the green economy." *Development* 57, no. 3 (2014): 362-375.

<sup>81</sup> Muraca, Barbara. "Décroissance: A Project for a Radical Transformation of Society." *Environmental Values* 22, no. 2 (2013): 147–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23460976>.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, Pp. 296-298

and on a number of levels. The logic of growth creates the primacy of the market, constraining policy and perhaps most importantly, colonizing the imaginations of citizens and policymakers alike. What's more, the growth logic is exported and reinforced the world over through globalization and international economic institutions, greatly limiting the ability of nation-states to create domestic policy that supports equality, bodily health, environmental preservation, and human flourishing, lest they be shut out of international organizations and in turn, 'wealth.' Nation-states all over the world are bound by global frameworks designed to spur growth. They include trade deals that hurt labor and quicken planet death, increasingly interconnected financial markets that spread lethal economic disease the world over, and biased collective international institutions that use inclusion as a carrot to incentivize often harmful liberal growth reforms.

In other words, the growth paradigm has eliminated autonomy. The standard liberal approach to autonomy sees it as a necessary precondition for social relations as opposed to a result of them. For liberals, autonomy is understood as "inscribed in human nature," and not as a "condition of particular socio-historical power systems."<sup>83</sup> We can very easily point to ideologies and regimes throughout history that have limited or eliminated autonomy. What may be less obvious to many is the tyranny of the growth paradigm, which can be seen to eliminate autonomy for the individual, as illustrated by my earlier discussion of choice as an expression of genuine preference with regards to the good life; for the average democratic citizen, who has little power to impact policy which is increasingly

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<sup>83</sup> Savini, Federico. "Maintaining autonomy: Urban degrowth and the commoning of housing." *Urban Studies* (2022): 00420980221121517, 3-4

determined by monied interests, as illustrated by my discussion of free-for-all campaign finance laws; for societies at large, as illustrated by my discussion of policymakers and nation-states constrained by an ever increasingly interconnected global economy.

## Conclusion

Without real autonomy, human flourishing is impossible. According to the most significant accounts of human flourishing, control over your environment, time and body are necessary conditions of well-being. If one cannot control their material conditions, including the health of their planet, or opt out of coerced labor, or most importantly, exercise meaningful influence over the institutions that govern her, then she does not have autonomy and cannot flourish. Given this understanding, we must probe ways to build institutions to make autonomy and in turn self-realization more possible. So long as our economic and democratic institutions remain so large as to be rendered beyond human control, human flourishing will remain an unachievable goal. For this reason, what follows is my argument in favor of downsizing and reformulating society's most consequential collective institutions: democracies and economies. We cannot exercise meaningful democratic influence without certain material preconditions, and we cannot secure the material conditions necessary for human flourishing without securing meaningful democratic influence. In chapter two I argue in favor of village economies as the model best suited towards the goal of obtaining the material preconditions of a realized life. In chapter three I make the case for localized, direct democracy as a way to achieve meaningful democratic influence.

## Chapter 2: Self-Realization and Village Economies

### Introduction

Much has been written about human flourishing, or self-realization, and society's most important social institutions. The economy, of course, is chief among these institutions. The liberal argument suggests that bigger and freer markets create greater wealth for all, which has long been understood to enhance human well-being. Wealth is typically measured by GDP, which captures little more than aggregate production and consumption in a given nation for a given year. As we've seen, more wholistic accounts of well-being exist and are compelling, as they take into consideration dimensions of wealth and well-being that cannot be captured by a simple aggregate measure of production and consumption. For this chapter, I employ conceptions of well-being-as-human flourishing given to us by Aristotle, Marx, and Nussbaum to argue against global capitalism for the reason that it makes the material, social, and psycho-spiritual, conditions of human flourishing inaccessible to much of the world, including western societies. These conditions include sustenance and shelter, democratic influence, control over one's time and body, ecological health, and meaningful human relationships. Coerced labor, inequality, poverty, technology, and globalization have all been understood as detrimental to the aforementioned conditions of human flourishing. A solution to these problems can be found in the academic and political movement for degrowth, which calls for a transformation of the social imaginary and a shrinking of our economies. One model for a small economic arrangement is Gandhi's 'village economy,' which aims to refurnish humans with meaningful control over their material conditions by localizing resource supplies and distribution.

First, I probe theories of human flourishing, and more specifically, self-realization, as they relate to important dimensions of economics, namely, poverty, work, technology and globalization. Then I discuss the movement for degrowth. The discussion includes a survey of actually existing steady-state or degrowth societies, as well as subversive and potentially liberatory communities and technologies. Finally, I make the argument in favor of village economies as a way to achieve fundamental conditions of self-realization, which include ecological wellness and meaningful democratic influence over governing institutions.

### Self-Realization, Work, Capitalism

Aristotle recognized that needs must be met before self-realization, and ultimately, eudaimonia were possible, writing “one will also need external prosperity; for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body must also be healthy and have food and other attention.”<sup>84</sup> There can be little argument that for millions of people around the world, meeting even basic needs is extremely difficult. In the U.S. alone, 40 million people were living below the poverty line by 2021.<sup>85</sup> Americans are facing severe wage stagnation and rising prices.<sup>86</sup> U.S. homelessness has

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<sup>84</sup> Ryff, Carol D, and Burton H Singer. “Know Thyself and Become What You Are: A Eudaimonic Approach to Psychological Well-Being.” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006): 13–39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9019-0>, 5

<sup>85</sup> Creamer, John. “Poverty in the United States: 2021.” *Census.gov*, September 13, 2022. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2022/demo/p60-277.html#:~:text=Highlights-,Official%20Poverty%20Measure,37.9%20million%20people%20in%20poverty.>

<sup>86</sup> DeSilver, Drew. “For Most U.S. Workers, Real Wages Have Barely Budged in Decades.” *Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>.

been steadily rising for years.<sup>87</sup> In Los Angeles, homelessness rose an astonishing 35% from 2012 to 2018.<sup>88</sup> Millions of ill and un or underinsured Americans are digitally crowdsourcing funds to pay their medical bills, because healthcare costs and policies have run amok.<sup>89</sup> On our own UC campus, over 40% of our undergraduate student body has had to deal with food insecurity.<sup>90</sup> Income inequality has reached Great Depression era levels in the US.<sup>91</sup>

The current economic conditions in the West are not only creating a class of chronically poor people, but one that is psychologically ill. Far from self-realization, this class, which Guy Standing calls ‘The Precariat,’ is in a perpetual state of material and mental precariousness.<sup>92</sup> Suicide rates have been on the rise in the U.S. for the last 2 decade.<sup>93</sup> For many residents of the West, current market systems are failing to secure

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<sup>87</sup> Lopez, German. “Homeless in America.” The New York Times. The New York Times, July 15, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/15/briefing/homelessness-america-housing-crisis.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Kusisto, Laura. “U.S. Homelessness Edges Higher Again after Six Years of Declines.” The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, December 17, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-homelessness-edges-higher-again-after-seven-years-of-declines-11545022860>.

<sup>89</sup> Young, Eric. “Millions of Americans Donate through Crowdfunding Sites to Help Others Pay for Medical Bills.” NORC at the University of Chicago. Accessed November 29, 2022. <https://www.norc.org/NewsEventsPublications/PressReleases/Pages/millions-of-americans-donate-through-crowdfunding-sites-to-help-others-pay-for-medical-bills.aspx>.

<sup>90</sup> Reyes, Deidre L. "A Qualitative Evaluation of Food Accessibility on UC Campuses." (2021).

<sup>91</sup> Kelleher, Kevin. “Gilded Age 2.0: U.S. Income Inequality Increases to Pre-Great Depression Levels.” Fortune. Fortune, February 13, 2019. <http://fortune.com/2019/02/13/us-income-inequality-bad-great-depression/>

<sup>92</sup> Standing, Guy. *The Precariat The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Hedegaard, Holly, Sally C. Curtin, and Margaret Warner. *Suicide rates in the United States continue to increase*. Vol. 309. Hyattsville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, 2018.

“external prosperity.” But the needs that must be met before self-realization can be achieved go beyond basic sustenance. For self-realization to be possible, alienation must end. For many thinkers, a wage-based economy precludes the possibility of self-realization for the reason that it alienates.

For instance, Aristotle asserts that “all paid work absorbs and degrades the mind.”<sup>94</sup> The good life, a life of reason, cannot be attained so long as humans are coerced into labor for sustenance. Eudaimonia and coerced labor are at odds. He argued that “The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion” and that “leisure is necessary for... the development of excellence,” not just for the individual, but for society as a whole. He illustrates this point in *Metaphysics* by alluding to the creation of mathematics. He writes, “Hence, when all such inventions were already established, the sciences, which do not aim at giving pleasure or at the necessities of life, were discovered, and first in the places where men first began to have leisure. This is why the mathematical arts were founded in Egypt; for there, the priestly caste was allowed to be at leisure.”<sup>95</sup>

Similarly, Marx, critiqued wage-labor on the grounds that it hindered the full development of excellencies in individuals and society collectively. Arguably, the center of his critique of capitalism is his concept of self-realization. Like Aristotle, Marx’s conception of self-realization deals with the development of man’s potential. In

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<sup>94</sup> Irwin, T. "Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, with notes." (1985)

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 939a3



Grundrisse I, Marx asks, “What is wealth if not the absolute unfolding of man’s creative abilities, without any precondition other than the preceding historic development, which makes the totality of this development – i.e. the development of all human powers as such, not as measured by any previously given yardstick – an end-in-itself.”<sup>96</sup> For Marx, capitalism as he knew it starves individuals of this wealth and instead leads to a “complete emptying-out of the individual.”<sup>97</sup> Under communism, an individual is no longer forced into a single sphere of activity for the purpose of survival, and according to Marx, the free time she is now allotted will “correspond to the artistic, scientific etc. development” of the individual and society.<sup>98</sup> The liberation of humans from alienated labor means that an individual ceases to be, “A crippled monstrosity, and becomes a fully developed human.”<sup>99</sup> For Marx, then, it is free time that allows for what he calls “self-realization,” or “Selbstverwirklichung,” through the individual engagement in activities that are pursued for their intrinsic value and not through compulsion or necessity<sup>100</sup>. He called for a societal order that prioritized this self-realization over other concerns, writing

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<sup>96</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*. Penguin UK, 2005, 411-412.

<sup>97</sup> Marx, Karl. "Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844." In *Social Theory Re-Wired*, pp. 152-158. Routledge, 2016, 12

<sup>98</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*. Penguin UK, 2005, 593

<sup>99</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital: volume I*. Vol. 1. Penguin UK, 2004, 251

<sup>100</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*. Penguin UK, 2005, 593530

of “a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle.”<sup>101</sup>

Understanding Marx’s conception of self-realization requires us to investigate his conception of work. For Marx, self-realization was only possible through free, creative labor. The central role that labor plays in self-realization can be attributed to Hegel’s ‘expressivism,’ which Marx adopted for his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. Expressivism refers to the human desire to have our true nature reflected in the world around us. Marx writes:

“Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process; objectification as loss of object, as alienation and as sublation of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the nature of labor and conceives objective man ... as the result of his own labor.”<sup>102</sup>

For Marx, then, self-realization is possible through an objective transformation of the environment. When humans are able to control nature so as to make it reflect their purpose, they are self-realizing. In other words, self-realization requires objectification, which is the embodiment of “life-activity” in external objects. Humans learn themselves through this utilization of powers, and for Marx, self-knowledge is essential to self-realization. This uniquely human manipulation of nature creates a condition in which one

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<sup>101</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital: volume I*. Vol. 1. Penguin UK, 2004, 460

<sup>102</sup> Marx, Karl. "Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844." In *Social Theory Re-Wired*, pp. 152-158. Routledge, 2016.

is no longer completely subordinate to nature but is still dependent upon it. It is a mediation that transforms both nature and human, demonstrating to us our powers and making the project of self-realization possible. Marx writes:

It is just in his work upon the objective world ... that man really proves himself to be a species being. This production is his active species life. Through this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man's species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created.<sup>103</sup>

Capitalist production keeps us from self-realization because it precludes the phenomenon described above. Instead, capitalist production, with its increasing division of labor, has created a reality in which “the work of proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the simplest, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him.”<sup>104</sup> Far from free, conscious activity, wage-labor is forced and external. It hinders the development of our numerous capacities. It becomes a mere means to an end instead of an end in itself. It saps us of our energy to do anything more after we have spent our days mired in the drudgery of alienated work. Instead of learning to read poetry, or paint, or dance, we come home after a day of monotony and opt to “Netflix and chill,” as it were. We drink a tequila or smoke a joint and do little with our bodies or brains. Afterall,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid

<sup>104</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. "The communist manifesto." In *Ideals and Ideologies*, pp. 243-255. Routledge, 2019

there are only so many minutes in a day, and after allocating time for wage-labor and sleep, there are few minutes left with which to develop our varying capacities.

For Marx, self-realization is not only the desired moral end; it is a need. Capitalism has created this need and now precludes the possibility of meeting it. He writes, “The wealthy man is...one who needs a complex of human manifestations of life, and whose own self-realization exists as an inner necessity, a need.”<sup>105</sup> Humans remain impoverished so long as they cannot fulfill this need. More than this, humans are alienated from themselves and their species being when there is a gap between their essence and their existence. He makes a related point when he writes, “The existence of what I truly love is felt by me as a necessity, as a need, without which my essence cannot be fulfilled, satisfied, complete.”<sup>106</sup> Imagine a gifted painter who is forced to labor as a fast-food employee in order to meet his sustenance needs. Surely few will make the argument that the fast-food worker loves flipping burgers. It is mindless work that does little towards “unfolding man’s potentialities.” The fast-food worker spends 8 hours of his day unable to perform the free conscious activity that develops his capacities, that he loves, that leads to his self-knowledge and realization. And when he comes home, he is deadened. His essence cannot be fulfilled. This is not only a loss to this specific individual, but to society as a whole.

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<sup>105</sup> Marx, Karl. "Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844." In *Social Theory Re-Wired*, pp. 152-158. Routledge, 2016

<sup>106</sup> Fromm, Erich, and Karl Marx. *Marx's Concept of Man: Including 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts'*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, 62

The loss to society of potential artistic greatness is admittedly hard to measure, but the importance of such greatness for the flourishing of a society has been recognized for millennia. Aristotle believed that the human spirit “attains the truth by art,” and wrote that “art completes what nature cannot bring itself to finish.”<sup>107</sup> For society to reap the benefits of art as Aristotle has identified, artists must be allowed to flourish. Marx and Engel understood this too. In *The German Ideology*, they write, “Anyone in whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop without hindrance.”<sup>108</sup>

Like Aristotle and Marx, other prominent thinkers understood the detriments of labor for the purposes of survival and argued that once the problem of subsistence is solved, humans would be free to live truly meaningful lives. For example, economist Bernard Keynes famously wrote of the “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren” with regards to automation of production. While he understood that automation would create a painful period of economic adjustment for developing societies, he believed that ultimately, technological innovation would be a liberating force. Keynes writes, “We shall once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful. We shall honor those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well, the delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment in things, the lilies of the field who toil not, neither do they spin.”<sup>109</sup> Keynes goes further and suggests that the

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<sup>107</sup> Chambliss, J. J. "Aristotle: The Artful in Nature and the Natural in Art." In *Imagination and Reason in Plato, Aristotle, Vico, Rousseau and Keats*, pp. 20-28. Springer, Dordrecht, 1974.

<sup>108</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The german ideology*. Vol. 1. International Publishers Co, 1970, 393

<sup>109</sup> Keynes, J. M. (1930). *Economic Possibilities for our - Yale University*. Retrieved from <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf>, 7

transformation would be so powerful so as to create an entirely new human morality. He writes

“When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals. We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues....All kinds of social customs and economic practices, affecting the distribution of wealth and of economic rewards and penalties, which we now maintain at all costs, however distasteful and unjust they may be in themselves, because they are tremendously useful in promoting the accumulation of capital, we shall then be free, at last, to discard.”<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, Gandhi wrote of the moral implications of industrial capitalism and its destruction. Much has been written about Gandhi’s orientation towards modernity.

Ostensibly, the spiritual and political leader was a luddite, condemning industrial technology and preaching the benefits of simple tools which kept the average person’s body and mind occupied. A closer look at Gandhi’s works reveals an economic philosophy that is not informed simply by fear of the modern, but by moral and practical concerns about the deleterious effects of industrialized capitalism on the physical and spiritual well-being of people. Like Marx before him, Gandhi’s worries about capitalism centered upon unchecked riches for the few at the expense of the many, the exploitation of workers, and perhaps most importantly, the deadening of the human spirit.

Like much of his thought, Gandhi’s economic vision was informed chiefly by his spiritual beliefs. For Gandhi, the divine--which he oftentimes called ‘God’--existed, and

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p 6

all humans were “sparks of the divine.”<sup>111</sup> Put differently, Gandhi, in line with eastern belief, saw all living things as part of the greater divine. It is this divinity that Gandhi saw as being threatened by modern capitalism. Modern capitalism, he venomously claimed, was “satanic,”<sup>112</sup> because it violated fundamental spiritual imperatives, imperatives which he believed were the only way to truth, or God. Among these imperatives is ahimsa, or non-violence. Gandhi writes, “truth is God, and the only way to truth is through ahimsa.”<sup>113</sup> Gandhi understood the economic order of his time, for many reasons, to be both direct and indirect affronts to ahimsa. He saw the millions of unemployed and impoverished people of the world struggle to secure even their basic necessities while the rich enjoyed innumerable luxuries and believed that the allowance of such disparity made ahimsa impossible. Gandhi wrote, “A non-violent system of governments is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists.”<sup>114</sup>

Many of his critiques of capitalism as it relates to ahimsa are couched in his disdain for industrialization. Gandhi wrote that industrialization would, “necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers”<sup>115</sup> and that it “depends entirely on your

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<sup>111</sup> Iyer, Raghavan. *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi ;: Oxford University Press, 2004. Vol. II, pp 10

<sup>112</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. "The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi." (1963), 28

<sup>113</sup> Iyer, Raghavan. *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi ;: Oxford University Press, 2004. Vol. II, pp 10

<sup>114</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *Village swaraj*. Narajivan Publishing House, 1963, 51

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26

capacity to exploit”<sup>116</sup> In Gandhi’s estimation, industrialization inevitably becomes the “source of inequality, oppression and violence on a scale hitherto unknown to human history.”<sup>117</sup> Industrial production brought with it “sinful”<sup>118</sup> machinery, which robbed thousands of villagers of their livelihoods and therefore their basic needs, and still worse for Gandhi, it made them ‘idle’, which meant that they could not fulfill their duty to God.<sup>119</sup> He writes, “Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities.... have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God.”<sup>120</sup> Gandhi, paraphrasing scripture, wrote that “God created man to eat by the sweat of his brow,”<sup>121</sup> and as such saw ‘destructive machinery,’<sup>122</sup> as antithetical to human purpose as determined by God. To idle away instead of labor for one’s necessities is to betray, in Gandhi’s understanding, God’s vision. His spiritual convictions were so seminal to his world view that he asserted that “the scriptures of the world are safer and sounder treatises on laws of economics than many of the modern textbooks,”<sup>123</sup> and in fact used the Bible and the Gita

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 24

<sup>117</sup> Chatterjee P (1998) *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. P. 86

<sup>118</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *Village swaraj*. Narajivan Publishing House, 1963, 178

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>120</sup> Rosenfeld, Isaac. "Gandhi: Self-Realization Through Politics." *Commentary* 10 (1950), 113

<sup>121</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *Village swaraj*. Narajivan Publishing House, 1963, 49

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>123</sup> Biswas, N.B. “Economics and Ethics in an Indian Society: a Reflective Analysis.” *International Journal of Social Economics* 25, no. 6/7/8 (1998): 1064–72. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03068299810212450>, 1064



to preach about the indecency of industrial machinery and the necessity of 'bread labour' as a means towards salvation. Gandhi writes:

“Brahma created His people with the duty of sacrifice laid upon them and said: 'By this do you flourish. Let it be the fulfiller of all your desire.' He who eats without performing this sacrifice, eats stolen bread," - thus says the Gita. "Earn thy bread by the sweat of thy brow," says the Bible. Sacrifices may be of many kinds. One of them may well be bread labour,”<sup>124</sup>

Idleness brought on by unemployment not only meant that people would “become dunces, as many have already become,”<sup>125</sup> but it also meant that people were violating ahimsa. Gandhi wrote, “Everyone.... who idles away a single minute becomes to that extent a burden upon his neighbours, and to do so is to commit a breach of the very first lesson of ahimsa.”<sup>126</sup>

An economics determined by ahimsa required adherence to other spiritual imperatives, including Aparighara, or non-possession, and Asteya, or non-stealing.<sup>127</sup> His commitment to these principles is most evident in his denunciations of private property and other excesses. Property which is hoarded for the exclusive enjoyment of the few, and the possession of material things beyond one's basic necessities, for Gandhi, were a betrayal of aparighara and asteya, and ultimately, ahimsa. Gandhi writes:

“Non-possession is allied to non-stealing. A thing not originally stolen must nevertheless be classified as stolen property if we possess it without needing it.... This principle [of aparigraha] is really a part of [non-stealing] [asteya]. Just as one must not deceive, so must one not possess anything which one does not really need.

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<sup>124</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *Village swaraj*. Narajivan Publishing House, 1963, 28

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 30

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 57

<sup>127</sup> Patel, Nehal A. "Mindful Use: Gandhi's Non-Possessive Property Theory." *Seattle J. Soc. Just.* 13 (2014), 293

It would be a breach of this principle to possess unnecessary foodstuffs, clothing or furniture. For instance, one must not keep a chair, if one can do without it.”<sup>128</sup>

For Gandhi, private property and the possession of excess material goods were violations of non-possession and non-stealing in light of his doctrine of sarvodaya, or “the welfare of all.”<sup>129</sup> Policies that did not strive towards the ‘welfare of all’ were a violation of ahimsa, and as such, needed to be changed. If a possession exceeded one’s needs while another’s went unmet, sarvodaya was violated, and ahimsa was impossible. God, Gandhi argued, “never creates more than what is strictly needed for the moment,” and society’s abandonment of this “divine law,” through the system of private property and more broadly, capitalism, “has given rise to inequalities with all the miseries attendant upon them. The rich have superfluous store of things which they do not need and which are, therefore, neglected and wasted, while millions are starved to death for want of sustenance.”<sup>130</sup> Industrial capitalism created a “mad desire to destroy distance and time,” and an increase in “animal appetites” that led humans to “go to the ends of the earth in search of their satisfaction,” greenlighting violent exploitation, theft, and war.<sup>131</sup> For Gandhi, Aprighara was a crucial step towards ending this violence. It helped secure ahimsa not only because it remedied the injury of poverty, but because it meant that property and other material goods that exceeded one’s needs would be given to those with unmet needs,

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 295

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 292

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 316

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 298

decreasing the likelihood of violent thievery, and that globally, resource wars would no longer be necessary.

Renunciation of excess possessions also simplified material life, freeing up humans to focus on their spiritual growth and ultimately, their salvation. Gandhi wrote, “the highest fulfillment of religion.... Requires a giving up of all possessions.”<sup>132</sup> This is because of Gandhi’s belief in the cosmic oneness of all life, or Advaita, and the divinity of that oneness. He wrote, “I believe in the absolute oneness of God and therefore humanity. What though we have one body? We have but one soul.”<sup>133</sup> To serve humanity, then, is to serve God. Furthermore, without service to humanity, one cannot realize God, which Gandhi argued was man’s ultimate aim. Of the realization of God, Gandhi writes:

“The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavor simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. I am a part and parcel of the whole and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity.”<sup>134</sup>

Non-possession served humanity as it allowed for resources to be used by all who needed them, according to their needs, and no more, ameliorating poverty and violence related to property or other resources. To realize God required one to shrink himself “to zero,” and if one “does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no

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<sup>132</sup> Rosenfeld, Isaac. "Gandhi: Self-Realization Through Politics." *Commentary* 10 (1950), 121

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 121-122

<sup>134</sup> Ibid

salvation for him. Ahimsa is the farthest limit of humility.”<sup>135</sup> Because capitalism violated these spiritual imperatives, there was no realization of God, no salvation.

As others have astutely noted, both Gandhi and Marx were interested in the ideal of ‘the unalienated life.’<sup>136 137</sup> Gandhi did not call any particular phenomenon ‘alienation’, but described a human existence in which man loses his ‘soul.’ Of the worker in an industrialized world, Gandhi writes, “ . . . . It is beneath human dignity to lose one’s individuality and become a cog in a machine. I want every individual to become a full-blooded, fully developed member of society.”<sup>138</sup> Both thinkers believed capitalism made self-realization—moksha for Gandhi and Selbstverwirklichung for Marx-- all but impossible, and both understood it to be the ultimate aim of life. Gandhi’s self-realization is synonymous with salvation, or the realization of God, and it is informed, of course, by his religious beliefs. Of self-realization, he writes:

“ What I want to achieve and what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years is self- realization, to see God face to face. To attain Moksha (literally freedom from birth and death. The nearest English equivalent is Salvation). I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field are directed to this same end.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Patel, Nehal A. "Mindful Use: Gandhi's Non-Possessive Property Theory." *Seattle J. Soc. Just.* 13 (2014), 289.

<sup>136</sup> Bilgrami, Akeel. "Gandhi and marx." *Social Scientist* 40, no. 9/10 (2012): 3-25, 8

<sup>137</sup> Gurukkal, Rajan. "Convergence of Marx and Gandhi: A Strategic Need Today." *Social Scientist* 40, no. 9/10 (2012): 61–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23338884>.

<sup>138</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *Village swaraj*. Narajivan Publishing House, 1963, 28

<sup>139</sup> Rosenfeld, Isaac. "Gandhi: Self-Realization Through Politics." *Commentary* 10 (1950), 113

Like Marx, Gandhi believed that capitalism as it existed was unsustainable. He wrote, “a violent and bloody revolution is a certainty one day unless there is a voluntary abdication of riches and the power that riches give and sharing them for the common good.”<sup>140</sup>

Marx, perhaps astutely, did not see the rich abdicating anything, and insisted that built into capitalism was its own bloody demise, writing prolifically about an inevitable revolution. He wrote, “Revolution is necessary.... not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”<sup>141</sup> The “muck of ages” that he is referring to is reification.

Scathingly addressing the bourgeoisie He writes:

“Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class made into a law for all, a will whose essential character and direction are determined by the economical conditions of existence of your class.”<sup>142</sup>

These bourgeois material conditions have corrupted, in Marx’s estimation, everything, including notions of freedom, culture, law, marriage, family and education, and without a complete overthrow by the proletariat, these corrupted institutions will continue to be reproduced.

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<sup>140</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *Village swaraj*. Narajivan Publishing House, 1963

<sup>141</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The german ideology*. Vol. 1. International Publishers Co, 1970, 94-95

<sup>142</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. "The communist manifesto." In *Ideals and Ideologies*, pp. 243-255. Routledge, 2019.

One form of resistance to this capitalist reproduction is *décroissance*<sup>143</sup>, or degrowth. The modern movement for degrowth is a utopian push for the radical transformation of the so-called social imaginary.

## Degrowth

While the intellectual beginnings of degrowth can be traced as far back Adam Smith, the movement began in earnest in the early 1970s. The term was coined by Andre Gorz<sup>144</sup> during a debate in Paris, which followed the publication of Meadows' important *The Limits to Growth*.<sup>145</sup> The movement was a response to numerous emerging crises, including climate change, increased scarcity of important production resources, and economic inequality throughout the world, all of which were thought to be outcomes of the liberal growth paradigm. The movement remained on the margins, even on the left, and by the 1980s, had all but disappeared. In its place was an ostensibly new paradigm of sustainable development, which maintained the logic of liberal growth. Sustainable development was an attempt to harmonize environmental preservation, social welfare, and economic growth.<sup>146</sup> Decades later, it appears that this attempt has largely failed, as,

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<sup>143</sup> Muraca, Barbara. "D croissance: A Project for a Radical Transformation of Society." *Environmental Values* 22, no. 2 (2013): 147–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23460976>.

<sup>144</sup> D'Alisa, Giacomo, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis, eds. *Degrowth: a vocabulary for a new era*. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>145</sup> Meadows, Donella H., Dennis L. Meadows, J rgen Randers, and William W. Behrens. "The limits to growth." In *Green planet blues*, pp. 25-29. Routledge, 2018.

<sup>146</sup> Kothari, Ashish, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. "Buen Vivir, degrowth and ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the green economy." *Development* 57, no. 3 (2014): 362-375.

for example, absolute resource use has not declined, and we delve deeper into ecological crisis. Human activity continues to drive earth into a new state of imbalance.

Furthermore, wealth concentration and inequality have steadily increased under the 'green growth' paradigm. Advocates of degrowth thus argue that economic growth, measured as GDP, and sustainability are incompatible, and that economic growth does not correlate significantly or positively with social well-being.<sup>147</sup> In other words, the central claim of degrowth literature is that continuous economic growth is ecologically ruinous, economically unsustainable, and is no longer improving social welfare and happiness.

The origins of the so-called growth paradigm can be found in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century France and Britain, with the birth of political economy and the formulation of "the economy" as a concept and institution.<sup>148</sup> At this time, the economic sphere was formed as a separate sphere from social life and as the site of a very specific type of social activity. This sphere was thought of as largely autonomous, self-regulating, and distinct from the state, which would sometimes intervene into the economic sphere as a force "outside" of it. By the 1930s, "the economy" came to be understood as the site of the "totality of relations of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services

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<sup>147</sup> Kothari, Ashish, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. "Buen Vivir, degrowth and ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the green economy." *Development* 57, no. 3 (2014): 362-375.

<sup>148</sup> Schabas, Margaret. "The natural origins of economics." In *The Natural Origins of Economics*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

within a given geographical space.”<sup>149</sup> The national economy emerged as a “well-defined object” by the 1950s, as innovations in statistical tools and accounting practices allowed for technical representation and measurement of economic growth as GDP. Growth became a stated policy goal at this time, and influenced nation-state creation and geopolitical military and economic conflicts.<sup>150 151</sup> Critiques of GDP as a measure are numerous and will not be exhausted here, but one compelling critique for our purposes is that it is a very poor measure for well-being. For instance, expenditures on things like prisons, pandemics, oil spills, increase GDP. These calculations suggest “growth” has occurred but cannot tell us the difference between expenditures on social ‘goods’ or ‘bads.’<sup>152 153</sup> GDP is a severely limited tool for calculating social welfare.

The Cold War increased reliance on and politicization of GDP numbers, as competition with Soviets, the goal of modern development, and the assuagement of class conflict necessitated increased economic growth.<sup>154</sup> Critics assert that “in the West, growth was instrumental to diffuse demands of the workers’ movement, and in the East,

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<sup>149</sup> Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer. "Research on degrowth." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018): 294-296

<sup>150</sup> Ibid

<sup>151</sup> Philipsen, Dirk. "What Counts—Why Growth Economics is Failing Us." *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2022): 14695405221136235.

<sup>152</sup> Lepenies, Philipp. *The power of a single number: a political history of GDP*. Columbia University Press, 2016.

<sup>153</sup> Lepenies, Philipp. "Happiness and Inequality: Insights into a Difficult Relationship—and Possible Political Implications." (2012).

<sup>154</sup> Schmelzer, Matthias. *The hegemony of growth: the OECD and the making of the economic growth paradigm*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.



to excuse the lack of democracy and the failure of more revolutionary ambitions.”<sup>155</sup> Economic growth became a nonpartisan issue, transcending ideology. It became internalized and naturalized and identified the market as the only place wealth could be created. Eventually, the statistics, accounting, and rules and standards regarding measurement of growth were internationalized, and nations around the world came to be described as either developed or undeveloped, the latter being made up of colonies or former colonies. This of course greenlit a whole host of further interventions from the West in attempts to “develop” the “third world” . When it became obvious that liberal growth was creating ecological disaster, the abovementioned move towards green growth occurred.<sup>156</sup> As has been stated, the promise of green growth was miscalculated. For Serge Latouche, noted scholar of degrowth, while reduced energy and resource use is an aim of degrowth, the goal of the overall degrowth project is an exit from economism in general.<sup>157</sup> It is a “decolonizing” of the social “imaginary” and a liberation of policy debate from growth-privileging economic terms.<sup>158</sup>

Many are wary of the consequences that might result from an exit of economism or the so-called growth paradigm, imagining apocalyptic scarcity instead of increased opportunities for wholistic well-being. But research tells us in fact that the material

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<sup>155</sup> Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer. "Research on degrowth." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018), 295

<sup>156</sup> Kothari, Ashish, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. "Buen Vivir, degrowth and ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the green economy." *Development* 57, no. 3 (2014): 362-375.

<sup>157</sup> Latouche, Serge. "Degrowth economics." *Le Monde Diplomatique* 11, no. 1-5 (2004): 2004.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid

preconditions of human flourishing can be achieved by no-growth or de-growth societies, and that a reconsideration of the growth paradigm is in order. Before evaluating no-growth or de-growth societies, I determine whether capitalism and degrowth are compatible.

### Capitalism and Degrowth

Neoclassical models of economics don't negate the compatibility of economic stability or high employment with zero or negative growth. Research on zero growth economies has grown recently, and even in the context of established macroeconomic theories, the findings are telling. For instance, Irmen, applying a neoclassical supply-side lens, found that market economies 1. Don't always produce growth and 2. Do not need to grow to function.<sup>159</sup> Bilancini and D'Allesandro create a neoclassical model in which "decreases in labor supply lead to stable degrowth with increasing social welfare, as consumption losses are overcompensated by more free time, allowing enjoyment of nonmaterial relational goods."<sup>160</sup> <sup>161</sup> Keynesian models too suggest that zero or negative growth is compatible with stability. Ultimately, many economists have developed many models and come up with actual policy proposals for so-called "steady state" or

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<sup>159</sup> Irmen, Andreas. *Ist Wirtschaftswachstum systemimmanent?* {[Is economic growth inherent in the system?]} No. 509. Discussion Paper Series, 2011.

<sup>160</sup> Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer. "Research on degrowth." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018): 299

<sup>161</sup> Fontana, Giuseppe, and Malcolm Sawyer. "The macroeconomics and financial system requirements for a sustainable future." In *Finance and the macroeconomics of environmental policies*, pp. 74-110. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015.

nongrowing economies, which include things like green taxes, reduction in working hours, elimination of dirty subsidies and so on and so forth.<sup>162 163</sup>

But many question the usefulness and accuracy of this literature. These critics assert that capitalist economies are simply incompatible with degrowth. They suggest that these economies have a “growth imperative,” largely due to competition and the desire to accumulate wealth. If all wages and all revenues were consumed by individuals and corporations alike, then zero growth might be a possibility. In other words, if people stopped saving and capital owners stopped accumulating, growth would end.

Unfortunately, owners of capital are compelled to accumulate wealth, and corporations must re-invest money in order to stay competitive in capitalist economies. As such, without growth, “profits and accumulation by capital holders come at the expense of other groups in society—intensifying economic inequalities and social tension.....

Whereas in theory, growth may not be necessary or inevitable within capitalism, in practice, the system generates growth via dynamics of competition, private ownership, and the availability of cheap energy supply”<sup>164 165</sup> Given the likely truth that degrowth—necessary for autonomy and ecological salvation—is incompatible with capitalism, we

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<sup>162</sup> Lange, Steffen. *Macroeconomics without growth*. Marburg: Metropolis Verlag, 2018.

<sup>163</sup> Lehmann, Cathérine, Olivier Delbard, and Steffen Lange. "Green growth, a-growth or degrowth? Investigating the attitudes of environmental protection specialists at the German Environment Agency." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 336 (2022): 130306.

<sup>164</sup> Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer. "Research on degrowth." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018), 300

<sup>165</sup> Lange, Steffen. *Macroeconomics without growth*. Marburg: Metropolis Verlag, 2018.

must imagine and examine other relationships between humans and resources. What follows is an exploration of no-growth or de-growth societies, strategies, and technologies.

#### Steady-state and Degrowth societies

Societies without growth are instructive here. Anthropologists and other social scientists have studied such societies as those who have long lived without growth, those who've experienced halted growth and have adapted successfully, and groups of people with little or no money in societies with huge rates of growth.

We can look to long enduring societies in Latin America and other places for models of actually existing steady-state economies, wherein hunter-gatherer communities have very different understandings of affluence. Scholars studying some of the longest existing communities on earth in the Kalahari find societies able to maintain extremely low ecological footprints by placing value on things outside of growth. The Kalahari people live good lives by working only as much as is needed to sustain themselves, and measure affluence in ways unfamiliar to the west.<sup>166</sup> Time, social relations, and richness of culture are determinants of affluence for these communities, not things like material possessions or profits.<sup>167</sup><sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Foster, Karen. "Work ethic and degrowth in a changing Atlantic Canada." *Journal of political ecology* 24, no. 1 (2017): 633-643.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid

<sup>168</sup> Suzman, J., 2017. *Affluence without abundance: The disappearing world of the Bushmen*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Recall that our theorists of human flourishing all consider free time and meaningful social relations as preconditions for human well-being. Both Aristotle and Marx emphasized the importance of leisure and free, conscious activity to individual and societal flourishing. Nussbaum too, understood the importance of time, making “play” one of her central capabilities. She defines play as “Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.”<sup>169</sup> Time also allows for positive social relations, which are also central to human flourishing. Marx famously wrote of the alienated worker under capitalism, and part of this alienation can be found in the conflictual, competitive human relationships created by capitalism. Workers see each other as obstacle to their own wealth creation and as such are in conflict. Capitalism creates conditions of alienation between individuals and in turn alienates individuals from their own humanity, or ‘species-essence’ Nussbaum made “affiliation” a central capability and defined it partly as:

Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation). . . .<sup>171</sup>

Nussbaum also wrote of the ability to enter into “meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers” as well as the ability to have emotional attachments to

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<sup>169</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2jbt31>, 33-34

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 35

others, to love and be loved, and to have positive political and artistic associations with others.<sup>172</sup>

Relatedly, the Mbendjele Yaka people, living in the forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo, pursue management strategies that attempt to maintain abundance, instead of managing resources in a way that emphasizes scarcity. Their cultural practices place emphasis on moral obligations for nonreciprocal sharing in communities, equitably distributing forest resources like meat and honey. Many of the remote groups studied feature a so-called “cosmology of sharing,” wherein the social relationships within a community and the community’s relationship to nature are considered interdependent partnerships. Nussbaum’s capability dealing with other species emphasizes the ability to have concern for other species and nature, which is only possible if growth is eliminated as the only or most important imperative social relations or societal configurations. Analyses of these groups show that the most egalitarian societies on earth prioritize immediate consumption of resources over surplus accumulation and develop social institutions that impair uneven distribution of power, wealth, or authority.<sup>173</sup> If, instead, we allow for brazenly unequal distribution of power via unequal accumulations of wealth, as is the case in our current paradigm, what we do is strip individuals of autonomy, or as Nussbaum suggests, control over their material conditions, as unequal

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid

<sup>173</sup> Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer. "Research on degrowth." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018): 291-316.

power allows for domination of others via political and economic institutions. How will Marx's individual "hunt in the morning" and "criticize in the evening,"<sup>174</sup> developing her various capabilities and as such self-realizing, if she dominated by a political regime or subjugated by the tyranny of market relations?

Recently, ancient agricultural technologies that sustained populations for thousands of years— raised fields in Bolivia, water harvesting in the Negev desert, terraces in Yemen— are being utilized once more for the survival of marginal environments that exist in otherwise contemporary market economies.<sup>175</sup> These technologies, which are based on local materials, are not aimed at growth but at resilience and sustainability. Movements in many places are using these technologies in an agroecological revolution of sorts, in hopes of reinstating local self-reliance, regeneration of agrobiodiversity, and producing healthy foods without creating a large ecological footprint. These movements are empowering so-called peasant populations all over Latin America.<sup>176</sup> These technologies allow for true autonomy, as they empower peasant populations to opt out of coercive or tyrannical market relations by localizing their productive powers.

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<sup>174</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The german ideology*. Vol. 1. International Publishers Co, 1970, 22

<sup>175</sup> Guttman-Bond, Erika. "Sustainability out of the past: how archaeology can save the planet." *World archaeology* 42, no. 3 (2010): 355-366.

<sup>176</sup> Altieri, Miguel A., and Victor Manuel Toledo. "The agroecological revolution in Latin America: rescuing nature, ensuring food sovereignty and empowering peasants." *Journal of peasant studies* 38, no. 3 (2011): 587-612.

Nonwestern traditions that can inform degrowth policy are sometimes viewed as controversial and are often at complete odds with existing and ever-expanding market forces. Take the oft-ridiculed whaling hunts of the Faroe Islands. These whale hunts, which have generated harvests of consistent sizes for centuries, produce enough meat and blubber to be shared among the entire community for nourishment. No money is exchanged and no profit is ever created. These practices receive wide condemnation from many in the west, including international NGOs, despite the fact that the ecological impact of such practices is negligible compared to the impact of the practices of economic growth.<sup>177</sup> If whale hunting is controversial, what is it when the western growth imperative--exported to the rest of the world via international institutions which include NGOs--has made parts of the world uninhabitable, has created a situation of dwindling biodiversity, and has made democracy, and in turn autonomy, obsolete?

To that point, in India, there exist local projects practicing “radical ecological democracy.” These associations have no goal to scale-up, though some alternatives exist that engage a larger scale bioregional democratic process. Take, for instance, the Avari River Parliament, which is made up of 72 river line villages in Western India.<sup>178</sup> This group meets often to decide on ecological, economic, and social practices. Groups like this and others in places like Latin America ascribe to the idea of “buen vivir,” which is

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<sup>177</sup> Bogadóttir, Ragnheiður, and Elisabeth Skarðhamar Olsen. "Making degrowth locally meaningful: the case of the Faroese grindadráp." *Journal of Political Ecology* 24, no. 1 (2017): 504-518.

<sup>178</sup> Kothari, Ashish. "Radical ecological democracy: a path forward for India and beyond." *Development* 57, no. 1 (2014): 36-45.



honored through cultural traditions that prioritize community well-being instead of western developmentalism, and which understand the necessity of ecological balance to said well-being.<sup>179</sup>

We can also look to societies where involuntary declines in growth driven societies have required a recalculation of policy. When an economic crisis hit Cuba in the 1990s, leaders utilized strategies long championed by degrowth proponents. When imports of food, agrochemicals, and industrial equipment declined or came to a halt, Cuba's leaders made shifts from high-input agriculture towards semi-organic agriculture. They utilized labor-intensive methods of agriculture instead of energy intensive methods and reduced their ecological and carbon footprint. During this time, several improvements in Cuban citizen well-being were documented, including lower maternal and infant mortality, obesity, diabetes, and so on. The shift towards labor intensive urban agriculture provided wide employment, fed people well, enhanced urban environments, and built community, all while making use of fewer fossil fuels and financial resources. While Cuba would have benefited from more open democracy, the health benefits associated with these degrowth strategies were viewed as a success and were accompanied by strong public policy that placed limits to private accumulation, encouraged socio-economic equality, and increased life-expectancy.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Kothari, Ashish, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. "Buen Vivir, degrowth and ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the green economy." *Development* 57, no. 3 (2014): 362-375.

<sup>180</sup> Borowy, Iris. "Degrowth and public health in Cuba: lessons from the past?." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 38 (2013): 17-26.

When Detroit was shrinking, their authorities accepted the end of growth and went about plans to invest in the improvement of the quality of life of their citizens. They invested in community programs aimed at mitigating needs for food, healthcare, and socialization, first opting to file for bankruptcy and prioritize the needs of their citizens over the interests of banks and debtors. Renewed investment and gentrification have replaced many of these programs with the usual processes of the growth paradigm, begging the question of whether degrowth strategies are possible in a widely capitalist system that is wired towards growth.<sup>181</sup>

That said, some scholars of degrowth look towards technology as a means to liberate the world from the growth imperative, asserting technology's potential for widespread knowledge dissemination and relatedly, empowering local production.<sup>182</sup> Technology has long been understood as a crucial determinant of well-being as it relates to economics. What follows is an exploration of the role of technology in degrowth.

### Technology and Degrowth

While Gandhi notoriously despaired at the mind-numbing impacts of modern technology, Marx considered the possibility that industrial methods of production could ultimately liberate the impoverished masses from alienation of wage labor and the injustice of capitalism. Writers throughout political thought have echoed both of these

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<sup>181</sup> Schindler, Seth. "Detroit after bankruptcy: A case of degrowth machine politics." *Urban Studies* 53, no. 4 (2016): 818-836.

<sup>182</sup> Likavčan, Lukáš, and Manuel Scholz-Wäckerle. "Technology appropriation in a de-growing economy." *Journal of cleaner production* 197 (2018): 1666-1675.

positions. Many critique technological “fixes” that aim to subvert labor all together<sup>183</sup>, and others make the argument that technology has developed in such a way as to now be completely autonomized from social control. For these thinkers, there exists a scientific-industrial-complex that forges full speed ahead, developing whatever it can without any consideration of the social purposes or impact any new technology might have.<sup>184</sup> Take for instance, new methods of surveillance, DNA analysis, and computer learning, which threaten privacy.<sup>185</sup> Some argue that all technology aims to turn the nonhuman into human-made objects, which critics see as at odds with sustainability, and therefore must be constrained if projects of sustainability are to be successful.<sup>186</sup>

Like Gandhi, who urged his countrymen to use simple technologies to spin their own clothes and grow their own foods, many degrowth scholars urge appropriation of technology that “encompass small-scale, decentralized, environmentally sound, and locally autonomous applications.”<sup>187</sup> <sup>188</sup> So-called ‘Nowtopian’ urban projects make use

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<sup>183</sup> Silver, Beverly J. *Forces of labor: workers' movements and globalization since 1870*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>184</sup> Samerski, Silja. "Tools for degrowth? Ivan Illich's critique of technology revisited." *Journal of cleaner production* 197 (2018): 1637-1646.

<sup>185</sup> Pueyo, Salvador. "Growth, degrowth, and the challenge of artificial superintelligence." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197 (2018): 1731-1736.

<sup>186</sup> Heikkurinen, Pasi. "Degrowth by means of technology? A treatise for an ethos of releasement." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197 (2018): 1654-1665.

<sup>187</sup> Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer. "Research on degrowth." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018), 304

<sup>188</sup> Kostakis, Vasilis, Vasilis Niaros, George Dafermos, and Michel Bauwens. "Design global, manufacture local: Exploring the contours of an emerging productive model." *Futures* 73 (2015): 126-135.

of low-tech tools to meet the needs of citizens and strengthen community ties.<sup>189</sup> People participating in these urban projects are deciding to ‘exit’ capitalism, which has rendered them “excess labor” and attempt to meet their own needs through reciprocity.<sup>190</sup> Examples include the Malmo-based “bike kitchen,” where sustainable transportation needs of members is met through a community repair studio where everyone contributes and shares tools for repair<sup>191</sup>, or low-tech community gardens in subcultures of CA, where sustenance needs are taken on as a community project of gift-exchange and sharing.<sup>192</sup>

There are many projects that make use of the digital world to freely share innovations in technology that are compatible with degrowth and sustainability. In India, the Kersla Scientific Literature Movement translates complex scientific knowledge from English to the local languages of Southern India, and in fact since 1987, local groups have been using this newly acquired knowledge to modify technology developed in the Western world to meet their local and rural needs.<sup>193</sup> These projects, rooted in the ethos of “design global, manufacture local”<sup>194</sup> makes use of open digital commons to share

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<sup>189</sup> Carlsson, Chris, and Francesca Manning. "Nowtopia: strategic exodus?." (2010): 924-953.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid

<sup>191</sup> Bradley, Karin. "Bike Kitchens—Spaces for convivial tools." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197 (2018): 1676-1683.

<sup>192</sup> Carlsson, Chris, and Francesca Manning. "Nowtopia: strategic exodus?." (2010): 924-953.

<sup>193</sup> Pansera, Mario, and Richard Owen. "Innovation for de-growth: A case study of counter-hegemonic practices from Kerala, India." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197 (2018): 1872-1883.

<sup>194</sup> Kostakis, Vasilis, Vasilis Niaros, George Dafermos, and Michel Bauwens. "Design global, manufacture local: Exploring the contours of an emerging productive model." *Futures* 73 (2015): 126-135.

designs innovated globally. Local communities then make use of these global designs in a way that is consistent with their local needs and adheres to their community rules of use. These projects have had success in the low-cost local manufacture of wind turbines, farming machinery and robotic limbs.<sup>195</sup>

What these case studies tell us is that it is possible for communities to flourish in steady-state economies, and to meet individual needs through community projects that attempt to subvert growth economies. These societies, subcultures, and strategies are helping to meet the material preconditions of human flourishing more consistently and with a more minimal ecological footprint than growth strategies which create severely inequitable distribution of resources. These arrangements help mitigate the alienation that is pervasive in capitalist societies. Fewer hours of work, engagement in productive activities– the fruits of which are kept by the worker–, an emphasis on community which ends the alienation between woman and her species, and a re-commitment to the relationship between human and nature support the process of human flourishing as conceptualized by Aristotle, Marx, and Nussbaum.

If we combine what we know about the practical and philosophical pitfalls of the growth imperative, our beliefs about well-being as human flourishing, and the real-life lessons learned from examples of no-growth or degrowth societies, we can start to imagine an ideal arrangement between humans and their resources. A compelling arrangement can be found in the Gandhian model of so-called “village economies,”

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<sup>195</sup> Pansera, Mario, and Richard Owen. "Innovation for de-growth: A case study of counter-hegemonic practices from Kerala, India." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197 (2018): 1872-1883.

which I defend using the combined and ever-timely wisdom of Gandhi and Marx, and to which I now turn.

### Village Economies

Both Marx and Gandhi imagine ideal worlds in which the scale of economies was drastically downsized, resulting in Marx's commune and Gandhi's gram swaraj, or the 'self-reliant village.' Both thinkers were wary of industrialization and globalization in no small part because of the disastrous ecological consequences associated with the phenomena and because it "emptied out" the individual. Gandhi's wisdom in particular seems to align perfectly with the degrowth imperative. He wrote, "By economic progress, I take it, we mean material advancement without limit, and by real progress we mean moral progress. . . . I hold that economic progress in the sense I have put it is antagonistic to real progress," and insisted that "civilization, in the real sense of the term consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants."<sup>196</sup> As such, Gandhi insisted on a village economy, which he saw as making more real the possibility of true wealth or well-being, including "moral progress." Of his ideal village economy, Gandhi writes:

"An ideal Indian village will be so constructed as to lend itself to perfect sanitation. It will have cottages with sufficient light and ventilation, built of a material obtainable within a radius of five miles of it. The cottages will have courtyards enabling the householders to plant vegetables for domestic use and to house their cattle. The village lanes and streets will be free of all avoidable dust. It

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<sup>196</sup> Ishii, Kazuya. "The socioeconomic thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi: As an origin of alternative development." *Review of Social Economy* 59, no. 3 (2001): 297-312, 298-299

will have wells according to its needs and accessible to all. It will have houses of worship for all, also a common meeting place, a village common for grazing its cattle, a co-operative dairy, primary and secondary schools in which industrial education will be the central factor, and it will have panchayats for settling disputes. It will produce its own grains, vegetables and fruit, and its own khadi. This is roughly my idea of a model village.”<sup>197</sup>

In this ideal village, Gandhi writes that “the motivating factor in the choice of vocations is not personal advancement but self-expression and self-realization through the service of society.”<sup>198</sup> This evokes Marx’s vision of liberation in a communist society, wherein a person’s self-expression, knowledge, and realization are practiced through well rounded, free conscious activity. Famously, he writes:

For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic and must remain so if he does not wish to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, to fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner.”<sup>199</sup>

People will struggle to imagine this way of life, as increasingly, we are separated from our immediate community in ways both literal and figurative. For instance, the average American drives 55 miles a day to get to and from their workplaces, which of course,

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<sup>197</sup> Ishii, Kazuya. "The socioeconomic thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi: As an origin of alternative development." *Review of Social Economy* 59, no. 3 (2001): 297-312, 298

<sup>198</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *Village swaraj*. Narajivan Publishing House, 1963, 23

<sup>199</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The german ideology*. Vol. 1. International Publishers Co, 1970, 22

contributes hugely to our carbon footprint.<sup>200</sup> We may buy and consume some locally produced foods, but often, we are eating food that has come from literally thousands of miles away, as over half of our produce is imported from other nations.<sup>201</sup> This is a far cry from Gandhi's vision of food grown within a 5 mile radius of a household and contributes not only to our planet-killing ecological impact but also serves to exploit workers in the global south.<sup>202</sup> This practice also relegates nations in the global south to the export of primary goods, the prices of which are quite volatile and the dependence on which hinders the diversification of economies necessary for capitalist development in a global market system.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, the importing of produce from the global south makes it difficult for American producers to compete in the global economy, requiring billions in tax-payer dollars to subsidize hurting farmers, an important portion of the national electorate.<sup>204</sup>

Our clothing, vehicles, and tech devices are manufactured all over the world in complex chains of global value, wherein brown and black international workers are

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<sup>200</sup> "Census Bureau Estimates Show Average One-Way Travel Time to Work Rises to All-Time High." Census.gov. US Census Bureau, October 8, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/one-way-travel-time-to-work-rises.html>.

<sup>201</sup> Karp, David. "Most of America's Fruit Is Now Imported. Is That a Bad Thing?" The New York Times. The New York Times, March 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/13/dining/fruit-vegetables-imports.html#:~:text=Imports%20have%20increased%20steadily%20for,now%20come%20from%20other%20countries>.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid

<sup>203</sup> Oatley, Thomas. *International political economy*. Routledge, 2018.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid



subject to hazardous working conditions, low wages, and the repressive tactics used by supplier firms to stifle any organization of labor.<sup>205</sup> Nations competing for investment from western firms are reluctant to enforce labor or environmental regulations, afraid that such regulations would prevent badly needed investment. It would seem that states in the global South have little option but to participate in a so-called “race to the bottom” in order to attract business from multinational corporations.<sup>206</sup> As Locke notes, governments have conflicting interests. They want to protect the rights of their citizens but must also give multinational corporations incentives to invest with supplier firms in their borders. To remain competitive, states allow for lax labor laws or fail to adequately implement existing labor laws.<sup>207</sup> The damage done to the planet is, of course, both devastating and undeniable, try as some might to gaslight the world into believing that man-made climate change is a hoax.

Global capitalism may have lifted billions out of abject poverty, but it keeps billions more mired in some level of poverty, both material and psychic. Citizens the world over increasingly spend most of their time in front of screens, either for work or for consumption. Despite technology and social media’s ability to render time and space obsolete, potentially connecting people the world over, Americans find themselves

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<sup>205</sup> Anner, Mark. "Labor control regimes and worker resistance in global supply chains." *Labor History* 56, no. 3 (2015): 292-307.

<sup>206</sup> Davies, Ronald B., and Krishna Chaitanya Vadlamannati. "A race to the bottom in labor standards? An empirical investigation." *Journal of Development Economics* 103 (2013): 1-14.

<sup>207</sup> Locke, Richard M. *The promise and limits of private power: Promoting labor standards in a global economy*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

increasingly isolated. This, combined with the increasing number of hours worked by Americans, has created an epidemic of so-called “social disconnectedness,” as evidenced by a compelling body of research. Reported levels of loneliness and unhappiness were rising long before the covid pandemic, which magnified the problem, and as previously stated, suicide rates in America were also rising significantly. Along with poverty, these problems have been partly attributed to social disconnectedness.<sup>208</sup> Where is there room for a reconnection to one’s species-essence, or the capability for affiliation as conceptualized by Nussbaum if work and consumption serve to disconnect humans from each other?

Recall Detroit’s investment in programs geared towards creating spaces of community socialization and what that might mean for this epidemic. Think of community gardens or the Bike Kitchen, which serve as spaces for community engagement, as places where a person’s productive capacities are used in the creation of goods that reflect her creative powers, aiding in her self-realization and providing her with an object she can make immediate use of. No worker is exploited, little is polluted, and no profit is generated at the expense of a healthy society or a healthy planet.

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<sup>208</sup> “Loneliness Is a 'Giant Evil' of Our Time, Says Jo Cox Commission.” The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, December 10, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/dec/10/loneliness-is-a-giant-evil-of-our-time-says-jo-cox-commission>.

## Conclusion

At this point, one might question the plausibility of an end to the growth imperative or a Gandhian village economy. It might be criticized as pie-in-the sky or utopian. I will discuss utopia in the next chapter but first it's important to note that groups of people can and in fact do successfully exist in non-growth societies, as evidenced by the preceding discussion of such societies. These societies, at the very least, support the attainment of the material preconditions for human flourishing. First, they reduce the necessity of wage labor, which is conceived of as coercion via the tyranny of the growth imperative and which is, ultimately, a rejection of autonomy. These societies allow for meaningful social relations, which are currently hindered by the growth paradigm. The elevation of ecological health as a constituent component of human relations in these societies mitigates the negative impact of environmental degradation on bodily health as they increase the accessibility of and cleanliness of food, air, and water. Equitable distribution is prioritized in these societies, contra the outcomes of growth, which include unlimited wealth accumulation for some at the expense of the impoverished and colored masses.

Perhaps most importantly, in a few of these societies, democracy is localized, allowing for true egalitarianism and as such, real autonomy, without which human flourishing is impossible. Local, direct democracy is a fundamental precondition of equitable resource distribution, and this is true of the relationship in reverse. Without meaningful influence over the institutions that shape our existence, equitable distribution of resources and ultimately, human flourishing, remain out of reach for most. In the

following chapter, I dig into the issue of democracy as it relates to degrowth and illustrate the necessity of local, direct democracy to the project of human flourishing.

## Chapter 3- Democracy and Human Flourishing

### Introduction

The notion that global capitalism and democracy are fundamentally incompatible is as old as capitalism itself, and I do not intend to exhaust that literature here. The goal of this chapter is first, to explore the relationship between democracy and human flourishing as it has been understood in political thought. The second goal is to show how mass democracies rob citizens of the potential for human flourishing as well as create conditions of ecological destruction. This critique includes a rejection of the thin and untenable liberal understanding of individual autonomy in favor of a robust conception that stresses the actual democratic means to choose one's own conception of the good life. I then argue in favor of small-scale, participatory democracy as conceptualized by democratic and degrowth scholars who introduce earth and intergenerational democracy as preconditions for human flourishing and as a way out of ecological crisis.

### Democratic Theory and Self-realization

That democratic engagement aids in self-development or self-realization is an old argument. Mill, Arendt and others spoke of the educative, self-expressive, and self-realizing potentiality of democratic engagement. This should come as no surprise since most conceptions of self-realization have at the center of them the notion that this need is satisfied through the meaningful exercise of talents and capacities that are uniquely human, such as reason, language expression, and sociability. Arendt, in her contested writings on council democracy, argues that "no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power," a claim similar to

Nussbaum's tenth capability regarding political influence.<sup>209</sup> America's representative democracy, in Arendt's estimation, robs the masses of a proper political experience and as such, of freedom, since "those activities of expressing, discussing, and deciding" are the activities of freedom defined positively.<sup>210</sup> Freedom defined "positively" is directly at odds with the standard liberal understanding of autonomy, which stresses only negative, protective 'freedom' instead of the real capability to decide for oneself. For Mill, a utilitarian who wrote at length about self-development, people gain critical skills, dignity, self-worth, and share in the so-called "public spirit" if they participate politically.<sup>211</sup> Listening, debating, and considering other points of view create both self-reflection and reflection on societal principles. This political participation also aids in a "moral" education, as it teaches tolerance and respect for others with differing views. Pateman, in her discussion of the positive implications of the democratization of workplaces, discusses efficacy, or the belief in one's competence or influence. Participation in the work place created greater efficacy in individuals and, Pateman argues, would translate to a greater willingness on the part of citizens to participate in wider political systems.<sup>212</sup>

Relatedly, Rousseau thought that political participation would educate people in identifying the 'general will'. In other words, socialization in democracy leads to the

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<sup>209</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *On revolution*. Penguin, 1990, 255

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, 82

<sup>211</sup> Pateman, Carole. *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press, 1970, 29

<sup>212</sup> Pateman, Carole. "Democratizing citizenship: some advantages of a basic income." *Politics & society* 32, no. 1 (2004): 89-105.

development of the general will.<sup>213</sup> While these things are not ‘self-realization’ explicitly, they are constituent parts, as self-realization requires self-knowledge and is ultimately the full development of our human capacities, including our intellectual, communicative, and social and moral potentialities.

Critiques of the educative, self-realizing potential of democracy are numerous, but short of a return to the ‘perfect liberty’ of the mythical state of nature, I can identify no other political arrangement in which this development is even possible. As Mill asks in reference to benevolent despotism, “What sort of human beings can be formed under such a regimen? What development can either their thinking or their active faculties attain under it? Their moral capacities are equally stunted. Wherever the sphere of action of human beings is artificially circumscribed, their sentiments are narrowed and dwarfed”<sup>214</sup>. Self-expression, crucial to self-realization, for instance, is precluded by authoritarianism.<sup>215</sup> Dewey identified democracy as the political form of life best suited for allowing citizens to continually “grow” or flourish through the repeated exercise of their social, intellectual, and communicative capacities, the uses of which are inherent to political participation and collective problem solving.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Pateman, Carole. *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press, 1970.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>215</sup> Barry, Brian. *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 2 (1979): 331–33.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1879226>.

<sup>216</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. Myers Education Press, 2018 (1916).

If we accept democracy as the one form of governance that can create even the potential for self-realization, then we must spell out why democracy appears to be failing to achieve this and design democracy so that it better allows for citizen self-realization. In my estimation, the single most important reform is the size of democracy. To make this argument, we have to probe, first, theories of democracy and evaluate their strengths and deficiencies as they relate to self-realization.

### Representative Democracy and its Limits

Rousseau, in his discussion of representative democracy, the form most prevalent today, argues that “The idea of representatives is modern...in the ancient republics...the people never had representatives...The moment a people allows itself to be represented, it is no longer free: it no longer exists.”<sup>217</sup> He makes this argument in part because, Rousseau believes, once the people have transferred its will over to anyone else, it has severed its freedom to determine its own future, as this transfer requires obedience to another person or body’s will. In other words, when we transfer our will to representatives, we give up our autonomy. The legislative duties lie with the popular sovereign and the popular sovereign alone. He writes “Sovereignty cannot be represented for the same reason that it cannot be alienated. It consists essentially in the general will, and the will cannot be represented. The will is either itself or something else; no middle

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<sup>217</sup> Douglass, Robin. “Rousseau’s Critique of Representative Sovereignty: Principled or Pragmatic?” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013): 735–47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23496650>, 736



ground is possible.”<sup>218</sup> As such, he called for a government wherein “there are more citizens who are magistrates than who are ordinary private citizens,” conceding that some people would have to execute and administer the general will.<sup>219</sup> Pessimistically, Rousseau says that democracy has “never existed and never will.”<sup>220</sup> He makes this case in part because he understands the conditions of modernity--namely, the nation-state system—to be incompatible with direct democracy, which is actual democracy in his view. Many scholars have argued that modernity necessitated representation because modernity is in large part, about mass societies. Rousseau, arguably anti-modern, understood this, and argued that even where small societies—ideally a city-state the size of his native Geneva—could secure political association that allowed for direct democracy and achievement of the general will, it would eventually be dominated by a larger nation-state and cease to exist. Again, the implication is that the nation-state system strips us of our autonomy, if we understand autonomy as the real capability to decide for oneself.

As noted, Arendt too critiqued representative government, tracing the loss of the Jeffersonian, public “pursuit of happiness” to the French Revolution, whereby the masses of the citizenry were restricted to private concerns through the implementation of representative government. Critiquing the representative system, she accuses nation-states like the U.S. of reverting to a situation wherein “public happiness and public

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid

<sup>219</sup> Ibid

<sup>220</sup> Ibid

freedom have again become the privilege of a few.”<sup>221</sup> Instead of public happiness or freedom or spirit, representative government stressed the primacy of civil liberties. In further critique, Arendt argues that without participation, citizens cannot form proper political opinions. She writes:

“In this system the opinions of the people are indeed unascertainable for the simple reason that they are non-existent. Opinions are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate, and where no opportunity for the forming of opinion exists, there may be moods-moods of the masses and moods of individuals, the latter no less fickle and unreliable than the former-but no opinion.”<sup>222</sup>

Instead, she argues in favor of council democracy, or many little “elementary republics”<sup>223</sup> wherein citizens could exercise public happiness and experience “rational” opinion formation. She rejects votes as a way to gauge public opinion on this basis, suggesting that voting is a private act that occurs without the adequate political experience necessary for proper opinion formation. Voting also fails to create a ‘meaningful’ relationship between the individual voter and the public issues of the whole. For this meaningful relationship to exist, spaces for political experience must be created where citizens can participate in a wider context than their narrow interests. For Arendt, political participation is a unique and fundamental human experience without which they cannot be free in a positive sense.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *On revolution*. Penguin, 1990, 269

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*, 93

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*, 84

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*

The claim that this sort of exchange is crucial to the human experience depends largely on the notion that belonging to a society is the “essential condition of people’s developing their basic human capacities; a person must be part of society to be human in the full sense and to realize the human good.”<sup>225</sup> As Taylor puts it, “Living in a society is a necessary condition of the development of rationality... or of becoming a moral agent in the full sense of the term or of being fully autonomous.”<sup>226</sup> To self-realize is to develop human capacities, which cannot be done outside of the polis because humans are not self-sufficient. Taylor affirms Aristotle’s view of man as a “social animal, indeed a political animal, because he is not self-sufficient alone, and in an important sense is not self-sufficient outside of the polis.”<sup>227</sup> In other words, not only is man unlikely to survive outside of society, but he is not even human without it. This logic stands counter to what Taylor terms atomism, which he describes as a liberal conception of society that is “constituted by individuals for the fulfillment of ends which were primarily individual.”

He continues:

“Atomism represents a view about human nature and the human condition which (among other things) makes a doctrine of the primacy of rights plausible ... atomism affirms the self-sufficiency of man alone or, if you prefer, of the individual.”<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Vetlesen, Arne Johan. “Hannah Arendt, Habermas and the Republican Tradition.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21, no. 1 (January 1995): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019145379502100101>. Pp. 5

<sup>226</sup> Taylor, Charles. "Atomism" In *Powers, Possessions and Freedom: Essays in Honour of C.B. Macpherson* edited by Alkis Kontos, 39-62. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487589417-005>

<sup>227</sup> Ibid

<sup>228</sup> Ibid

For Taylor, atomism itself is a situated concept. In other words, it is through participation in a society that has, over centuries, learned to value individual autonomy, rights, and self-sufficiency above all else, that we come to understand and aspire to these concepts. He argues that we cannot know what it means to be self-sufficient without a cultural context, or without knowledge of “the nature of man or of the circumstances in which he is placed.”<sup>229</sup> Taylor and other communitarians understand individuals to develop only within the context of a community, or as Neal would say a “social fabric.”

If these understandings of the self are true, then we can more easily understand Rousseau’s argument regarding the educative role of participatory democracy. These accounts also help us reconcile individual autonomy with Rousseau’s prescription that citizens should be “forced” to be free. Pateman’s exegesis of Rousseau’s work is instructive here. First, Pateman notes Rousseau’s necessary economic conditions, namely that his ideal republic would contain very little economic inequality and that it would be economically independent. He writes that “no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself,”<sup>230</sup> and suggests that each citizen own a little bit of property since, as Pateman puts it “the security and independence that this gives to the individual is the necessary basis on which rest his political equality and political independence.”<sup>231</sup> Once these conditions have been met, then “independent and equal” citizens can come together to write and execute laws. Despite this independence, Rousseau

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid

<sup>230</sup> Pateman, Carole. *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press, 1970, 23

<sup>231</sup> Ibid

argued in favor of interdependence, suggesting that interdependence was necessary for their individual independence to be maintained. Of this seeming paradox, Pateman writes:

“This is not so paradoxical as it sounds because the participatory situation is such that each citizen would be powerless to do anything without the co-operation of all the others, or of the majority. Each citizen would be, as he puts it, 'excessively dependent on the republic' i.e. there would be an equal dependence of each individual on all the others viewed collectively as sovereign. and independent participation is the mechanism whereby this interdependence is enforced”<sup>232</sup>

Because laws are written by all in accordance with the general will, “Individual X will be unable to persuade others to vote for his proposal that gives X alone some advantage.”<sup>233</sup>

Rousseau’s vision of the participatory process makes it so that the only policy that will be accepted by all is one that spreads the “benefits and burdens” equally across participants.

The resulting law, in Rousseau’s vision, would almost certainly be one that ensures the freedom and equality of the individual while also protecting the common good. In this process, the participant is transformed. Pateman writes:

“As a result of participating in decision making the individual is educated to distinguish between his own impulses and desires. He learns to be a public as well as private citizen...The individual will eventually come to feel little or no conflict between the demands of the public and private spheres.”<sup>234</sup>

In other words, under the correct economic and democratic conditions, there would be little tension between individual choice and the common good. The participatory process gives each citizen a choice in determining the laws of the republic and as such, gives them actual control over their own lives in a way that even a cursory glance tells us is

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid

<sup>233</sup> Ibid

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, 25

untrue of representative systems. In other words, participatory democracy ensures genuine autonomy, not just the thin and untenable conception of autonomy as the negative freedom to choose. This process is only possible in small republics, wherein participation and resources are actually manageable. What's more, the participatory process is an educative one whereby citizens learn the common good, their role in securing it, and also fosters in them a crucial sense of belonging, which helps to build "true community."<sup>235</sup>

These claims argue, essentially, that political institutions have an impact on the development of the individual, especially as it relates to the "psychological qualities and attitudes of individuals."<sup>236</sup> J.S. Mill also believed this and suggests that political institutions be judged based on the "degree in which they promote the general mental achievement of the community, including...advancement in intellect, in virtue, and in practical activity and efficiency."<sup>237</sup> As such, Mill stresses the importance of political participation at the local level. He writes, "We do not learn to read or write, to ride or swim, by being merely told how to do it, but by doing it, so it is only by practicing popular government on a limited scale, that the people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger."<sup>238</sup> Of course, Mill is writing in the context of and for large societies, and it's unclear what role participation actually plays in his theory of its educative effects. Others

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 27

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 103

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 28

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 31

too, like Cole and Green and even Pateman herself try to salvage democratic participation by suggesting that such participation, and as result, self-governance, can be fostered at the local level or “in a smaller unit.”<sup>239</sup> I fail to see how even if efficacy could be achieved in the workplace which would foster greater democratic participation, the forces of the growth imperative wouldn’t simply deny citizens the policy or ideology for which they voted. In other words, in mass democracies competing for wealth and dominance in a globalized world, self-governance remains elusive. Soon we will see that in fact, our own American legislature ignores the votes and policy preferences of the average citizen in favor of legislation favored by plutocrats. In this next section, I illustrate the impossibility of self-governance in the context of the nation state system and more broadly, in a globalized economy. If self-governance is precluded, then so is autonomy, and as such, so too is human flourishing.

### Self-governance

What does self-governance actually mean in a globally interconnected context. Does participation in a “smaller unit” actually foster self-governance? Sure, people can participate and even receive some of the educative benefits associated with said participation, but the real world tells us this it has little impact on the ability to self-govern. Is it accurate to claim someone is engaged in self-governance, and more crucially, when decisions that directly impact his life and in turn, his ability to self-realize, are being made by others, remotely, and without any of his meaningful input?

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 38

Even when a city is able to create ordinances that align with the general will—which, if we believe Rousseau on the impossibility of representation of the general will, they actually cannot do given that city councils are representative bodies that function similarly to national representative bodies—the ordinance is only lawful if it does not conflict with a wider state law, which cannot conflict with a wider national law, laws that are determined by a small percentage of a nation’s population and do not reflect majority will. For instance, in a typical election, about 50% of citizens exercise their right to vote.<sup>240</sup> America’s electoral system is plurality rule, meaning whichever candidate receives the most votes gets to hold office. Typically, a member of one party in our highly polarized, adversarial two-party system wins any given office and is increasingly elected only by members of his own party. This means that, in reality, only 25% of the American electorate decides who writes our national laws. Add to this truth the fact that much of American law is administrative, determined by a large bureaucracy of unelected officials, and you have a situation in which it is unreasonable to claim that citizens are engaged in self-governance.

What’s more is that most municipalities in the US receive a large majority of their revenue from state and federal governments. Estimates suggest that, on average, some 50% of a city’s funds comes from bigger governments through transfers and grants, making it so that states and the federal government can punish cities for noncompliance

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<sup>240</sup> DeSilver, Drew. "Turnout in US has soared in recent elections but by some measures still trails that of many other countries." (2022).



by withholding desperately needed funds<sup>241</sup>. What does this say for autonomy? Folks living in a more progressive city like Austin would presumably support fully protected reproductive rights but are still subject to Texas' draconian 6 week abortion ban. Municipalities are preempted by state and federal law in most instances, allowing only for gap-filling ordinances that are rarely the result of participatory law-making but of bureaucratic operating procedures.<sup>242</sup> Cities lack financial self-sufficiency and will always be dependent on the county, state, and federal government for the planet-killing growth policies all levels of government currently champion. And in any case, the modern American city is too large for good governance, let alone the formation of "true community". A mid-size city like Riverside, CA has over 300,000 residents<sup>243</sup> and is currently facing crises of wage stagnation<sup>244</sup>, houselessness<sup>245</sup>, severe air pollution<sup>246</sup>, and

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<sup>241</sup> Dupuis, Nicole. Rep. *City Rights in an Era of Preemption: A State-by-State Analysis*. National League of Cities, n.d. <https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/NLC-SML-Preemption-Report-2017-pages.pdf>.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid

<sup>243</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Riverside City, California." Accessed August 27, 2022. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/riversidecitycalifornia>.

<sup>244</sup> Roosevelt, Margot. "In California's Inland Empire, Fewer than Half of Jobs Pay a Living Wage." *The Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-inland-empire-jobs-20181128-story.html>.

<sup>245</sup> Downey, David. "Riverside's Initial Deal Aims to Get More Homeless off the Streets." *Press Enterprise*. *Press Enterprise*, October 1, 2021. <https://www.pe.com/2021/09/30/riversides-initial-deal-aims-to-get-more-homeless-off-the-streets/>.

<sup>246</sup> Meadows, Donella H. *The Limits of Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. Universe Books, 1975.

regular, destructive fires that are the direct result of ecological crisis.<sup>247</sup> The city and county more broadly seem less concerned with sustainability or even green growth, opting instead to allow massive warehouse after massive polluting warehouse to be built in the region in attempts to employ more people and deal with wage and housing crises<sup>248</sup>. Here, we can see how the growth imperative preempts concerns about the material conditions for human flourishing, including a healthy planet which is directly related to bodily health. Can Riverside’s citizens flourish if they are breathing in some of the lowest quality air in the country? Shortly I will discuss also how this scenario confirms the notion that growth is used simply as a saucer to cool the hot tea of class antagonisms. Additionally, residents have not been allowed to vote on the warehouses, being given time only for limited public comment in lip service to ‘deliberative democracy’. And even when public comment has been firmly against the development of ecologically disastrous distribution warehouses, the city council and county board of supervisors have sided with the monopolistic interests of transnational corporations.

Riverside is also very economically diverse and by 2016 had one of the worst wealth gaps in CA, worse than the notoriously expensive Bay Area<sup>249</sup>. Those with money

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<sup>247</sup> Rokos, Brian. “Fire in Santa Ana River Sends Smoke into Downtown Riverside.” Press Enterprise. Press Enterprise, July 23, 2022. <https://www.pe.com/2022/07/22/fire-in-santa-ana-river-sending-smoke-into-downtown-riverside/>.

<sup>248</sup> Roosevelt, Margot. “In California’s Inland Empire, Fewer than Half of Jobs Pay a Living Wage.” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-inland-empire-jobs-20181128-story.html>.

<sup>249</sup> “Income Inequality in Riverside County, CA.” FRED, March 17, 2022. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/2020RATIO006065>.

both in and outside of the city are able to exploit plutocratic campaign finance schemes and fund local campaigns and initiatives to the tune of millions of dollars, as was the case with the recent Riverside Sheriff's race, wherein admitted and proud former Oath Keeper Chad Bianco was able to exploit local and national ideological divisions to garner widespread support and receive huge campaign donations.<sup>250</sup> Increasingly, local campaigns and initiatives are penetrated by broader, monied interests, making the influence of the working masses nearly obsolete. Riversidians might get a warehouse job but they have been robbed of genuine autonomy. The increasingly role of plutocratic interests is also true of state campaigns and initiatives and increasingly, national campaigns and initiatives<sup>251</sup>. The nation-state is subject to the same plutocratic pressures that local governments are, and I turn to that discussion in the next section.

### Democracy, Autonomy, and Globalization

In the neoliberal context, power has shifted from nation-states towards other centers of power, particularly economic. The centers of power can be global, public and undemocratic, like the G8, the WTO, the IMF, and so on, or private and even less democratic, like big banks, corporate CEOs, big investors and so on<sup>252</sup>. Large scale

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<sup>250</sup> Crumrine, JP. "Sheriff Candidates Land Big Donations." *Idyllwild Town Crier*, May 9, 2018. <https://idyllwildtowncrier.com/2018/05/09/sheriff-candidates-land-big-donations/>.

<sup>251</sup> "Money in Local Elections (2016)." *Ballotpedia*. Accessed August 27, 2022. [https://ballotpedia.org/Money\\_in\\_local\\_elections\\_\(2016\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Money_in_local_elections_(2016)).

<sup>252</sup> Deriu, Marco. "Democracies with a Future: Degrowth and the Democratic Tradition." *Futures : the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 44, no. 6 (2012): 553–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016>.

representative government makes it possible for big economic actors to spend millions of dollars to support electoral campaigns of candidates or political parties in attempts to secure policy favorable to their interests. Citizens without money are effectively shut out of influence. In a large-scale study of 20 years of public opinion and national legislation, Princeton University found that “the preferences of the average American appear to have only a miniscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact on public policy.... By contrast, economic elites are estimated to have a quite substantial, highly significant, independent impact on policy.”<sup>253</sup> The effect has led to the economic destruction of entire cities, the worst national economic inequality since the Great Depression, overworked, mentally ill Americans, and of course, imminent planet death. In the global context, traditional state tools used to counter the undemocratic effects of the market are increasingly ineffective in the face of new global actors. As noted by Derui, “Multinational corporations and financial and economic elites are increasingly avoiding democratic control and contribution in terms of taxation, compliance with social and environmental laws, protection of workers’ rights and, more generally, respect for citizens and populations.”<sup>254</sup>

Nation-states are increasingly beholden to these economic actors. When nations in the global south faced devastating economic crises, international institutions bailed them

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<sup>253</sup> Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens.” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 564–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592714001595>.

<sup>254</sup> Deriu, Marco. “Democracies with a Future: Degrowth and the Democratic Tradition.” *Futures : the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 44, no. 6 (2012): 553–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016>, 55

out conditionally, requiring severe liberal reforms and austerity before IMF loans were distributed. The effect of these structural adjustment programs has been negative, as the required slashes to government spending overwhelmingly hurt the average citizen. Recent studies show that indicators of children's health in these nations saw declines after liberal reforms were implemented. In some of these nations, spending on healthcare declined by 50% and by 25% for education.<sup>255</sup> This is true even of nations not in the global south, as was the case in Greece's recent economic crisis, wherein painful cuts to social spending led to crises in citizen welfare. The economic ministers of these countries have become chiefly concerned with speculation done in global financial markets, which have the power to doom a nation-state to severe crisis<sup>256</sup>. Increasingly, Western Liberal Democracies are heavily indebted in global financial markets, making them exposed to the whims of nondemocratic actors. The market is no longer embedded into society. As Habermas summed up, "today they are the states to be incorporated into the markets, rather than national economies to be incorporated into the boundaries of the state."<sup>257</sup> In other words, the global economy has become tyrannical; it has stripped us of autonomy.

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<sup>255</sup> Thomson, Michael, Alexander Kentikelenis, and Thomas Stubbs. "Structural Adjustment Programmes Adversely Affect Vulnerable Populations: A Systematic-Narrative Review of Their Effect on Child and Maternal Health." *Public Health Reviews* 38, no. 1 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-017-0059-2>.

<sup>256</sup> Deriu, Marco. "Democracies with a Future: Degrowth and the Democratic Tradition." *Futures : the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 44, no. 6 (2012): 553–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016>, p. 55

<sup>257</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. "The European nation-state and the pressures of globalization." *new left review* (1999): 46-59.

Globalization is undermining democracy, not just because states are increasingly beholden to the power and interest of global economic actors, but also because the effect has been to concentrate power at the very top of most nation-states, which 1) allows for the elite to buy representation, and 2) creates conditions of scarcity that turn citizens of the same state against each other. In-group-out-group dynamics are made worse in conditions of scarcity, wherein groups of different identities are fighting for the paltry crumbs left over for average Americans after the plutocrats have taken their hefty shares. This is especially true of nations with racial and ethnic divisions, as is best exemplified by the phenomenon of so-called ‘racial resentment’ in the US, which has emboldened a white, far-right political movement against social spending on black and brown Americans.<sup>258</sup> This dynamic has played out across Europe too, as far-right, xenophobic movements garner serious support in France, the U.K., and elsewhere.<sup>259</sup> Far from achieving a “true community,” which is simply impossible in groups as large as nation-states, these countries are experiencing ever increasing social divisions and making more acceptable arguments for exclusion and oppression.

If citizens have no meaningful influence over the institutions that govern them, they are simply not autonomous. They are subjugated by the tyrannical forces of the growth imperative, forced to accept work at ecological ruinous warehouses having their democratic influence drowned out by plutocrats. The preconditions for human flourishing

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<sup>258</sup> Abramowitz, Alan, and Jennifer McCoy. "United States: Racial resentment, negative partisanship, and polarization in Trump's America." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 137-156.

<sup>259</sup> Campion, Kristy, and Scott Poynting. "International Nets and National Links: The Global Rise of the Extreme Right—Introduction to Special Issue." *Social Sciences* 10, no. 2 (2021): 61.

can only be achieved when humans can exercise control over their political and material conditions. The discussion above illustrates the impossibility of exercising this influence in democratic systems that render one's vote meaningless and in a global economy that demands convergence on liberal market practices at the expense of wholistic well-being. Rousseau's wisdom casts a long shadow here, and what follows is an argument in favor of local, direct democracy as a model better suited towards the goal of human flourishing than our current model of mass representative government.

#### Degrowth, democracy, and self-realization

Large-scale, representative democracy precludes participation in legislating, helps create a situation in which citizens are alienated from each other and do not enjoy a feeling of "belonging", and produces conditions perfect for the plutocratic takeover of government, which then produces conditions of economic inequality, poverty, and mental and physical illness. This model also precludes real autonomy. Self-realization is a higher order need that can only be met if other conditions are present, and those created by large scale representative democracy are the opposite of said conditions. Noted degrowth scholar Deriu writes:

"Citizens are the mercy of immense and impersonal powers, which are difficult to be controlled, at least with the current instruments of traditional democracies.... In short, the balance between capitalism, democracy, well-being and social security, and between economic freedom and political rights that had been maintained for several decades, has been broken as a result of globalization of economy on the one hand and on the other hand of the limits of a system

structured on the need for continued growth in production, profits and consumption.”<sup>260</sup>

How must democracy be transformed so that it not only increases the potential for citizen self-realization but also so that we might salvage what is left of our planet? The degrowth literature has some interesting things to say on the matter. It’s important to note that prior to our current moment, democratic theorists rarely had to contend with imminent planet death. As Canadian scholar Richard Swift claims “The environmental dimension is something relatively new for democratic thinkers to cope with. Classical democratic theory just assumed a bountiful nature where endless free goods were there for human enjoyment.”<sup>261</sup> It’s also important to note that the development of democratic regimes and the building of democratic consensus is deeply intertwined with the history of growth, with the market, and with the encouragement of consumption.<sup>262</sup> Deriu writes, “The same imaginary that forms the basis of democratic consensus is historically based on the promise of growth. Social consensus in post second world war liberal democratic societies was founded on the centrality of productive work, an ethic of sacrifice and the promise of “collective upward mobility.”<sup>263</sup>

Liberal democracies had been able to harmonize social relations and stymy class antagonisms by pursuing ceaseless growth. In other words, these countries have

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<sup>260</sup> Deriu, Marco. “Democracies with a Future: Degrowth and the Democratic Tradition.” *Futures : the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 44, no. 6 (2012): 553–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016>, 556

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, 554

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*



depended on economic growth for the pacification of class conflict through use of the welfare state, which mitigated the most harmful impacts of the free market in the Post-Fordist era. Kallis et al note:

“Growth has been instrumental for securing employment, tax revenue, and investments in large-scale infrastructures. In addition, it has kept alive the promise of social mobility and increasing wellbeing. During a relatively short historic period, the alliance between liberal welfare democracies and the capitalistic growth logic guaranteed some social redistribution of economic surplus and a promise of improved wellbeing.”<sup>264</sup>

To summarize: Modern democracies have relied on continual expansion for their “dynamic stabilization and structural reproduction,”<sup>265</sup> but post economic crises of the 1970s, the neoliberal shift has dulled and rounded the welfare state’s ability to protect citizens from the deleterious impacts of the market and to stem class antagonisms. The neoliberal paradigm placed emphasis instead on “globalization, deregulation of financial flows, and new modes of governing.”<sup>266</sup> According to Brown, “the neoliberal program has dismantled the separation between the economic and the political by extending economic and entrepreneurial logics of competition to all dimensions of social and public life, including the state.”<sup>267</sup> The logic replaces a so-called homo politicus with a new “entrepreneurial man,”<sup>268</sup> and disappears the spaces in which discourses about social

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<sup>264</sup> Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer. "Research on degrowth." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018): 291-316, 306

<sup>265</sup> Ibid

<sup>266</sup> Ibid

<sup>267</sup> Ibid

<sup>268</sup> Ibid

justice or the good life once took place. Now, critics argue, “neoliberal rationality neutralizes normative foundations of liberal democracy, leading to a path of dedemocratization, where subjects are driven to act as personal enterprises, responsible for their own investments and failures.”<sup>269</sup> Streeck argues that the growth paradigm threatens the stability and legitimacy of liberal democracy, and claims that “Democracy ceased to be functional for economic growth and in fact became a threat to the performance of the new growth model.”<sup>270</sup>

In other words, neoliberal logic has undermined democracy and transformed our understanding of ourselves, as social institutions are clearly capable of doing. Some degrowth literature aims to capitalize on this truth, arguing for a regeneration of democracy via the re-education of citizens in the tradition of Rousseau, Mill, and Dewey. Deriu writes, “the task of a democratic regime is not only that of counting heads, but also of shaping citizens according to a common social ethos. In this direction, the instruments, spaces and conditions for the emergence of a new democratic ethos inspired by the principles of degrowth and sustainability must be considered.”<sup>271</sup> Proponents of degrowth think of democracy as one, large pedagogic institution wherein the continuous self-education of individuals must take place towards a “common social ethos.”<sup>272</sup> Current

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid

<sup>270</sup> Streeck, Wolfgang. *How will capitalism end?: Essays on a failing system*. Verso Books, 2016.

<sup>271</sup> Deriu, Marco. “Democracies with a Future: Degrowth and the Democratic Tradition.” *Futures : the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 44, no. 6 (2012): 553–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016>, 555

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, 557

education systems instead train homo economicus, turning individuals into “technical-scientific managerial subjects”<sup>273</sup> who aim to immediately turn their newly acquired, gatekept knowledge into economic profit. Instead, systems should focus on education in ecological and social limits, geared towards educating a “global citizen.”<sup>274</sup>

One criticism of this approach is that the reliance on “experts” for information about environmental crisis is contra the aim of direct democracy wherein everyone, regardless of expertise, is responsible for creating and executing laws. Critics identify a so-called “technical bias” present in the degrowth literature that somewhat resembles the technocratic management of our current governments. After all, if we depend on the experts to give us our truths about the environment, shouldn’t we then also turn to them for solutions? Why not choose technocratic or non-democratic modes of governance if they are best suited to deal with emergency, which we are currently experiencing. Besides the truth that autonomy is a necessary condition of human flourishing, another response to this critique is a call for “cognitive democracy,” or a democratization of scientific knowledge. Deriu writes:

the task of a democratic regime is not only that of counting heads, but also of shaping citizens according to a common social ethos. In this direction, the instruments, spaces and conditions for the emergence of a new democratic ethos inspired by the principles of degrowth and sustainability must be considered.”<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid

<sup>274</sup> Ibid

<sup>275</sup> Ibid

Recall my discussion of the digital commons in my previous chapter. Scientific knowledge is at present largely inaccessible to the average citizen. The sharing of scientific innovation via the digital commons is one way to democratize this knowledge. The objective is the development of democratic and environmental consciousness, which can be “pursued and put into action more successfully if, alongside institutional initiatives, bottom-up (self-)training and educational initiatives also multiply.”<sup>276</sup>

The degrowth literature also stresses a reconsideration of what is meant by “demos,” when discussing a regeneration of democracy. Shiva, in her remarks on “Earth Democracy,” for instance, draws on the Indian concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbkam*, which means “the whole world is one single family,” an “earth family.”<sup>277</sup> This earth family refers to all “past, present, and future generations and different forms of life, both human and non-human.”<sup>278</sup> The interesting question posed by earth democracy is, essentially, who has ownership of democratic rights? Or who has democratic duties? Of Shiva’s contributions, Deriu writes:

“Belonging to a common “earth family” brings not only rights and opportunities to present generations, but also responsibilities and duties towards future generations and other living species. In this way, even if animals or future generations have no voice, a principle of relational nature and the nurturing of all living beings that draw sustenance from our planet in a common belonging to the “earth family” is affirmed.”<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid

<sup>277</sup> Shiva, Vandana. *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability and peace*. Zed Books, 2005, 7

<sup>278</sup> Ibid

<sup>279</sup> Deriu, Marco. “Democracies with a Future: Degrowth and the Democratic Tradition.” *Futures : the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 44, no. 6 (2012): 553–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016>, 557

Echoing these questions and assertions is literature on so-called Intergenerational Democracy, which can be defined as “a method of social engagement and capacity building, requiring the inclusion of citizens representing all age groups within a specific community. It aims to assist the reconstruction of generational and environmental relationships by engaging whole communities, from children to the elderly, in planning and managing their futures.”<sup>280</sup> In other words, the aim is to allow for future autonomy and in turn, human flourishing.

It might seem difficult to determine what future generations will desire, but it certainly is not impossible. It requires, of course, that we understand future generations as part of our community, which De-Shalit calls “transgenerational.”<sup>281</sup> This too isn’t that difficult and it is certainly not new, as many thinkers and cultures throughout history have emphasized the “social, political, moral, and epistemological connections that exist between generations,”<sup>282</sup> even if the liberal individualist tradition aims to remove man from his temporal context. Many cultures stress the necessity of taking seriously one’s own place in time and the debts we owe to the past for all sorts of innovations- scientific, artistic, natural, and political. If we can access our connections to the past and recognize the humanity in those that came before us, then we are compelled to “to consider our place among future others.”<sup>283</sup> As McKenzie succinctly puts it, “We are compelled to do

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 557

<sup>281</sup> Ibid

<sup>282</sup> Ibid

so because time is irrelevant to the moral status of individuals.”<sup>284</sup> Mackenzie, when discussing intergenerational “justice,” discusses the concept of ‘humility,’ which modern psychology defines as “making accurate assessments of the self in relation to others, or in relation to the larger world or universe.”<sup>285</sup> This humility means that we recognize ourselves as part of a broader universe of valuable people and things. It is not difficult to discuss, then, a sort of intergenerational humility. This approach requires us of course to accept an essentialist outlook on humans—what it means to be human, what humans need, what it means to be part of a broad “humanity,” which I have already discussed in Chapter 1 and throughout my discussion on human flourishing. Contextualizing ourselves temporally leads us to intergenerational humility, which involves “recognizing that we are part of a small number of generations in a long succession of others, each of which must be accorded some value if we are to claim any value for ourselves.”<sup>286</sup> The concept of humility evokes the concept of “self restraint,” practiced by the indigenous people of the America’s. The Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy had a philosophy called the Seventh Generation which “mandates that tribal decision-makers consider the effects of their actions and decisions for descendants seven generations into the future.”

At this point, skeptics might be wondering how broadening democracy to include future generations is a degrowth of democracy at all. Isn’t it, in fact, displacing the

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<sup>283</sup> MacKenzie, Michael K. "Ourselves in Time: Intergenerational Humility, Democracy, and Future Others," 2

<sup>284</sup> Ibid

<sup>285</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>286</sup> Ibid

explicit preferences of those Actually Participating with those who are potentially as of yet unconceived? It's a fair speculation. But in fact, without future-facing imperatives, we risk eliminating democracy for future others. A degraded environment that is unsuitable for living is also unsuitable for democratic participation, and in turn, unsuitable for the project of human flourishing, which requires control over our political and material conditions. When we lack humility and self-restraint, we elevate ourselves and the desires of our current generation in our understanding of democracy, and we in turn deny democratic opportunities to the future. Ultimately, we deny democracy itself. This is true too of attempts to educate individuals towards collectivity, towards global citizenship with sustainability at its core. When we make claims about global citizenship, aren't we expanding democracy beyond the village or commune or city or state or even nation? The answer, in fact, is no. A proper education in global citizenship strongly implies that preservation of the earth dictates that we shrink all of our collective undertakings, otherwise, there will be no globe to speak of.

One might wonder if this is a call for an intergenerational, international tyranny of sorts. But I ask, simply: have the quasi-democratic decisions of liberal, present-obsessed democracies no tyrannical implications for future generations? One could fill volumes with past decisions that have tied the hands of all who came after the decision, even where constitutional amendment is permitted. When a government say, refuses to regulate industries that do staggering and measurable harm to the environment in favor of short term, immediate profits and in order to appease various shareholders, and that inaction leads to irreversible ecological harm, do those who inherit the damaged planet

not live under a tyranny of the past? When a nation amasses debt in service of immediate goals, and that debt becomes an existential threat to its survival in a highly financialized world, do future generations not pay the cost? If we are serious about human flourishing, then we must be serious about democracy, and this includes taking seriously our temporal context, otherwise we risk leaving very little room for self-realization in the future.

Degrowth literature also stresses the need for “recognitional and procedural justice” which involves the “processes and scales of decision-making,” echoing participatory democratic theorists.<sup>287</sup> For governance to be truly transformative, we must address inclusivity in decision-making with an eye towards equity. The question of plurality in what’s been termed “transformative biodiversity governance” is an interesting one.<sup>288</sup> Scholars in this tradition posit that many of the attempts at biodiversity governance have been based on approaches of deliberation and compromise which treat biodiversity as “one of many interests,” or they utilize optimization approaches that “apply economic logic to decide whether addressing biodiversity loss “is worth it”.”<sup>289</sup> Historically, even folks interested in ecological sustainability and biodiversity have stressed the importance of a plurality of values and worldviews. Does this mean that those actors who are responsible for large-scale ecological destruction should have an

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<sup>287</sup> Deriu, Marco. “Democracies with a Future: Degrowth and the Democratic Tradition.” *Futures : the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 44, no. 6 (2012): 553–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016>, p. 557

<sup>288</sup> Kok, M., Elsa Tsioumani, C. O. Bliss, Marco Immovilli, K. Keune, Elisa Morgera, Simon R. Rüegg et al. "Enabling Transformative Biodiversity Governance in the Post-2020 Era." (2022).

<sup>289</sup> Ibid



equal seat at the table, their values considered with similar reverence? Recent scholars on the issue say, “no.” Instead, they argue that transformative biodiversity governance must prioritize biodiversity concerns, and specifically those of indigenous peoples and local communities. In this sense, inclusivity doesn’t mean all-affected, but is instead used as a strategic move towards transformative governance. In other words, the participatory process necessary for sustaining biodiversity must include and “empower those whose interests are currently not being met and represent values embodying transformative change for sustainability.”<sup>290</sup> It’s a call for the expansion of genuine autonomy.

Plurality in this sense refers to the inclusion of voices of indigenous and local communities who have historically been on the subjugated end of relationships of domination. The participatory process must be designed in such a way as to transform the existing power dynamics inherent in neoliberal global governance, unlike current compromise approaches which allow for neutrality among values and risk reproducing relationships of domination between people, the earth, and its non-human inhabitants. In fact, current approaches risk the entire project of human flourishing.

These scholars advocate for bottom-up approaches that extend so-called procedural and substantive rights to entities that we have historically considered unworthy of rights. Alongside future generations, many degrowth scholars speak of the ‘rights of nature.’<sup>291</sup> We can view the rights of nature, which include the rights of animals, through the same lens with which we view intergenerational democracy. That is,

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid, 345

<sup>291</sup> Ibid, 346

we can apply the concepts of humility and self-restraint when discussing the democratic rights of nature. Because non-humans lack representation in parliamentary systems, their interests are all but ignored. Anthropocentric societies value biodiversity and ecological wellness only in economic terms, treating the prioritization of a healthy planet as only an option among many. Degrowth scholars argue for an environmental philosophy that emphasizes the value of non-human species and biological diversity instead. It is a call, in essence, for eco-representation at all levels of governance. They term this ‘ecodemocracy,’ which is “a legal and political system in which nonhumans and their habitats are represented and nonhuman beings’ right to survive and flourish can be accounted for in human society’s decision-making processes.”<sup>292</sup> Norton’s “convergence theory” tells us that that a healthy environment is beneficial to human welfare. This means that preserving the natural world can be a democratic interest, and, Norton argues, “, anthropocentric and nonhuman centered policies are assumed to converge in the long run,” through a “twin process of democracy and the advancement of ‘postmaterial values’.”<sup>293</sup> In other words, we need a reeducation of citizens in values centered on well-being instead of well-having.

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<sup>292</sup> Kopnina, Helen, Reingard Spannring, Shé Mackenzie Hawke, Colin D. Robertson, Alessio Thomasberger, Michelle Maloney, Marco Morini et al. "Ecodemocracy in practice: Exploration of debates on limits and possibilities of addressing environmental challenges within democratic systems." *Visions for sustainability* 2021, no. 15 (2021): 9-23.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid, 16

One way to do this is to “reserve places for nonhuman representatives, based on existing electorates, and as mandated requirements or quotas.”<sup>294</sup> Because, of course, nonhumans cannot deliberate or participate in a traditional sense, Lundmark and Dobson both argue for proxy representation, wherein a “random sample of from the ‘ordinary’ electorate act on behalf of non-humans.”<sup>295</sup> It may be better, in fact, to instead have Indigenous and local populations take on this representative role, as it elevates communities who have historical been shut out of the participatory process and it is exactly these communities who have been the most strident stewards of the earth. Other steps, including “constitutional entrenchment” of the so-called ‘precautionary principle’ have already been taken. The precautionary principle tries to “foresee, forewarn, and forestall harm in the form of care ethics in public policy which has relevance in scientific disputes about certainty.”<sup>296</sup> In other words, where scientific knowledge of the impact of an action is unknown or in dispute, this principle must be invoked. For instance, because there is a growing body of evidence that consumption of wildlife caused COVID-19, a few governments have used the precautionary principle to determine policy on wildlife trade. Other ways to include non-human interest in the decision-making process include “political engagement emanating from civil group activities,” like The Council of All

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<sup>294</sup> Kopnina, Helen, Reingard Spannring, Shé Mackenzie Hawke, Colin D. Robertson, Alessio Thomasberger, Michelle Maloney, Marco Morini et al. "Ecodemocracy in practice: Exploration of debates on limits and possibilities of addressing environmental challenges within democratic systems." *Visions for sustainability* 2021, no. 15 (2021): 9-23, 12

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, 11

<sup>296</sup> Ibid, 14

Beings, whose workshops aim to help people “better understand both their place in the ecosphere as humans and how they should behave.”<sup>297</sup> These workshops involve “a communal ritual in which participants speak on behalf of another being or entity (for example, a wolf or a river). After each has spoken about their species' concerns, participants talk as humans about their responsibilities to remove the threats or correct the injustices identified.”<sup>298</sup> I imagine at this point, readers are asking how it is possible, besides these modest and rare attempts, to reconceptualize and then practically transform the relationship between democracy and nature and thus make human flourishing a real possibility. Even within the degrowth tradition, there are differing views about how best to achieve a degrowth world. Below, I explore some possible paths to a degrowth world.

### Reform, Revolution, and Autonomy

Within the degrowth tradition there are disputes over paths to emancipation via degrowth. Some urge for a radical transformation of all of life, while others believe that a reformist approach is the only realistic way to get us to what Latouche calls a “concrete utopia.”<sup>299</sup> For his part, Latouche, suggests that “the lesser evil,” is what a society is likely to achieve when in search of “the good.”<sup>300</sup> For Latouche, representative democracy is part of the western tradition, and it “should not be abolished but improved

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid

<sup>298</sup> Ibid

<sup>299</sup> Asara, Viviana, Emanuele Profumi, and Giorgos Kallis. "Degrowth, democracy and autonomy." *Environmental Values* 22, no. 2 (2013): 217-239, 221

<sup>300</sup> Ibid, 223

with popular referendums, recallable officers, civil society initiatives and direct participation in some cases.”<sup>301</sup> He questions the plausibility of the Rousseauian “total citizen,” arguing that it’s likely that people don’t want to participate in politics all the time, and that it would in fact be better for them to have “spare time for leisure, conviviality, love and idleness.”<sup>302</sup> Instead of an overthrow, we can improve representative democracy through “injections of localization and participatory democracy.”<sup>303</sup> Relocalization refers to bioregions, in Latouche’s vision, which allow for more participation in the decision-making process. For Latouche, before we can transform existing relations, we must first transform the “social imaginary” through a transformation of the self which involves a self-limitation of needs and which creates a society of “frugal abundance.”<sup>304</sup> The social imaginary must move from economism, growth, consumerism, and towards “re-embedding the economy within the social and ecological realms.”<sup>305</sup> The degrowth transition requires a “decolonization” of the social imaginary, a process which can be achieved through his 8 Rs: re-evaluation, reconceptualization, restructuring, re-localizing, redistributing, reducing, reusing, and recycling. Latouche also argues for the “parallel development of alternative (non)economic spaces here and now, in the form of production-consumption

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid

<sup>302</sup> Ibid, 221

<sup>303</sup> Ibid, 222

<sup>304</sup> Ibid, 221

<sup>305</sup> Ibid

cooperatives, subsistence-oriented food gardens, collectives, self-organized systems of housing, education and health, etc., that can gradually grow and occupy a progressively larger part of society.”<sup>306</sup>

Fotopolous, another noted “critical degrowth scholar,” takes issue with Latouche’s understanding of and prescription for the problem. He understands western democracies to be facing:

“an interdependent economic, ecological, social and cultural crisis, the roots of which are the uneven concentration of power, itself consequence of the non-democratic organization of society, institutionalized in the market system and representative democracy.”<sup>307</sup>

Because representative democracy and the market system are inextricably linked, Fotopoulos argues that liberal democracies have allowed the bourgeois to control the nation-state, and degrowth will require the end of liberal, representative democracy. Fotopoulos writes of Inclusive Democracy (ID), which aims to eradicate any uneven accumulation of political or economic power. By ‘inclusive’, Fotopoulos is referring to four different forms of democracy, which include political, economic, social and ecological.<sup>308</sup> In his estimation, political democracy will necessitate a “confederation of demoi, that is communities run on the basis of direct political democracy,” and which may geographically include a town and the villages around it.<sup>309</sup> Economic democracy

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid, 222

<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 219

<sup>308</sup> Ibid

<sup>309</sup> Ibid, 220

requires that the means of production and distribution be directly controlled by the demoi, and is necessary so that “each citizen has the same resources and capacities to participate in the making of decisions.”<sup>310</sup> He argues in favor of decentralization and economic self-reliance and sees confederalism as the best way to assure ‘horizontally independent’ demoi. Recall Gandhi’s self-reliant village. The social realm will require an eradication of hierarchical relationships found in households and workplaces, similar to Pateman’s argument about the democratization of the workplace and the democratic potential of a universal basic income in her feminist discussion of the undemocratic nature of marriage.<sup>311</sup> All of these institutional changes, Fotopoulos argues, will also transform the way humans understand themselves in relation to nature. Here we see echoes of the educative potential of political participation found in the works of many of the thinkers we have already discussed, including Rousseau and Mill and Pateman. The ID transition can get its start through the contestation of local elections.

Fotopoulos ultimately aims for a “universal replacement” of representative democracy and the undemocratic market system with “a stateless and marketless confederation of demoi on the basis of direct participation of all citizens.”<sup>312</sup> Latouche, on the other hand, believes in a ‘democracy of cultures,’ which calls for ‘social trade’ of

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid

<sup>311</sup> Pateman, Carole. "Democratizing citizenship: some advantages of a basic income." *Politics & society* 32, no. 1 (2004): 89-105.

<sup>312</sup> Asara, Viviana, Emanuele Profumi, and Giorgos Kallis. "Degrowth, democracy and autonomy." *Environmental Values* 22, no. 2 (2013): 217-239.224

diverse cultures instead of a “unified humanity.”<sup>313</sup> Fotopoulos, and I, take issue with this sort of relativism, which is incoherent at best—which I have argued in chapter 1—and inadequate to deal with our interdependent crises. The market system is, after all, a universalist project, aimed at stomping out any alternatives, as is evidenced by the ever-increasing ineffectualness of the nation-state in a globalized economy. Pragmatic reforms to representative democracy which allow for cultural “exits,” are unsatisfactory to deal with the universalist and interwoven projects of global capitalism and representative democracy. These projects, practically speaking, all but eliminate autonomy.

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid



## Conclusion

Autonomy is not simply a precondition of social relations. Autonomy must be maintained throughout social relations. It requires that institutions do not emerge and proliferate that eradicate autonomy. This is thought to be the reason that degrowth is so important: If democracy is localized, folks are able to have real influence over the manageable institutions that govern them. But how do we ensure that democracy will in fact produce only those institutions that promote autonomy, that these institutions will protect the health of the planet or the human flourishing of future generations? The standard liberal understanding of autonomy focuses largely on individual freedom from external coercion and is thought to be expressed through the regime of liberal democracy. Once we have secured that, we are supposedly autonomous. This means that no authority—no government, no God, no planet—can be appealed to in deliberation of life choices or institutions. In other words, any limits to liberal democracy understood as the expression of individual autonomy must be self-limitations. As Deriu notes, “the paradox of democratic freedom is that of a regime that has no limits outside of itself....”<sup>314</sup> In this sense, autonomy is not seen as a necessary precondition for human flourishing, for the good life, but as an end in itself, as the only legitimate aim of the public sphere.

As we’ve seen, this conception has served to produce institutions that are democratic largely in name only, robbing regular citizens of genuine influence over their governments. The ‘free’ market appears to also be free in name only, as undemocratic

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<sup>314</sup> Deriu, Marco. “Democracies with a Future: Degrowth and the Democratic Tradition.” *Futures : the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies* 44, 556

governing institutions allow those with wealth to dictate matters of labor, environmental, and tax regulation. The growth imperative doesn't allow for autonomy over one's life choices, as the real options in front of an individual are essentially that they live in destitution or engage in wage labor that "degrades the mind" or deadens the human spirit, precluding the development of one's rational, creative, and social capabilities.

Beyond this, the growth imperative, informed and reproduced by liberal autonomy, has the social imaginary held hostage. Our understandings of ourselves are directly linked to our social context. The growth imperative is internalized by institutions and individuals alike, insisting that well-being can be achieved if enough wealth is produced and there are increased opportunities for consumption, which serve to 'harmonize' social relations and protect individual liberal autonomy. Sure, there might be some unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities for consumption, or liberal well-being, but so long as everyone's tides are rising, who cares if some tides are rising faster or higher than others? But what happens when an external limit actually emerges, when resources are dwindling and the planet on which you live is dying? What happens when jobs are scarce, when financial crises decimate middle class wealth, when globalization creates a devastating health pandemic that kills millions of people worldwide? Will the liberal response then be "who cares if some boats are sinking faster than others when everyone's boat is sinking?" What does this say about liberal autonomy?

The simple answer is that liberal autonomy produces institutions of domination that make impossible the very thing it aims to protect, individual freedom. What we need is a reimagining of society, a new system of democratic participation that is robustly able to

resist co-option by all tyrannical forces, including those of liberal growth. How can we salvage the social imaginary in such a way that we can actually create this new system of democratic rule? The answer is that we must change our self-perception. It's not to make an appeal to some external limit like the planet or God, but to commit to a new understanding of our own nature. The project of genuine self-rule, of democracy, requires the maintenance of autonomy, and that maintenance requires self-limits, as we have seen.

What we need is an understanding of ourselves as belonging to a greater humanity that shares some essential characteristics of potential or capability for reason, for creativity, for sociability. If we want to protect freedom or democracy or ultimately, autonomy, for future generations to whom we are tied and in whom we recognize our essential humanity, our self-perception must also take on ecological dimension. In other words, our essential understandings of ourselves must recognize that our flourishing is inextricably linked to the flourishing of all of nature. So long as we are driven by the growth imperative, nature cannot flourish and neither can we. As Deriu compellingly writes:

“The task is....to rethink democracy as something that does not and cannot exist in the abstract and that can only be thought in space and time. In other words, it is to incorporate in the self-perception of democracy the sense of our nature, in a political but also in a social and ecological dimension. Democracy lives, regenerates and is perpetuated only through the recognition and the care of its links with the environment and the past and future generations.”<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid

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