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SWITCHING OFF THE AUTOPILOT

An evolutionary toolbox

for the Great Transition

Acknowledgements

The Smart CSOs Lab is a think tank and social innovation lab working with civil society leaders, researchers and funders aiming to develop and put into practice strategies that embrace the cultural and systemic root causes lying behind the social and environmental crises of our times. More information at smart-csos.org.

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Introduction

This book is about the ecological crisis that threatens to collapse our entire civilisation. It is about the crisis of liberal democracy unfolding before our eyes. And it is about a new approach that aims to tackle both crises.

Over the last few years, progressive activism has increasingly looked at the world through the lenses of identity, power and privilege. It has successfully placed its *oppression story* at the heart of the mainstream media and politics. But at the same time it has alienated its more moderate allies and has become more homogeneous and dogmatic in its thinking.

In this book I argue that this is a huge mistake. It is a divisive approach that contributes to further political polarisation and provides fertile ground for authoritarian and nationalist politics. The recent elections to the European Parliament have provided fresh evidence that our societies are drifting further apart. On the one side stands the urban, cosmopolitan, liberal and ecologically minded elite that has helped the German Green party to its biggest electoral success ever, and on the other side are the more rural, more traditionalist working classes who have helped Salvini, Le Pen, Farage, Orban etc. to electoral victories in their respective countries.

If this trend continues, it might set us back many years from tackling climate change, years we don't have. It might also reverse some of the enormous social progress made in recent years instead of contributing to a fairer world. As encouraging as the recent movements Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion are, they exist within the progressive bubble. The resentments against green politics on the other side of the political spectrum have reached unprecedented levels.

The situation is serious. The transition to a sustainable society cannot happen inside the progressive ideological bubble. Instead we need to break out of the current echo chambers and welcome a much broader set of ideas of good faith into our discussions. We should reduce our moral certainty and learn to live with, rather than fight, people who hold values different to our own. We might even learn something from them.

A much better way of tackling our societal problems and existential risks is to take an evolutionary perspective. Evolutionary science teaches us how we got to where we are now, and how understanding our gene-culture co-evolutionary heritage will make it much easier to switch off our destructive deep-seated tendency for tribalism and design a good society. We have to shift all our attention to tackling the hard problem of evolution: figuring out how to adapt to the new conditions on Earth much faster than humanity has ever done or has had to do.

This book is written for civil society leaders, grantmakers and other change agents who are keen to learn about strategies, solutions and systems that are grounded in human evolution, and thus are more likely to succeed and are better suited to creating wellbeing for all. It is for anyone who is open to engaging with challenging new ideas and committed to building or advocating alternative models of society and economy.

The book has four parts:

Part I analyses the causes of the crisis of liberal democracy and explores the origins and unintended effects of a significant swath of current social justice activism.

Part II explores the core findings from human gene-culture co-evolution and what this explains about how we organise our

societies. It contains an evolutionary toolkit that aims to help make evolution work for the Great Transition.

Part III provides a glimpse of an emerging puzzle composed of ideas and solutions in our democratic and economic systems that might be part of an intentional cultural evolution towards a greater human wellbeing that is in harmony with nature.

Part IV proposes a number of action areas and strategies that civil society organisations, activist networks and grantmaking organisations should pursue. It is based on the evolutionary insights and other findings in this book.
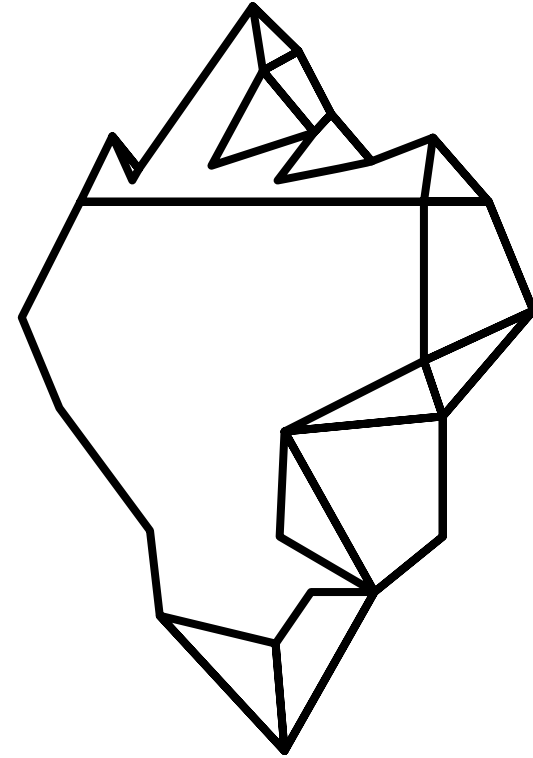
**Part 1
Analysis**

1

THE URGENT CASE FOR THE GREAT TRANSITION

In 2011 I co-authored and published a paper called 'Effective change strategies for the Great Transition'[1], in which we claimed that NGOs were too often focused on treating problems like climate change, biodiversity or poverty as single issues instead of seeing them as complex, interconnected issues. As a result they were mostly addressing these issues at the symptoms level, for example, renewable energy and electric cars as a solution for reducing CO_2 emissions. But more cars can't be the solution because they would require more roads and therefore more land, their production is resource intensive and the batteries produce toxic waste. This is but one example to show that the global sustainability crisis cannot be adequately addressed by focusing on single issues and symptoms. There will soon be nine billion of us, all aiming to reach a high living standard, sharing a planet that is approaching its planetary boundaries at many different levels (climate, biodiversity, land use, toxics, fresh water etc.): continuing to operate under the current consumerist growth model is a highly risky pathway. In the paper we argued that humanity needs to embark on a total redesign of our economy, political system and society, a Great Transition[2] that is necessary for humanity to have a good future on this planet.

Many people agreed with our analysis and were keen to learn how to put such a vision into practice. So we created the Smart CSOs Lab, a think tank and social innovation lab where civil society leaders, researchers and funders could learn to use tools and approaches to put into practice strategies that embrace the cultural and systemic root causes that underlie the social and environmental crises of our times. We knew that changing large organisations would be a very difficult task, so we didn't expect the big NGOs to change in any significant way, but we did hope that somewhere new clusters of systemic activism would emerge.

Eight years later, after countless workshops, conferences, meetings and conversations, many things have changed. Of the big global NGOs, Greenpeace seems to have become the most explicit about the need to address ecological crises, as seen in the more systemic approaches in the new global strategy they implemented in 2017. They realised that, instead of making small contributions that add up to a greater transformation, many of their campaigns were often ineffective technical fixes. Greenpeace's recent campaign about eating less meat is one example of the more creative and systemic campaigning the organisation is experimenting with.[3] Another example is CIDSE, a Brussels-based alliance of Catholic development organisations that has also adopted a new, more systemic strategy in collaboration with its members. As a result, the member organisations now search for new approaches to development and a global economy that respect the ecological boundaries of our planet.

But the bigger visible shift in the last few years has come from new networks and organisations that have emerged with the purpose of exploring, discussing, disseminating and lobbying for ideas, solutions and strategies for a new sustainable economic model. Among them are the New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) in the UK, the Next System Project in the U.S., the campaigning network The Rules, the P2P Foundation, the funders network Edge Funders as well as the degrowth activist network that grew out of the series of European research conferences on degrowth. Common to all these initiatives is the conviction that the neoliberal economic model stands in contradiction to an ecologically sustainable, more equal society and that the solutions are unlikely to be found within the current political spectrum / party system – so it's not a left versus right debate. Alternatives, if any, are only being developed in smaller experiments and niches, not on a bigger, for example, national, scale.

Differences between these networks are mainly of emphasis. For example, the P2P Foundation is concerned with examples and ideas for commons-based self-organised ways of production and consumption, mainly in the digital sphere, whereas the degrowth network is especially interested in moving towards an ecological model beyond the growth paradigm.

Most of what these alternative civil society networks are promoting is in line with the ideas that we at the Smart CSOs Lab have been laying out since 2011. We had the impression that the spheres of the commons, degrowth and the solidarity economy were the niches that, according to the framework we were working with, were the seeds of the new system at the niche level.[4] The activist networks in and around the organisations mentioned above were the beginning of a system change movement. While I don't know of any reliable numbers, the sensation is that over the last eight years the number of people involved in these networks of activists, pioneers and change agents has grown significantly (and not just in Europe). Most of these discussions are still happening outside the mainstream media and institutions, but there are signs that this might change. The media attention on the recent Extinction Rebellion movement calling for systems change might be the most prominent example.[5] The reaction to a letter calling for an end to growth dependency, signed by more than 200 scientists and sent to EU institutions in September 2018, is another example.[6] The letter was received by many mainstream media outlets across Europe with a level of respect that was uncommon until then.

The above examples show that there is a segment in civil society that has a good understanding of the systemic challenges we're facing and is putting energy and creativity into systemic alternatives and campaigns. The big question that remains is if the sum of all these

activities by system change activists and pioneers is the best we can do to set us on a path towards a sustainable future or if, on the contrary, there are important blind spots in our approaches and ultimately better ways and strategies.

As the reader may have guessed, I have come to believe that there are important arguments in favour of reconsidering current approaches to systemic change. I have serious doubts that current strategies and visions have the potential to outcompete the current system. In the following chapters, I will explain why I have come to this conclusion and explore alternative ideas that I propose to consider.

The future is uncertain and the climate change models are not exact predictions, but from everything we know at this moment in time, the risk is real that climate change, and the serious disruptions to ecosystems, society and economies it might entail, could bring about the end of our civilisation if we don't act decisively in the next few years. Extreme weather patterns in 2018 show that climate change is hitting closer to home. For example, the fact that the North Atlantic jet stream seems to be getting weaker has contributed to the long drought and heat in Northern Europe and North America during 2018, including the many severe wild fires.[7] Leading earth systems scientists have recently warned that "self-reinforcing feedbacks could push the Earth System toward a planetary threshold that, if crossed, could prevent stabilization of the climate at intermediate temperature rises and cause continued warming on a 'Hothouse Earth' pathway even as human emissions are reduced".[8] The ecological crisis is far from limited to the climate crisis. For example, the overfishing and pollution of the oceans as well as the accelerated loss of biodiversity might all have dangerous consequences for human life on this planet. In May 2019,

It is a matter of survival. We need to combine the best existing knowledge to ensure that civil society pursues strategies and solutions based on our very best guesses.

the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) warned: "The rate of species extinctions is accelerating, with grave impacts on people around the world now likely."[9]

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ARE WE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PLANETARY COLLAPSE?

A significant number of those activists motivated by visions of a deep cultural and economic transformation to tackle systemic ecological and social crises believe that we're already in the middle of a planetary collapse, or at least that total system collapse is imminent and by now unavoidable. People who hold these beliefs are sometimes called collapsitarians.

Collapsitarianism is rooted in the same scientific data on the continuing degradation of our ecosystems that are widely known and accepted. What distinguishes collapsitarians is a greater pessimism about the chances of avoiding the total collapse of our civilisation. One of their leading proponents, James Lovelock, believes that billions *will* die.[10] The change strategist Joe Brewer considers the political polarisation in recent years as well as the ecological degradation and severe weather patterns to be signs that the collapse started many years ago and cannot be stopped.[11] The academic and activist Jem Bendell is among those who have interpreted the currently available data to mean that we are on the path to "inevitable near-term social collapse".[12] However, others maintain that this interpretation is just one of many, even among climate change scientists.[13]

It is impossible to say to what degree the collapse myth is based on a superior understanding of the situation we're in, compared to the rationale among those of us who hold on to a certain hope that keeps us (and I include myself here) working towards a less apocalyptic scenario. My guess is that the difference is instead due to an emotional state of despair that people rationalise a posteriori.

Collapsitarians believe that all global or national political, economic and technological structures will entirely collapse in the none too distant future. Their focus is on building resilient, regenerative, self-sufficient systems on a small scale.

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If collapse is the scenario that we presume unavoidable, how likely is it that it would lead to a peaceful transition instead of ending in totalitarian systems, nuclear war or catastrophe, mass famine etc.?

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I don't think it is harmful to embark on all these experiments with living sustainably on a local scale. On the contrary, if these projects result in prototypes for achieving human wellbeing with a low footprint or even better, regenerative systems, we can all learn from these types of experiments.

The problem lies with the narrative. Alex Evans argues in his book *The Myth Gap* that the gloomy prognoses might be accurate.

> "But if that does prove to be the case, it might well be in large part the result of collapse myths: because enough people believed them, we concluded that there was nothing we could do in the face of climate change, and so did nothing. Myths are powerful creatures [...]. They create our reality as much as they describe it. [...] If the myths we reach for in conditions of stress and crisis are ones about overshoot and collapse, and we all start to act accordingly – competing for resources rather than cooperating, fragmenting rather than coming together – then that will itself determine where we're headed."[14]

If collapse is the scenario that we presume unavoidable, how likely is it that it would lead to a peaceful transition instead of ending in totalitarian systems, nuclear war or catastrophe, mass famine etc.?

I for one have not resigned myself to that conclusion. I don't perceive that the system is collapsing right now. I see that our democracy and possibly freedom is at risk, and I fear that creating a sustainable society will be even more difficult if nationalist authoritarian and illiberal forces one day dominate Western politics. (We will discuss this in depth in the next chapter). I also see that we might be approaching

dangerous ecological tipping points that might lead to uncontrollable, runaway climate change and, in fact, civilisation collapse.

But the success of the Great Transition will depend on enough people having hope and the energy to help humanity transition to a regenerative way of living on this planet without going through a total system collapse where billions of people suffer and die. And it will depend on making the right choices in developing systems that allow for over eight billion people to live together peacefully and sustainably on this planet. I just can't imagine that local self-sufficiency projects based on low-tech solutions will be enough to achieve this. I think that in addition to this we will need intelligent governance systems at all levels as well as an evolved global economic system based on the internet and other high-tech solutions.

In this book we will work towards a scenario for a peaceful transition that would avoid total system collapse.

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WHY IS AUTHORITARIAN NATIONALISM ON THE RISE?

One core question we need to assess is whether current activist approaches are adequately addressing the political situation that is currently unfolding. In the last few years the world has changed dramatically. Liberal democracy is now in crisis across the globe, and authoritarians and nationalists are on the winning track. We can't discuss strategies about the Great Transition without rooting these conversations deeply in the current political context.

During the economic and financial crisis in Greece in 2015, and before the Brexit vote and Trump's election in 2016, many activist voices and lefty intellectuals argued that a breakdown of the EU or a system shake-up via a Trump presidency would be a welcome opportunity to build something better in its place.[15] Now that many of these 'welcome outcomes' have become a reality, and the alternative to liberal democracy increasingly gaining strength currently looks more like an authoritarian nationalist state rather than a greener, more just democracy, some of these voices have become weaker.[16] But there are still too many progressive activists who don't believe that current political polarisation is a problem in itself. They see it as a welcome process full of opportunities for a progressive revolution.

I am sceptical of this view. I believe it is based on a false interpretation of what drives people towards authoritarian and nationalist ideas, and it therefore underestimates the power authoritarian leaders have.

My fear is that if polarisation worsens and authoritarians continue to win, we might be set back many years from tackling the issues that most matter, like climate change. The civic space for alternative discourse will shrink dramatically, as is happening already in Hungary and Turkey.

Ecological transformation can only succeed with broad support from all parts of society. It can't be enforced against an angry right-wing mob that is growing day by day. We have to think about climate change and polarisation together.

My second cause for alarm is that current developments are taking the shape of a kind of counter-revolution of people who are attracted by authoritarianism against what they perceive to be the green-left mainstream in liberal democracies.[17] The enemies of those people are not just the corporate elite or the super rich but also the ecologically minded, social-justice-oriented middle class who are considered part of the elite.

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To develop such very needed strategies, we first have to understand the causes of the mess that we're in. So what drives people to vote for authoritarian populists, and who are they? What follows is a summary of the arguments that I find most convincing.

The voter profile is very similar across many European countries as well as the United States. Whereas women, high earners, the well-educated and people living in large cities vote increasingly for green, liberal and left parties, people living in smaller cities and the countryside, especially men of lower and medium professional qualifications and income, are attracted by right-wing populist parties. British journalist David Goodhart calls them the somewheres. "The [anywheres] are the metropolitan, well-travelled, better-educated 'elite'; the [somewheres] are the hardier folk from the provinces who have never lost their sense of place or identity, whose 'decent' concerns have been ignored."[18] In his book *The Road to Somewhere*, Goodhart argues that around 20–25% of the British population share the anywhere worldview and around 50% are somewheres.[19] The people who voted for Brexit, for Trump and for

far-right parties in Germany, France, Austria, Sweden, Poland etc. are mostly somewheres.

> + The term 'somewhere' is used in this book to refer to the worldview that Goodhart describes: people who value tradition, family and patriotism and reject high levels of immigration.

CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

According to the political scientist Yascha Mounk, one of the reasons for the populist uprising has to do with the rise of technocratic institutions, like the EU, the international agreement on climate change or trade treaties.[20] He argues that it was real policy challenges that led to the creation of technocratic institutions: "The European Union, for example, has its origins not in a conspiracy of corporations, but rather in an idealistic attempt to rebuild the continent in the aftermath of World War II."[21] Complex problems demand for increasingly complex solutions, institutions and decision-making that are difficult for ordinary citizens to understand. But more and more areas of public policy have been walled off from the influence and control of democratic politics.[22] And most national parliaments in liberal democracies today are controlled by the urban well-educated elite. Political scientist Achim Schäfer says: "Left parties have become middle-class parties whose active members and leaders are largely professionals who graduated from university."[23] Many people who are not part of this cosmopolitan elite increasingly have the feeling that politics hasn't been working in their interest. They don't feel represented by parties and the political elite.

ECONOMIC FEARS AND HARDSHIP

The liberal consensus of the last few decades was that free trade and immigration were economically beneficial. But this has not been true for everyone. The one major group that has lost out on the most recent wave of globalisation is the lower-middle and working classes in rich countries. One of the most influential charts in modern economics looks at global income from 1988 to 2008 – the so-called elephant curve.[24] It shows that every other group has benefitted except for the lower- and middle-income earners in rich countries, who have seen zero income growth. They are the losers of globalisation mainly because manufacturing jobs moved to countries with lower wages. These economic effects of globalisation, including the pressure on salaries from low-paid immigrants, are often cited as one cause of resentment against the urban elite that has largely benefitted from globalisation.[25]

LOSS OF IDENTITY AND ORIENTATION

Up to this point progressive activists would surely say that they have the solutions to tackle the crisis of democracy and inequality. People are being manipulated by smart right-wing narratives and are voting against their economic interests, so the progressive story goes. Accordingly, the left needs to organise and radicalise itself to offer a real populist progressive alternative. The examples to follow are the Spanish Podemos and local progressive platforms like Barcelona en Comú.

This would sound convincing if it weren't for the fact that the discontent is at least as much about the loss of identity as it is about inequality. The reality is that the populists who are benefitting from this discontent are not the left wing but the right wing. I will explain why this is not a coincidence or a question of being smarter and better organised.

The somewheres who live in these places value stability, order and being rooted in a local community, and they fear losing much

Rural people, who are the backbone of populist movements not just in the United States but in Britain, Hungary, Poland and other countries, often believe that their traditional values are under severe threat by cosmopolitan city-based elites.

Francis Fukuyama[26]

of what they value. They perceive that the world around them is changing fast, so fast that they feel a loss of control.[27] They see how the cosmopolitan elite welcomes an increasingly multicultural society and regards gender equality and a green transformation as progress. The more conservative rural people perceive much of this as a threat to their collective identity and culture. Where cosmo-politans hold universal values and would sometimes even welcome giving up their national identity in order to become global citizens (or European citizens), rural people often cherish their national identity highly.

Especially in smaller towns and villages, neoliberal politics have led to the loss of shops, the local post office, the savings bank and other institutions, and young people leave in search of work. Local communities lose their collective rhythm, their rituals and their sense of belonging. Civic association is declining. When other identities are crumbling, the value people attach to their national identity increases.

Not only do rural people and the urban elite now hold very different values and live very different lives, but they also live increasingly separated from each other (physically) and know little about each other.

In a recent essay, psychologists Karen Stenner and Jonathan Haidt describe how roughly one third of the people living in liberal democracies have a deep-seated, relatively enduring psychological predisposition to prefer and demand obedience and conformity, or what Stenner and Haidt call oneness and sameness, over freedom and diversity.[28] In her earlier research on twins, Stenner found that authoritarianism is to a large extent (about 50%) heritable and relatively immutable. This tendency typically lies dormant until a threat is perceived. The conditions that can activate and aggravate
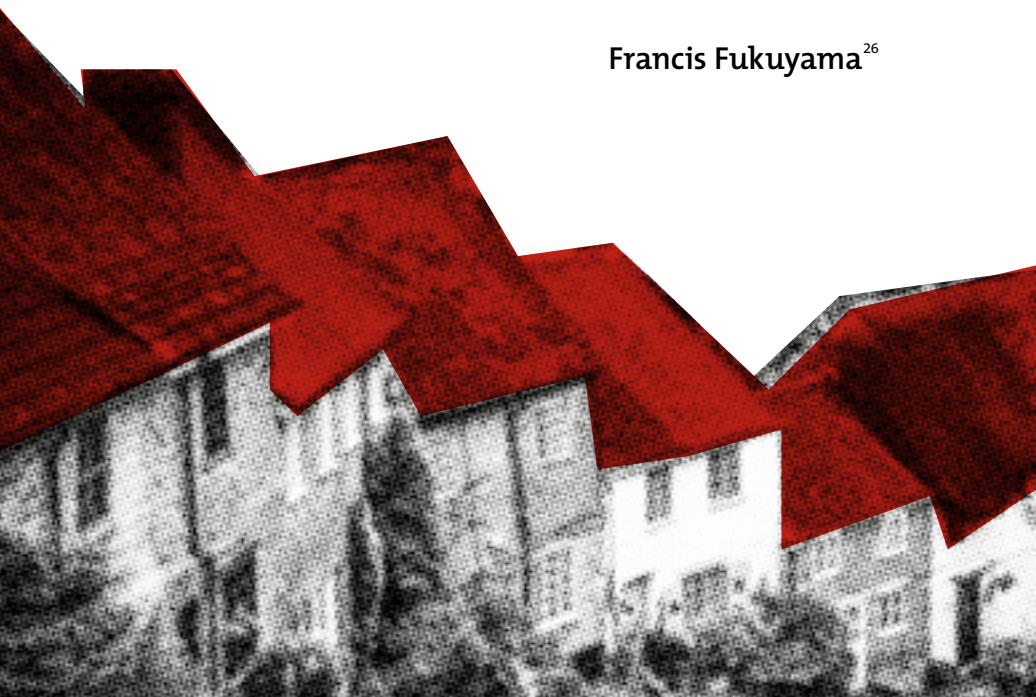
authoritarians and render them more racially, morally and politically intolerant tend to be a loss of societal consensus / shared beliefs and/or an erosion of cultural or group identity, sometimes expressed as a loss of 'who we are'/'our way of life'.[29]

In 2005 Stenner was already predicting the current political situation. She wrote that in response to the increasing tolerance in Western societies, an authoritarian backlash was all but inevitable:

> "The increasing license allowed by those evolving cultures generates the very conditions guaranteed to goad latent authoritarians to sudden and intense, perhaps violent, and almost certainly unexpected, expressions of intolerance. [...] The kind of intolerance that springs from aberrant individual psychology, rather than the disinterested absorption of pervasive cultural norms, is bound to be more passionate and irrational, less predictable, less amenable to persuasion, and more aggravated than educated by the cultural promotion of tolerance."[30]

IDENTITY POLITICS AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

In the 1990s progressive activism started to abandon its emphasis on the conditions of the working class. Fukuyama states: "Many activists came to see the old working class and their trade unions as a privileged stratum with little sympathy for the plight of groups such as immigrants or racial minorities worse off than they were."[31] As Europe and the United States became more multicultural, the progressive left shifted focus towards the lived experience of identity groups that needed to be addressed in ways specific to the group.

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Identity politics on the left has encouraged white, rural people in Europe and America to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored.[32]

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But the turn away from a universalist rhetoric and the emphasis on the specificity of the experience and oppression of historically marginalised minorities has had its effect on white rural working-class men, who are not included in these narratives and often receive the message from the media that they are the oppressor. A blog post in *The American Conservative* says:

> "I'm a white guy. [...] I am constantly bombarded with messages telling me that I'm a cancer, I'm a problem, everything is my fault. I am very lower middle class. I've never owned a new car, and do my own home repairs as much as I can to save money. I cut my own grass, wash my own dishes, buy my clothes from Walmart. I have no clue how I will ever be able to retire. But oh, brother, to hear the media tell it, I am just drowning in unearned power and privilege, and America will be a much brighter, more loving, more peaceful nation when I finally just keel over and die."[33]

To say that political correctness played a major role in Trump's victory is often dismissed as a figment of the right's imagination. But according to a 2017 poll, "71% of Americans believe that political correctness has done more to silence important discussions our society needs to have".[34] The journalist Robby Soave notes: "Trump won because he convinced a great number of Americans that he would *destroy* political correctness."[35]

In 2011 researchers at Tufts University noted that "when asked how they feel about talking politics, [...] every single conservative respondent raised the issue of being called racist".[36]

Political correctness can be synonymous with human decency and inclusiveness, in which case it is certainly a good thing. But there is clearly a very unhelpful type of political correctness. The academic Glenn Loury writes:

> "For every act of aberrant speech seen to be punished by the 'thought police', there are countless critical arguments, dissents from the received truth, unpleasant factual reports, or nonconformist deviations of thought that go unexpressed, or whose expression is distorted, because potential speakers rightly fear the consequences of a candid exposition of their views. As a result, the public discussion about vital issues can become dangerously impoverished."[37]

Political correctness reached a new high in Germany when the German mainstream press waited several days to report an incident involving mass groping and sexual assault by a crowd of mostly Muslim men at a 2015 New Year's Eve celebration in Cologne, all for fear of stoking islamophobia.

All of this was the fertile ground prepared over decades that Trump, the Brexiteers, Marine Le Pen, the AfD and other populists could use in their interests, a nationalist and often xenophobic agenda. Take the resentment that the somewheres have been building up against the political and urban elite over decades and add the perceived threat to their identity due to suddenly high numbers of immigrants and refugees as well as the fear of jihadist terrorism, and you have the perfect recipe for exploitation by nationalist and far-right populism. Trump promised to give the people their voice back. Marine Le Pen ran her 2017 presidential campaign "in the name of the people". Given the above analysis, it shouldn't be a surprise that these slogans were and still are so successful. Of course, the populists' narratives and frames can influence what people think,

e.g., they might spread xenophobic thinking by putting the blame on immigrants. But for the most part they were giving a voice to and amplifying existing views and fears. It would be foolish to believe that the concerns about immigration and identity politics from the left weren't there in the first place.

An antidote to the rise of far-right populism has yet to be found.

SOCIAL MEDIA OUTRAGE

So far, I have listed a number of important arguments that each provide some explanation for the rise of right-wing populism. However, it might well be that democracy wouldn't be in nearly as big a crisis, if any, if it weren't for the important role that the internet and social media play in this.

To start with, people increasingly read the news that their friends curate for them on social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter, rather than what traditional media gatekeepers provide. The lack of journalistic filters increases the risk of fake news spreading. It also increases the risk that most of the news items and opinion pieces one reads will confirm one's pre-existing beliefs, which one's social media 'friends' usually share. This is the so-called filter bubble phenomenon that might be able to explain an increase in political polarisation to some degree.[38]

The algorithms used by social media platforms often operate in such a way that they suggest or autoplay increasingly extreme versions of the type of videos or news that a user has previously shown interest in. The commercial interest social media companies have in maximising clicks plays right into people's craving for sensation. The result is that we often watch or read the most extreme and not very representative version of the other side, e.g., a Trump voter being exposed to the most extreme cases of political correctness

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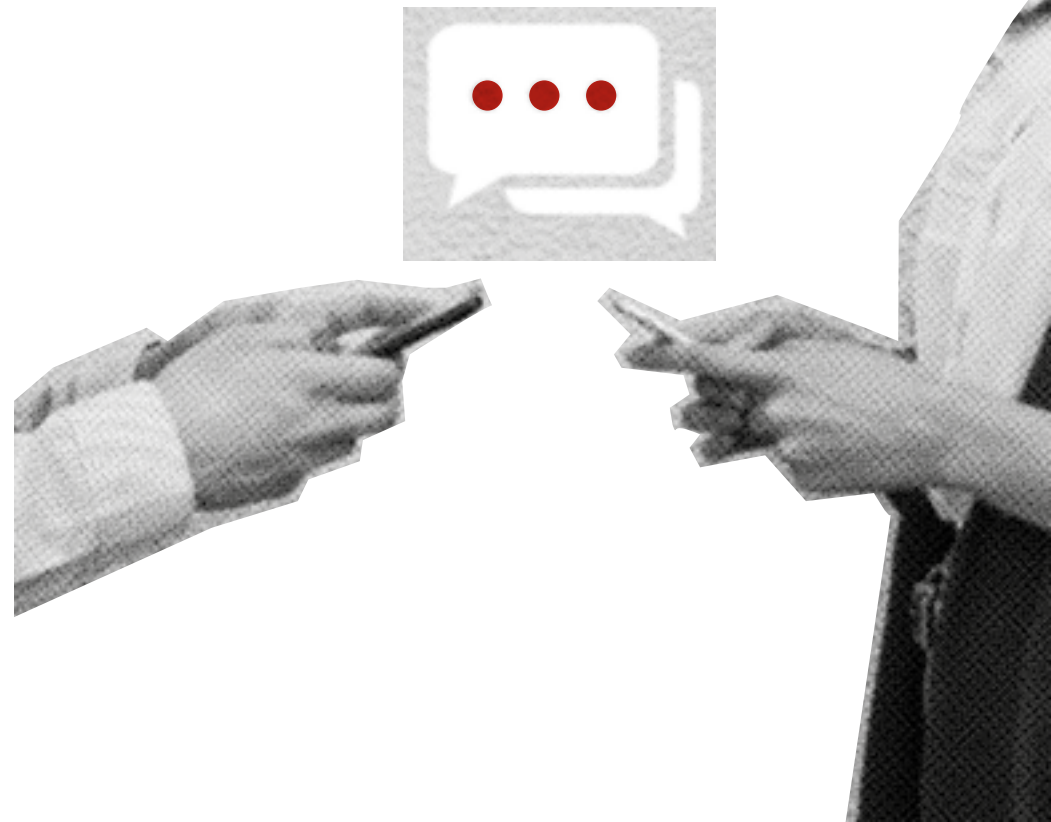
and identity politics, or a German leftist getting the most extreme xenophobic currents of the far right. These mechanisms amplify pre-existing resentments and stereotypes and lead to further outrage and polarisation.

And finally, not least from the case of Cambridge Analytica, we know how data mining and analysis on a massive scale can be and is used strategically to hack people's minds and successfully influence elections via social media. In the most dangerous instance, we have seen over the last few years how the Russian government steered activities that spread division in Western liberal democracies through massive dissemination of fake news on social media platforms on every occasion that the political landscape provided. During the Catalan crisis in autumn 2017, Russian propagandists used trolls to spread ever more subtle forms of propaganda through fake accounts on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms to stoke unrest in Catalonia.[39] Russia also used this type of cyber warfare to support Trump and Brexit.[40] The ultimate goal is to destabilise or destroy Western liberal democracies in favour of authoritarian and nationalist regimes.

I hope that I have described the main drivers of our current political situation fairly accurately. Now we are going to take a closer look at the role progressive activism plays in this landscape.

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HOW A DOGMATIC VERSION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM MAKES THINGS WORSE

After the failed Copenhagen summit on climate change in 2009, many climate activists came to believe that the climate crisis demanded a deeper change in the economic system and in our cultural norms. Then in 2011 Occupy put the spotlight on the rise of inequality in many countries and on our economic system, which creates inequality instead of helping to reduce it. Both converging ideas were backed up by much ecological and heterodox economic research. It was the basic rationale for the Smart CSOs Lab's core idea that 'systemic change' was needed and CSOs should put their energy into it.

But then, around 2015, I noticed – initially slowly – a change in focus and narrative among the European activist networks that I was following. Suddenly, for many activists the term 'systemic change' was about 'fighting the systemic oppressions of racism, patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism', all in one package.

One example of this shift is the British network NEON[41], founded in 2013 by the New Economics Foundation with the aim of connecting progressive activists in the UK around the idea of economic systems change and with the purpose of *fighting neoliberalism*. NEON still aims at economic systems change but it now does so through a strong lens of fighting the whole range of *systems of oppression* listed above.

Another example is the progressive international funders network EDGE Funders that has more recently moved in a similar direction and now embraces *intersectionality* as one of their core frames.

Initially, I didn't understand what was going on. I had always appreciated the importance of feminist movements and anti-racist movements and their achievements, but I had only a basic understanding of their theoretical underpinnings, its history and

Intersectionality bears the assumption that all hierarchies and inequalities are the consequence of persisting systems of oppression.

current motivations. I didn't know what intersectionality meant and what it was about.

HOW THE CONCEPT OF INTERSECTIONALITY BECAME POPULAR

Intersectionality bears the assumption that all hierarchies and inequalities are the consequence of persisting systems of oppression. Advocates of intersectionality argue that oppression due to race, sex and gender etc. often overlap (as multiple forms of discrimination) and need to be thought through and fought together. According to the scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who originally coined the term in 1989, it is important to understand that historical inequalities and oppressions that discriminate against women overlap with historical injustices against black people and therefore hit black women hardest.[42] Accordingly, it was important to link the fights for justice, to join forces. This seems to be the reason that the concept became so successful. It became a strategic argument for movement building across issues.

The proponents of intersectionality seem to be deeply influenced by critical theory (with its origins in the Frankfurt School), which maintains that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation. In an article for *Quillette*, Uri Harris describes critical theory as follows:

> "By identifying the distorting effects power had on society's beliefs and values, [the founders of critical theory] believed they could achieve a more accurate picture of the world. And when people saw things as they really were, they would liberate themselves. 'Theory', they suggested, always serves the interests of certain people: *traditional* theory is uncritical towards

power and automatically serves the powerful while *critical* theory unmasks these interests and serves the powerless."[43]

Critical theory underpins most thinking in today's gender, feminist and race studies. Intersectional theory argues that the systems we live in were shaped and are still controlled by Western white men, by systems of patriarchy, systems that continue to oppress women, people of colour and other marginalised groups. This is how, so it seems, intersectionality movements came to see the world through a lens of power and privilege.

Another source of influence on intersectional thinking stems from postmodernism, a school of philosophy originated in France in the 1960s, according to which science is a socially constructed ideology of the dominant classes, colonisers and hegemonic interests, predominantly created by Western white men, and implicit biases in scientific outcomes that supposedly benefit white men can be expected.[44] We can see that this thinking has led to current demands for more diversity of gender, race and cultural background in science.[45]

The ideas around intersectionality are not new. They have been flourishing in critical race and gender studies and other humanities departments at universities since the 1990s and have influenced the thinking of generations of students who have since then left their mark outside the university across the Western world.

But this doesn't explain the vehemence and power these ideas have gained more recently in activism on campuses and beyond. Why was this happening now, I was asking myself. Why were activists around me suddenly talking so much about *white privilege* and *male privilege*?

Nobody knows the precise answer to this question as far as I can tell.

We certainly don't live in particularly racist or misogynist times. The opposite is true, actually. A wide range of indicators concerning gender, race, homosexuality etc. show how over the last few decades our societies have become more progressive, for example, the number of hate crimes, violence against women, attitudes towards gender roles, attitudes about interracial marriage etc. The improvement has been steady across the Western world and beyond.[46]

A number of factors might be at play.

One popular explanation is that Trump's election and the rise of the far right in many countries have created a threatening climate for the rights of women, immigrants, people of colour and other minorities, requiring urgent action from social justice activists.

While the current political situation is certainly a strong motivator for activists, it can't be the sole catalysing factor because the phenomenon was visible before Trump was elected, before Brexit. I noticed a change in the discourse among activists as early as 2014 or 2015. It's also a chicken and egg problem because intersectionality movements are themselves contributing to the rise of the far right (as I will argue below).

Another possible explanation is that the feminist, anti-racist and gay rights movements achieved significant progress over the last decades but have reached a phase of diminishing returns, where it's increasingly harder to progress further.[47] Social justice activists are frustrated that certain disparities in outcome persist, for example, that women are still underrepresented in many professions and especially in leadership positions, or that black people in the United States still underperform in academia and the professional world

while black men are highly overrepresented in American prisons.

At the same time, it might well be that social activists are driven by a newfound strength. Women and people of colour in liberal democracies have won many battles over the years and now hold positions with certain levels of power. Our societies have become more diverse – white men are less dominant in numbers. The power relations have shifted. It's very well possible that recent outrage is a sign that these identity groups are feeling that much more powerful and confident that they can go the last mile and achieve total equality.

There is no doubt that the emergence of social media plays a role. The vast increase in connectivity has made it a highly effective tool, especially for the generation born after 1995 (often called iGen or Gen Z) that has grown up with social media and is best prepared to use it. Memes and campaign slogans now spread much more quickly across the world, and small groups can have a big effect and appear much larger than they actually are.

The networks that I know of (like the aforementioned NEON and Edge Funders) are certainly part of the wider movement that uses a strong intersectional frame. But I also believe that they take a particularly strong strategic perspective. In these networks, many activists have fought against climate change for many years and have seen how difficult it is to make meaningful progress on tackling the issue. They also know that changing the economic system is not something you can easily put on parliament agendas for legislation. These strategic activists believe that strengthening and connecting movements of oppressed and marginalised groups can result in a movement of movements with the potential to overthrow the system. This is an important distinction from many activist groups who would be much happier to see their identity-based causes

thrive within the capitalist system.

The question we have to ask is whether this strategy for system change is a good strategy. Is this a truly systemic approach?

I believe that it is a bad strategy for two reasons. First, it won't achieve its goals because these movements overestimate the potential their discourse has for attracting sufficient people to join them. Only a small share of the population cares about pursuing social justice at all costs. And even if it were successful, it wouldn't result in a healthy society. Second, it contributes to the further polarisation of our society, and as a consequence, more people will join the authoritarian right. The probability that the authoritarian right will continue to win if polarisation increases is high, and it is likely that once in power they will stay for a long time. I also don't believe these movements are really applying a systemic approach, at least not with regard to what I have learned about how to work in complex systems. I will provide my arguments for these claims in the following sections.

In these polarised times it's hard to describe contentious and extremely complex issues like identity politics and intersectionality in a precise and fair way. I make a concerted effort to avoid exaggerating the problem, but I endeavour equally to avoid downplaying the situation. I don't doubt the good intentions of the type of intersectional social justice activism I'm describing here, but I do think that we can't expect good outcomes for the simple reason that the ideas are flawed, a conclusion I have come to after careful analysis and certainly not an assertion I make lightly.

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It is this power and dominance over the political discourse in liberal democracies that progressive activists may not perceive but that is very much felt by those who don't identify with these values, those who are now increasingly attracted by the far-right discourse.

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INTERSECTIONAL ACTIVISM WON'T DELIVER SOCIAL PROGRESS

In a certain way, social justice activists promoting identity politics and those movements more concretely motivated by a discourse of intersectionality have been very successful over the last few years: many mainstream media outlets across the Western world have adopted a proactive social justice discourse. On news sites like *The New York Times, El País, The Guardian* or *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, it often seems like the news has to fit a certain progressive narrative in order to be published. If a news piece contradicts the narrative of, for example, women or minorities fighting against the oppressive white Western man, it won't be published. This has real political consequences. The political discourse across the spectrum from left/liberal to centre-conservative – the majority of the mainstream parties in most Western countries – has now tacitly adopted the core rationale of intersectionality: that all unequal representation of women and minorities in politics, academia and the business world is due to persisting systems of oppression. The goal that is now actively pursued and rarely disputed is equal representation of all allegedly discriminated groups in all institutions.

It is this power and dominance over the political discourse in liberal democracies that progressive activists may not perceive but that is very much felt by those who don't identify with these values, those who are now increasingly attracted by the far-right discourse.

The problem with intersectionality is not its original concept of overlapping discriminations. There is value in this concept, when applied with rigour. Nor is the problem that critical theory is wrong per se. No doubt, dominant narratives shape how we see the world and can control the world. The problem is that intersec-

tional activism rarely applies these concepts with scientific rigour to identify true discriminations and their causes.

The phenomenon that I'm describing here is rather a dogmatic construct that contains a sophisticated mythology, similar to a religion.[48] The structure of the mythological core of intersectionality is the 'matrix of domination' in which power and privilege operate to dominate, oppress, marginalize and silence relatively oppressed identities.

Intersectional social justice activists often mention the supposedly ubiquitous systems of oppression, like sexism, racism, colonialism etc. These narratives about systems of oppression usually sound very vague, abstract and nebulous, and rarely mention any concrete oppressions. It often seems that the goal is not to identify tangible problems and push for concrete solutions but to preach to a community of believers.

The author Andrew Sullivan argues that intersectionality "posits a classic orthodoxy through which all of human experience is explained – and through which all speech must be filtered. Its version of original sin is the power of some identity groups over others. To overcome this sin, you need first to confess, i.e., 'check your privilege', and subsequently live your life and order your thoughts in a way that keeps this sin at bay. The sin goes so deep into your psyche, especially if you are white or male or straight, that a profound conversion is required."[49]

Possibly the most practical application of intersectionality is based on the idea that *racial and gender biases* (etc.) are responsible for the injustices that women and people of colour suffer. The so-called implicit-association test (IAT), a controversial concept, can identify one's implicit bias (i.e., level of unconscious racism or sexism). The

goal is that we have to *unlearn the habits of our minds that perpetuate white and masculine privilege*. The practical tool on offer is implicit bias training, a version of which was recently taken by 175,000 employees at Starbucks and is now being extended to thousands of other workplaces. Other such approaches operate under the headings of 'unlearning whiteness' or 'unlearning toxic masculinity'. However, there is no evidence that these tools in any tangible way decrease discriminatory behaviour.[50] There is even less evidence that the implicit bias that the IAT measures actually corresponds to intersectionality's core rationale, which is that people's biases are wholly the result of a socialisation process where people's identities are entirely shaped by culturally legitimized discourses, controlled by powerful Western white men. Instead, growing evidence from social psychology finds that the IAT to a large degree measures people's innate ability to generalise intuitively based on their lived experience. While people do err when making judgements based on probability, stereotypes actually reflect reality to a high degree of accuracy, contrary to popular belief.[51]

But those who believe in intersectionality often don't allow for a rational critique, of any aspect. Either you believe in the whole dogmatic construct or you are excluded on the basis of blasphemy. Rational critique is important when faced with a worldview as irrational as intersectionality. We don't live in a world that is dominated by the white supremacist patriarchy. The dominant cultural narrative of people in the Western world is not that men are superior to women, that white people are superior to black, Asian and minority ethnic people or that straight people are superior to gay people, as we can see in the widespread support for gender equality, racial equality and issues like same sex marriage.[52]

Science can be biased for all kinds of reasons, and surely in some

cases the gender and the cultural background of the scientists are relevant factors. To increase diversity in science is a good thing. But judging a claim by the strength of the argument cannot be substituted by the view intersectional activists hold, which is that knowledge about all ethical questions pertaining to oppression is accessible only through personal experience. Defending the scientific method is essential. The researcher Helen Pluckrose says:

> "Sometimes the values [of the Enlightenment] are referred to as 'western values' although rational, empirical, secular liberal democrats exist everywhere. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment and the formation of the scientific method and secular liberal democracies did form and take root in the west. We, the lucky inheritors of them, should not take them for granted and neglect to defend them. Not because they are western but because they have proven their effectiveness at facilitating the advance of knowledge and the progress of human rights and equality."[53]

Identifying real injustices and their causes is not easy. Clearly correlation does not imply causation. Inequalities of outcome are the result of many complex factors, some of which have nothing to do with discrimination, and it is clear that racial or sexual bias is only one of many possible factors. The efforts should be put into searching and identifying the real causes of and solutions to injustice. But given that the current culture of intersectionality is not receptive to open debate, it is difficult to see how it can deliver any kind of positive change. On the contrary, it is counterproductive to progress.

The things that multi-culturalists believe will help people appreciate and thrive in democracy - appreciating difference, talking about difference, displaying and applauding difference -
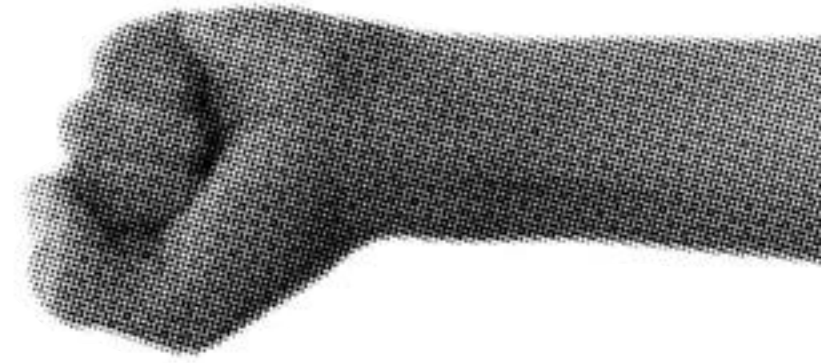
are the very conditions that encourage authoritarians not to heights of tolerance, but to their intolerant extremes.

Karen Stenner and Jonathan Haidt

INTERSECTIONAL ACTIVISM EXACERBATES POLARISATION AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Trump, Brexit and the rise of the far right in Europe have been countered by progressive movements representing broad coalitions of anti-fascist, pro-feminist and pro-LGBT groups in both the United States and Europe.[54] Probably the most prominent of these was the Women's March, which was also very vocal about its intersectional approach. Very understandably, with social progress under threat in light of authoritarian politics (especially for minorities) and its possible knock-on effects, these movements see themselves on the frontline of the resistance against the far right. This is of course the laudable intention. I believe, however, that the dynamics as they play out in reality are such that the actions and narratives of current social justice activism as described in this chapter will most likely have the opposite effect and might make things worse. My impression is that a large swath of progressive activism misunderstands what has caused authoritarian dynamics in the first place and which underlying psychological predispositions play a key role in the dynamics of polarisation.

According to Stenner and Haidt, "the things that multiculturalists believe will help people appreciate and thrive in democracy – appreciating difference, talking about difference, displaying and applauding difference – are the very conditions that encourage authoritarians not to heights of tolerance, but to their intolerant extremes".[55] The reason for this (as explained more in detail on pages 25–26) is that a large number of our fellow citizens (about a third) have a predisposition for becoming more intolerant and demanding authoritarian politics if they feel their identity is being threatened. Unless one's strategy is to provoke more polarisation and outrage on the other side, which I don't think is the general idea, there must be

an error in assessment. Paradoxically, it seems that we can best limit intolerance of difference by parading, talking about and applauding our sameness. Professor Mark Lilla comes to the same conclusion: identity politics on the left "encourages white, rural, religious Americans to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored". Instead, he suggests that "we must relearn to speak to citizens as citizens and to frame our appeals – including the ones to benefit particular groups – in terms of principles that everyone can affirm".[56]

The American Civil Rights Movement was ultimately successful because Martin Luther King and his fellow activists framed their goals on the basis of equal rights and opportunity that eventually most people could identify with. Haidt and his co-author Lukianoff state:

> "Part of Dr. King's genius was that he appealed to the shared morals and identities of Americans by using the unifying languages of religion and patriotism. He repeatedly used the metaphor of family, referring to people of all races and religions as 'brothers' and 'sisters'. He spoke often of the need for love and forgiveness hearkening back to the words of Jesus and echoing ancient wisdom from many cultures: 'Love is the only force capable of transforming and enemy into a friend.' "[57]

Intersectionality movements understand the power of inclusiveness, of bringing people together under the umbrella of a common story, but they are captured by the contradictions and the divisiveness of their core story, which is the story of the hierarchy of oppressions according to which white, Western, able-bodied, straight, cis-gendered men are the oppressors, or at the very least

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The idea of educating a group of people by calling them racists is certain to fail, be it a Trump voter, a Brexiteer or an AfD voter in Germany. The opposite is usually what ends up happening: people identify more strongly with their group.

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belong to the group with the highest privilege and have to pay for their privilege by relegating themselves to the lower end of a new hierarchy as so-called 'allies'.

This is effectively dividing the world between good and bad people, between oppressors and oppressed. It's an us-versus-them approach that sends us down a spiral of polarisation and tribalism.

Humans are biologically hardwired for tribalism (I will discuss this more in depth in chapter 6). When people who identify as a group are attacked by another group, the reaction is for members to bind themselves more tightly and defend the group.

The idea of educating a group of people by calling them racists is certain to fail, be it a Trump voter, a Brexiteer or an AfD voter in Germany. The opposite is usually what ends up happening: people identify more strongly with their group.[58]

There are many examples of mistakes made by progressive activists in recent times that stoked tribalism and backfired, rather than having the desired effect of a more tolerant society. To take one, at a large demonstration recently in Berlin against the far right, the organisers didn't allow participants to hold German flags during the demonstration (as a stance against nationalism). What signal does this send to those people who feel that their national identity is being threatened and are attracted by an authoritarian narrative that promises to restore national pride?

There is another important factor that adds to the outrage and polarisation: in progressive language, the definition of what constitutes an oppression is constantly expanding. Psychologist Nick Haslam coined a term for this: concept creep.[59] He describes how words are increasingly seen as violence and that the perception of which words or ideas constitute violence is constantly expanding. The

academic John McWhorter writes: "Where antiracist progressives once looked to bondage, disenfranchisement, and torture, today they classify as equally traumatic the remark, the implication, the unwelcome question."[60] Today, in the most progressive circles, if someone questions the level of immigration he is often seen as a racist, and if a man opens the door for a woman, he is seen as sexist. There are two big problems with this: one is that if the definitions of such important words become highly diluted, they become increasingly meaningless, and the other problem is that most people don't identify with the new expanded definition. They perceive the creeping meaning of these labels as highly unfair or vastly exaggerated, and an extreme quest for justice ultimately exacerbates our growing polarisation.

INTERSECTIONAL ACTIVISM MAKES A STRATEGIC MISTAKE

Intersectionality is all about power. The underlying rationale is that white masculine power and privilege operate to oppress, marginalise and silence other identities. Building and strengthening intersectional grassroots movements that connect oppressed and marginalised groups ultimately serves to gain political power, as a precondition to creating an oppression-free world as well as an ecologically sustainable economy focused on human needs.

I cannot see how such a strategy can have any chance of success. It overestimates the appeal and potential size of the intersectional movements.

One argument often mentioned by progressives who want to spread optimism among their peers is that in many Western countries people of colour will soon outnumber white people, and when this

happens, the progressive battle against *oppressive whiteness* will be won. Naturally such stories feel threatening to many white people and contribute to the authoritarian dynamics described above.

But even in the United States, the ones closest to reaching such a scenario – some say that by 2045 white people will be a minority – the forecast is probably overly optimistic when analysed in some more detail. The biggest ethnic immigrant group are Hispanics, but later generations of Hispanics often identify far less with their ethnic origins, and the rate of interracial marriage among them is high.[61] In addition, a significant segment of non-white Americans hold conservative views on many issues. For example, according to a Pew report from October 2018 approximately half of U.S. Latinos believe there is about the right amount of immigrants living in the U.S., while a quarter say there are too many immigrants and 14 percent say there are too few.[62]

The other strategy that intersectional movements pursue is to create stronger ties with the working classes. Class is one of the dimensions of intersectional theory, but of all the contradictions intersectional theory makes, class is what makes the whole concept implode. It is impossible to construct this whole theory about white privilege and all the various marginalised identities and then hope that the white working class will happily join the movement. Such a strategy is based on faulty assumptions about the values held by the majority of the working class, who perceive today's identity politics and social justice activism to be an urban elite project that is detached from their reality and morality.

The organisation More In Common recently published a report on the project Hidden Tribes of America, based on an in-depth survey with 8,000 U.S. citizens analysing the values and political views they hold.[63] The report concludes that only 8% of Americans hold

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If one always looks at the world through a lens of power and privilege, what one sees is a highly distorted picture of the world, where everything is under suspicion of being caused by oppressive power.
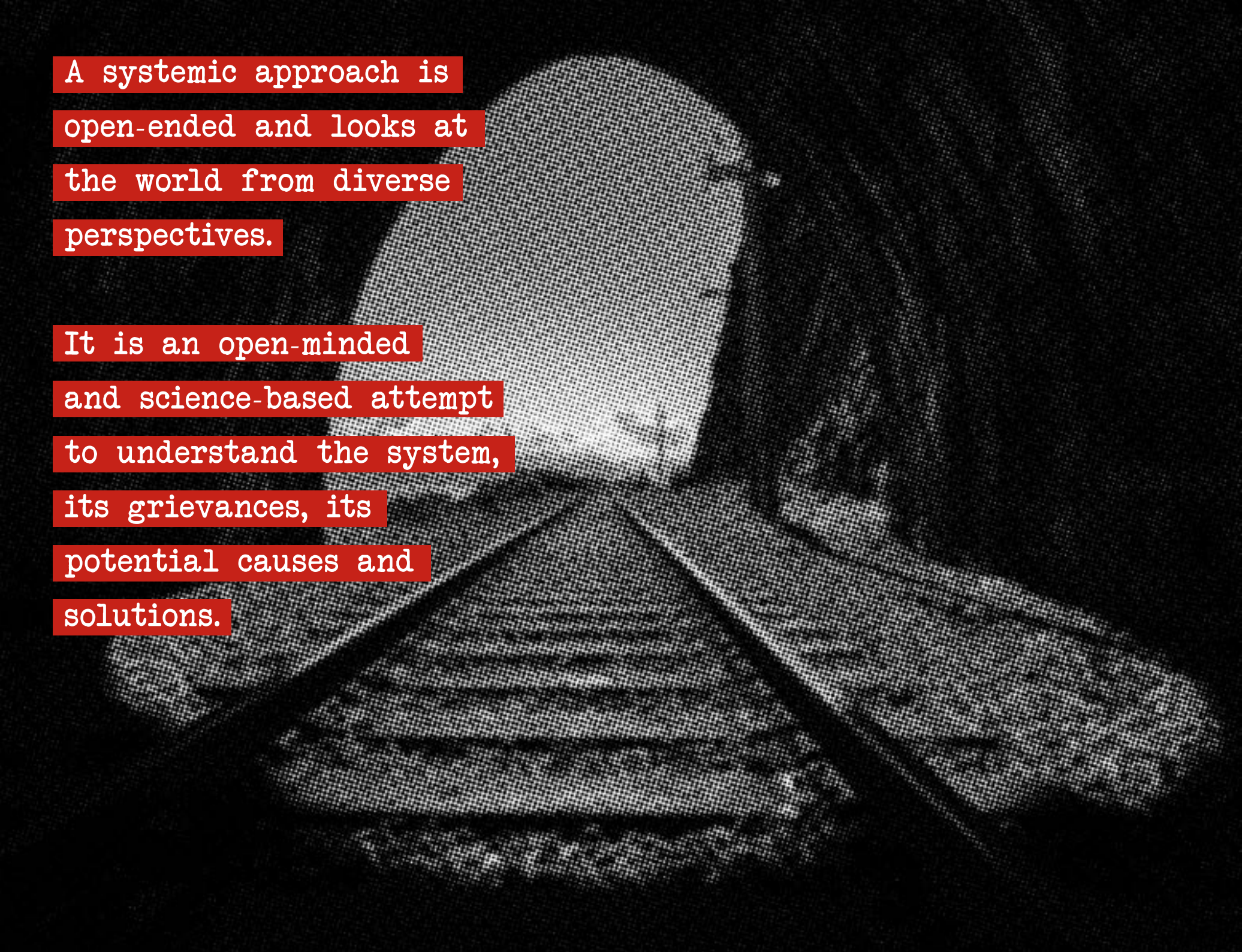
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the values and political views that are fully in line with progressive activists. "[They] are deeply concerned with issues concerning equity, fairness, and America's direction today. They tend to be more secular, cosmopolitan, and highly engaged with social media." In contrast, around 80% of the people surveyed believe that "political correctness has gone too far in America".

The theory of intersectionality implicitly assumes that the values of social justice and being liberated from perceived oppressions are universal values. However, this is not entirely true. Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt discovered that human societies are governed by a wide variety of moral systems. The morality of Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (WEIRD) people is mainly concerned about protecting the individual and individual rights.

> + In his book *The Righteous Mind* Jonathan Haidt details how people from WEIRD cultures are more likely to view the world more analytically and "see a world full of separate objects, rather than relationships". They have a more individualistic, independent concept of the self compared to a more holistic vision found in the majority of the world, where emphasis is placed on the relationships among parts of the whole, and as such, the rather rule-based moralities developed by Kant and Mill are more apt for governing a society of independent individuals than a society of groups and institutions. The term was first coined by Joe Henrich et al.[64]

But globally, and especially outside the Western world, WEIRD people are statistically a small minority. Most people in the world – and this includes people in the West who don't belong to the urban, well-educated, liberal progressive class – often put the needs of groups and institutions first, ahead of individuals. They value justice and fairness, but they value respect for authority and loyalty to their own group just as much. In other words, non-WEIRD people will share the universality of the values of social justice as long as they don't endanger the social order.

A systemic approach is open-ended and looks at the world from diverse perspectives.

It is an open-minded and science-based attempt to understand the system, its grievances, its potential causes and solutions.

In an example of solidarity across movements that appeals to basic decency, shared morals and an identity as citizens, the British miners' strike in the 1980s had the support of a group called Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, which proved to be a "fundamental turning point" for gay rights in the UK.[65]

Social justice activists who want to develop broad coalitions between the working classes and the various marginalised identity groups will only succeed if they abandon today's widespread dogmatic and irrational version of social justice activism and open up to the reality of the wider variety of moral systems that are found among humans.

INTERSECTIONAL ACTIVISM IS NOT SYSTEMIC

If one always looks at the world through a lens of power and privilege, what one sees is a highly distorted picture of the world, where everything is under suspicion of being caused by oppressive power. The intersectional approach presupposes that the systems of white supremacy and patriarchy are responsible for any inequity one might encounter. It does not inquire about anything, instead providing the answers in advance.

In contrast, a systemic approach is open-ended and looks at the world from diverse perspectives. It is an open-minded and science-based attempt to understand the system, its grievances, its potential causes and solutions. It requires an honest gathering of data, including those data that don't fit neatly with one's intuition or ideology.

Intersectional activism cherry-picks data that fit with the ideology and preconceived causes of oppression. For example, to prove that there is a general problem with masculinity (popularised as toxic masculinity) and that women are always the victims, you only have to pick the data and examples that justify this claim and hide those that stand in contradiction. Yes, without a doubt, there are men who are toxic, there are men who are violent, men who rape, and there are more extremely violent men than extremely violent women, but most men are not toxic. A rational and surely more systemic look at the issue reveals not that toxic masculinity is primarily caused by socialisation, as intersectional mythology preaches, but that it has a strong biological basis, which might be reinforced or suppressed through culture.

Masculinity has both negative (e.g., aggression and violence) and positive sides (e.g., protecting loved ones), and femininity can be toxic, too. As evolutionary biologist Heather Heying says, "creating hunger in men by actively inviting the male gaze, then demanding that men have no such hunger – that is toxic femininity".[66] Men can be victims of sexual violence committed by women[67], and there is an increase in depression among young men in a society that has become hostile to masculinity. In chapter 6 we will discuss the differences between the sexes more in depth.

This is but a taste of a much broader spectrum of perspectives, aspects and data that are needed to develop a truthful picture of reality. Similar, more realistic pictures can be drawn of racial inequality and other grievances.

Today's challenges regarding justice and equality cannot be explained and resolved via misguided models of oppression and theories of socialisation. In order to advance social progress, the new 21st-century activism will have to deal with complex challenges in very different ways than those explained in this chapter.

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THE NEED TO BREAK OUT OF OUR ECHO CHAMBERS

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Given our very human tendency to filter out information that does not comport with our worldviews the more we repair to our ideological lenses, the more distorted they become thanks to a spiralling process of confirmation bias.

Jerry Taylor

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Not long ago I was sitting at an event with a group of civil society people and activists to discuss the premises and values for a better economic system. I said something like "competition and hierarchy are not per se bad things" and received strong counter reactions. I was surprised at first but then recognized this as an example of the strong ideological groupthink found in many networks.

It's difficult for anyone to escape our human penchant for confirmation bias, "our tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms our preexisting beliefs or hypotheses while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities".[68] Our rational mind typically reasons to justify our pre-existing intuitions. Our reasoning process has become well adjusted to the continuous task of justifying our deeper moral intuitions and subconscious motives.[69]

I found the following good argument written by Jerry Taylor, a former libertarian, for why attachment to ideology is problematic for tackling our most complex problems:

> "Even if we embrace ideology merely as a conceptual lens to help us better understand what is most likely to promote human well-being (ideology as a pattern-recognition device), we run into difficult problems. The incredible complexity of social and economic relationships, the heterogeneity of human beings, and the ubiquitous and irresolvable problem of unintended consequences will frustrate dogmatic shortcuts to problem-solving. Given our very human tendency to filter out information that does not comport with our worldviews – and excessive attention to information that comports with the same – the more we repair to

our ideological lenses, the more distorted they become thanks to a spiralling process of confirmation bias."[70]

When we as individuals join groups, as we so often do as activists who are keen to develop collective action, our individual biases then interact with group dynamics.

Research shows that groups often don't reach the ideal state of the wisdom of the crowd, where the collective thinking of a group is superior to that of any individual therein. Instead groups often adopt the more extreme positions already taken by a minority of its members.[71] Such groupthink may be fuelled by a particular agenda or simply because group members value harmony and coherence above rational thinking. Those members of the group who believe they hold minority positions often stay silent for the mostly unconscious fear of being isolated (the so-called spiral of silence). These dynamics reach a greater extreme when groups become ideological echo chambers, systematically alienating their members from all outside epistemic sources. The way they see the world remains intact when confronted by outsiders because their belief system is designed to withstand intellectual attack.[72]

The following are some of what I think are more deeply held and rarely questioned views among progressive activist groups.

Maybe the strongest one is the idea that hierarchies of any kind are bad. It is believed that hierarchies are always a form of domination, or even oppression, and must be avoided, often leading to a rejection of the state and of other formal institutions as well as of representative democracy altogether. Instead communities should be autonomous, and decisions should be made via consensus (e.g., assemblies) or direct democracy. The underlying but often not explicit assumption here is that the egalitarian society without

hierarchies is the natural way to organise society and that hierarchies are almost synonymous with oppression and inequality.

A similar and related argument is often provided in favour of collaboration and against competition. In discussing the pillars of a new economic system that would increase wellbeing and be ecologically sustainable, we hear that we learned the wrong story from Darwin and his *survival of the fittest*, the idea that our innate selfishness drives our behaviour (Darwinism). Instead, according to the progressive belief, humans have a natural predisposition to care for others and to cooperate, that it is the system that has been designed to reward greed and competition.[73]

There is truth in these views about hierarchy and competition. I don't doubt that hierarchies can be oppressive, and the idea that humans are predisposed to compete in the marketplace is very incomplete. Indeed, human evolution has provided us with the remarkable capability to cooperate in groups.

But that is not the whole story because not all hierarchies are oppressive. Hierarchies and competition have a function and evolutionary explanation, and selfishness and self-interest are a part of human nature as is our predisposition to compete. According to Michael Tomasello, a leading development psychologist, acknowledged for his pioneering research on the uniqueness of human social cognition, "[human] cooperation evolved on top of a deep-seated competitive drive".[74]

Hierarchies have helped organisations, and on a larger scale entire societies, to function and gain stability. In the absence of formal hierarchies, informal non-transparent ones typically emerge, and they're usually undemocratic power structures. In fact, the absence of hierarchies was an important factor in Occupy Wall Street's

failure.[75] This is not to defend the existence of all types of hierarchies in our societies, but to briefly illustrate that the issues we're dealing with are complex and require looking at from multiple perspectives. (In chapter 6 we will discuss hierarchy, competition and cooperation in more depth.)

In the echo chamber, arguments and evidence are selected to justify the group's ideology and pre-existing intuitions. This is of course not unique to progressive activism, but is rather a characteristic of any community bound by a strong belief system.

I believe that it is highly problematic when ideology determines which arguments and ideas are considered relevant for discussion and which ones are totally ignored or fall under the ideological radar. If we limit ourselves to presenting the straw man versions of the other side's argument, how will we ever know if they have good ideas to contribute to solving complex problems? In the progressive activist circles I have been part of in the last few years, I have seen very little debate about some of these fundamental complex questions.

For example, in my research for this book I was looking for discussions that presented the best good faith arguments in favour of competitive markets as well as those that support cooperative forms of economy where markets simply play less of a role. I didn't find any discussion that openly engaged with the different arguments. It's always either-or: either the author presents the market fundamentalist's views or it is entirely focused on the marvels of the utopian new system.

Most of the books in our space of systemic change and alternative economics seem more like pamphlets presenting one side of the argument and designed to preach to one's own bases, instead of

He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that.

John Stuart Mill

honestly engaging with the best arguments from all sides and to truly seek truth. Where there is contention in a scientific field, no reference is made. The reason for this might be an anxiety over winning the battle of narratives. When everything is subordinated to a fight for power, the truth doesn't matter. Complexity and contradictions are being ignored and neglected for the sake of showing unity and strength towards the common enemy. Or it all happens unconsciously in the protected space of the echo chamber, where everybody happily nods.

A BETTER WAY TO MAKE SENSE OF A COMPLEX WORLD

John Stuart Mill believed that the pursuit of truth required the collation and combination of ideas and propositions, even those that seem to be in opposition to each other. He urged us to allow others to speak – and actually listen to them – for three main reasons:

- First, the other person's idea, however controversial it might seem today, could turn out to be right. ("The opinion may possibly be true.")

- Second, even if our opinion is largely correct, we hold it more rationally and securely as a result of being challenged. ("He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that.")

- Third, and in Mill's view most likely, opposing views may each contain a portion of the truth, which need to be combined. ("Conflicting doctrines share the truth between them.")[76]

If we're seriously committed to systemic change and to finding truly viable solutions to our global problems, we need to break out of the current echo chambers. We need to acknowledge our human predisposition for motivated reasoning and confirmation bias and deal

with it in a thoughtful manner. This will require some fundamental changes in the way civil society pursues its work. We need to allow for real conversations to take place and accept that any ideas of good faith that are relevant and important should be part of the discussion.

No doubt there exist civil society spaces where meaningful and important conversations happen unbound by dogmatic and overly ideological constraints. We will discuss some of these positive developments in the coming chapters.

But my impression, clearly, is that the dogmatism I have described is widespread. It negatively impacts and disrupts most of those activist spaces with the ambition to drive systemic change. As a result we get distracted from the core questions we need to focus on, too blinded by ideology to tap into the best ideas that would help us find meaningful and workable solutions.

We are living in dangerous times. We cannot take for granted that our democratic institutions will survive the next few years. Once the likes of Trump, Bolsonaro and Orban have taken over, tackling the ecological crises will depend on their good will, which is a very gloomy prospect.

We are clearly currently not tackling the ecological crises in any commensurate manner. We're not on the right track towards the Great Transition. This is of course not the sole responsibility of progressive activists. But their current populist enemy narratives and approaches only exacerbate an already serious situation and will only lead to more extremism.

This will require a wholly new mind set and approach to sensemaking from everyone involved. According to the journalist Nafeez Ahmed, we have to "cultivate open, intersecting nodes of humble, critical,

self-reflective engagement in which new information is able to come in from multiple perspectives, to every perspective".[77]

The rest of this book will explore ideas and approaches that are – so I hope – more suitable to tackling the systemic complex problems we are facing.
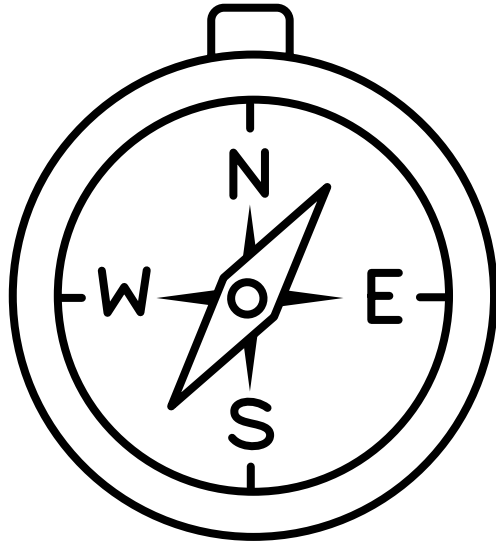
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THE BIOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SOCIETY

Part 2
Science

To this day, most visions for a better world that activists pursue and most theories of change that underpin their campaigns and movements are based on the idea that the human mind is shaped almost entirely by socialisation and culture and that human nature doesn't play a significant role in explaining human behaviour and the way we organise our societies.

However, among biologists and evolutionary psychologists it is completely undisputed that humans are not entirely shaped by the environment, but that we share a universal human nature. There is a large evidence base suggesting that most human behavioural traits can be explained at least partly by the genes that have been inherited.

In his book *The Blank Slate*, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker explains how the idea that we're born with empty minds (blank slate) became popular and remains so until today. The initial idea goes back to John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers who were aiming to undermine the religious dogmas of the time holding that people were born with "eternal truth" as well as a "notion of God".[1]

Since the beginning of the 20th century the doctrine of the blank slate has set the agenda for much of the social sciences and humanities. Pinker says:

> "The social sciences have sought to explain all customs and social arrangements as a product of the socialization of children by the surrounding culture: a system of words, images, stereotypes, role models and contingencies of reward and punishment. A long and growing list of concepts that would seem natural to the human way of thinking (emotions, kinship, the sexes, illness, nature, the world) are now said to have been [...] socially constructed."[2]

This thinking underpins the development of egalitarian visions and progressive politics. If there were no innate differences between individuals, then creating a society according to our values would depend only on shaping the environment, policies, parenting etc. Accordingly, observable differences between people could only be explained by different cultural socialisation or by structures of privilege and oppression.

Since its beginnings, sociology has developed theories to explain persisting social inequalities. The various versions of critical theory identified the structures of domination and oppression or explained how ideology had encoded, produced and reproduced relations of power and domination in language and people's minds. More recent academic fields like feminist studies, critical race theory and post-colonial studies adopted these variants of critical theory into their core. All of these disciplines proved to be highly influential in social justice activism (see also chapter 4).

Judith Butler, one of the most acclaimed gender theorists, entirely disassociates from the science of biology when she argues in her influential book *Gender Trouble* that "gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes", and even "perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender."[3]

Frequently, scientists who present evidence that human hardwiring affects human behaviour are denounced as racists, sexists, even Nazis. No doubt, the experience with eugenics in the first part of the 20th century is justification enough to be cautious with this type of science.[4] What motivates the denial of human nature is often well intentioned fear.

But these fears are not well founded for a number of reasons. First of all, human behaviour is only partly influenced by genes.

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The body of knowledge from evolutionary sciences can help us make more informed choices about which design features and which change strategies towards just and ecologically sustainable cultures are more likely to work and which aren't, given our biological predispositions.

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Human nature is not deterministic. An individual's genes provide a tendency for certain traits and behaviours, but the cultural circumstances often play a more important role in determining people's way of life.[5] Secondly, traits may differ on average between different groups, but this provides no moral justification to treat different groups differently. On the contrary, as Steven Pinker argues, "discriminating against people on the basis of race, sex or ethnicity would be unfair, penalising them for traits over which they have no control".[6]

Although I have personally never believed in the blank slate, I hadn't paid much attention to the specifics of human nature in my 15 years of working on strategies for systems change. It was not until recently that I saw how problematic it is that the foundations of psychology, sociology, political sciences and economics are often detached from the 'laws' of evolutionary biology.

But we need social sciences that are deeply rooted in biology. I'm now convinced that the body of knowledge from evolutionary sciences can help us make more informed choices about which design features and which change strategies towards just and ecologically sustainable cultures are more likely to work and which aren't, given our biological predispositions.

THE BIOLOGY OF SEX DIFFERENCES

To talk about differences between men and women has almost become a taboo in the mainstream sphere of the media and politics. Or at least they are rarely mentioned. Instead the question that is now in the news day in and day out is how equal representation of women can be achieved in all spheres of life and at all levels, in business, politics, academia and culture. Justice and equality are

directly equated with equality of outcome. The liberal-progressive mainstream sphere doesn't even allow for a discussion of arguments that divert from this mainstream narrative. Whenever there is resistance to the narrative, it is labelled as coming from those who are stuck in the past and who deny women their obvious rights. Clearly, implicit in all this is the intersectional worldview according to which all inequalities are the result of oppression, in this case the patriarchy.

Another typical example of how the issue of gender equality is being treated in our times is the issue of allegedly unequal pay. Every year when the statistics about the gender pay gap are released, the number that the mainstream media usually report on is the unadjusted pay gap that measures the difference between the average total annual salaries of women and men. According to this measure, Germany and the UK have some of the highest gender pay gaps in Europe, at around 21% in 2018.[7] Campaigners often use this indicator as a proof of discrimination of women. However, an honest discussion about what could constitute discrimination can only happen when the different factors that contribute to the gender pay gap and that can be explained are put on the table. For example, in the case of Germany, a large part of the gender pay gap can be explained due to the fact that many women in Germany work part time (they work less hours than men) and many women work in industries like education and care where the average pay is lower.

But most people would probably think that the best measure of fair pay for women would be to compare jobs at the same level and responsibility. This adjusted gender pay gap seems to be as low as 0.8% in the UK and 3% in Germany.[8]

Social justice is a complex question that cannot be measured by single indicators or by the question of equal representation. Is it discrimination if women work less hours or choose to not work for some time when they have children? Is it discrimination if women choose different professions than men and it happens that some of these professions have typically lower pay, like care professions?

I wouldn't be able to answer these questions with a yes or a no. I think all these questions are complex and have to be dealt with great care and open-mindedness. I am not convinced at all that the current inertia towards equality of outcome and equal representation in all professions and spheres of life is a good idea. My fear is that we all, women and men, and our societies as a whole, are losing out if we continue this pathway.

What is missing entirely from this discussion is a good level of evolutionary awareness – a common understanding of how we got to where we are now, men and women. We would gain from understanding and being honest about the fact that men and women are different. Our interests, skills and emotions are different. We might therefore (on average) not enjoy reaching total symmetry when it comes to roles in life. Women and men are very similar with regard to most human traits, but we have also evolved to be specialists due to our division of labour between the sexes throughout human history (until recently at least). This gene-culture co-evolution has brought along some important differences.

For example, research shows that on average, women are more interested in people, while men are more interested in things.[9] These differences in interest can explain to an important degree why there are many more male than female computer scientists and engineers while women prefer professions like nursing, medicine etc. In the most gender-equal countries like Sweden gender differences in occupational choices are higher than in less gender-equal countries, which can be seen as an indicator of such evolutionary differences.[10]

Men and women are different for historical reasons. The basis for that difference and the utility of that difference has largely been neutralised by the modern world. We don't need to retain those distinctions. But some of those distinctions are built in on a deeper level than others.

Bret Weinstein[11]

Other differences that can be found across cultures include that on average men are more physically violent, tend to compete more aggressively among each other and are more inclined to take risks than women. On average, women experience basic emotions more intensely, have more intimate relationships, feel more empathy towards their friends and are also more agreeable than men. Instead of using physical violence, women tend to compete more through verbal means, including gossip. Men tend to be more polygamous, while women tend to invest more into nurturing offspring after birth.[12]

All these were adaptive traits in our evolutionary history, but due to technological progress most work can now be done equally by women and men.

First-wave and second-wave feminist movements have brought along great empowerment for women and have succeeded in giving women access to most of the societal roles that were formerly reserved to men.

However, the attempts to achieve total symmetry in all spheres of society put pressure on women to work in domains that many of them might not enjoy due to their evolutionary heritage. Also, it is already the case that many women don't consider full-time motherhood as an option for them because there is strong societal pressure against it.

Many progressive activists believe that the gender and sex binaries have to be overcome because they are supposedly social constructs, while ignoring the biological truth. Their morality that is entirely focused on social justice stands in conflict with a broader moral sense that cares about the health of society as a whole. One of the fatal long-term results of this might be that Western culture

disappears because it doesn't produce enough babies, which then would be, within the logic of natural selection, a (social justice) culture that is maladapted.

We will continue the conversation in the coming chapters about how we want to retool our culture in an evolutionarily aware way so that both sexes and our societies as a whole can thrive.

THE BIOLOGY OF COOPERATION AND SELF-INTEREST

Before we continue, I need to clarify something: it's not true that all findings from evolutionary biology have encountered the same fear and rejection, as is the case, for example, with findings about differences between individuals and groups. In particular, Darwinian research has always been used to justify all kinds of different political philosophies and economic orders, from communism to classical liberalism.[13]

In recent times I have seen a striking number of articles and mentions in the progressive activist world all more or less saying that we got it all wrong with the idea that humans are selfish creatures, predisposed to compete and fight for survival in the market place, that in reality what makes us human is our capacity to cooperate and care for others. This often goes along with a rejection of the metaphor of *Homo economicus*, the self-interest-driven abstraction of man in classical economic theory. The argument is usually used explicitly or implicitly to reject capitalism and the competitive market economy and to advocate instead in favour of economic models that are based on collaboration and not on competition.

The basic idea of this is entirely true. What makes humans truly distinctive from other primates, including from chimpanzees, is that we are especially cooperative.[14] Moreover, it is the secret of our

success. Without this ability we wouldn't have been able to build a civilisation as astonishing as ours.

However, I believe that the progressive narrative about humans' true cooperative nature is an ideologically motivated oversimplification (or possibly even a false antagonism) that can lead to wrong conclusions. To start with, whatever knowledge we put forward about our human ability to cooperate, we should not immediately jump to conclusions about which economic system is more suitable.

Capitalism is often described as a system driven by greed and brutal competition. But from another perspective the success of capitalism has only been possible within the context of human cooperation at all levels. Michael Tomasello notes:

> "The rules that empower individual self-interest in capitalist markets are thus like the rules that empower a tennis player's self-interest in defeating an opponent, that is, within the context of the cooperative rules that constitute the game in the first place."[15]

The rules of evolution don't care about morality, at least not in principle. From an evolutionary perspective, the question that one has to ask is if an attribute represents an 'evolutionarily stable strategy'. Does it contribute to an individual's 'evolutionary fitness' in a stable, persistent way over time? Does it enhance a group's survivability? From this perspective, both self-interest and altruism/cooperative behaviour have been important features of our evolutionary success.

I think it is important that we not dismiss self-interest and competition as anachronisms that should be forgotten in the future. Let's be conscious that competition is a deep-seated drive that was responsible for most of our evolution. Jonathan Haidt says we're 90% chimps and 10% bees. He doesn't say this to dismiss the

When I say that human nature is selfish, I mean that our minds contain a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our own interests, in competition with our peers. When I say that human nature is also groupish, I mean that our minds contain a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our group's interests, in competition with other groups. We are not saints, but we are sometimes good team players.

Jonathan Haidt

importance of cooperative "bee-like" behaviour, but to stress that most of human evolution has been attributable to individual natural selection due to self-interest. We still have much in common with chimps, but on top of the individual self-interest-driven evolution, we have learned to cooperate. Jonathan Haidt states:

> "When I say that human nature is selfish, I mean that our minds contain a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our own interests, in competition with our peers. When I say that human nature is also groupish, I mean that our minds contain a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our group's interests, in competition with other groups. We are not saints, but we are sometimes good team players."[16]

Over the last million years or so, our ancestors evolved the ability to learn from each other, creating the possibility of cultural evolution.

According to Tomasello, humans alone are capable of shared intentionality – they intuitively grasp what another person is thinking and act towards a common goal. He states: "Human infants already have special skills for creating with other persons joint goals, joint intentions and joint attention, and special motivations for helping and sharing with others – and for communicating with and learning from others within these special interactions as well."[17]

The anthropologists Peter Richerson and Rob Boyd have argued that cultural and genetic evolution are intertwined; they co-evolve. Genes influence culture and culture influences genes. Such gene-cultural co-evolution has facilitated the transition from small-group collaborative settings to the conditions that enabled cooperation across large groups.[18] It's how we developed our groupish instincts that make us love joining teams and then compete between teams.

The mechanisms that humans evolved and that are required for a human social group to function as an organised unit are complex. Importantly, they are not simply the consequence of the noble motives of people wanting the world to be a better place.[19]

Humans evolved an ability to learn and conform to social norms and developed emotions like shame and guilt due to the need to be accepted by the group. We generated simple ways like gossiping to make people conform to norms. We also developed ways to display group identity to develop a sense of 'we' and show that one is a trustworthy partner.[20]

The effect of these mechanisms was that non-conformists within groups were punished (or selected against) and that more cohesive groups were more successful when they competed for territory and resources with less cohesive groups.

We can see from this short summary about the evolution of cooperation that there is no antagonism between competition and cooperation. Instead both play their part in our evolutionary history and how we are today. We can certainly say that *Homo economicus* is not a good description of human nature. As a result of our gene-culture co-evolution we are at our best when we cooperate in groups, and we often do so. However, the science is also clear that selfishness is not a social construction. The idea of the noble savage and that greed (and violence) are the product of civilisation, popularised in 1755 by Rousseau, is untrue.

What we should keep in mind if we want to design new economic, political and social institutions is that cooperation is not an easy task. Successful institutions require clear social norms and strong enforcement mechanisms. As Jonathan Haidt says, humans are no saints, and we often cheat.

Many experiments in social psychology and neuroscience with humans and with children have shown how easy it is to make people strongly identify with one group and to discriminate against members of an outgroup.

THE BIOLOGY OF TRIBALISM

There is a flipside to the human ability to care about our teams thriving and to compete peacefully between teams. We sometimes turn against people who are not part of our group, and we sometimes do this violently.

Many experiments in social psychology and neuroscience with humans and with children have shown how easy it is to make people strongly identify with one group and to discriminate against members of an outgroup.[21] According to Haidt the human mind must be genetically programmed for tribalism. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt note:

> "Tribalism is our evolutionary endowment for banding together to prepare for intergroup conflict. When the tribe switch is activated, we bind ourselves more tightly to the group, we embrace and defend the group's moral matrix, and we stop thinking for ourselves. A basic principle of moral psychology is that 'morality binds and blinds', which is a useful trick for a group for gearing up for battle between 'us' and 'them'. In tribal mode, we seem to go blind to arguments and information that challenge our team's narrative."[22]

But while we're all wired for tribalism, whether we behave and live in tribal ways depends on the conditions. The more intergroup conflict one perceives, the more one's tribal circuits get switched on, and vice versa.

I have the impression that neither in civil society nor in the wider political domain is there sufficient attention being paid to the true mechanisms governing how tribal conflicts appear and how

they can be avoided. What's worse, in most cases, it seems there is total ignorance. The most common dynamic in the many identity-based conflicts that we experience is the continuous escalation of tribalism and outrage.

We need to develop strategies that help flip the tribe switch off or that help to keep it switched off. More about this later.

THE BIOLOGY OF MORALITY

In his book *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt shows how human morality has its roots in the moral intuitions children are born with. This is what Haidt calls the "first draft of morality". Children then apply these intuitions in their particular culture, and the first draft gets revised by the child's experiences. Studies on identical twins who were separated at birth show that genes contribute to about every aspect of our personalities, including political orientation and the degree of religiosity.

Haidt found a wide variety of moral systems governing human societies. These are all based on a common set of six moral foundations shared by all humans (Moral Foundations Theory[23]):

1. Care: protecting others; opposite of harm

2. Fairness or proportionality: rendering justice according to shared rules; opposite of cheating

3. Loyalty or in-group: standing with your group, family, nation; opposite of betrayal

4. Authority or respect: submitting to tradition and legitimate authority; opposite of subversion

5. Sanctity or purity: abhorrence for disgusting things, foods, actions; opposite of degradation

6. Liberty: resenting and resisting any sign of attempted domination; opposite of oppression*

> + The original Moral Foundations Theory was based on five identified foundations. Further research revealed moral attitudes that could not be accounted for by this first set. With Liberty/oppression a sixth foundation was added.

Figure 1. Relationship between political leanings and how relevant a foundation is to making a moral judgment.[24]
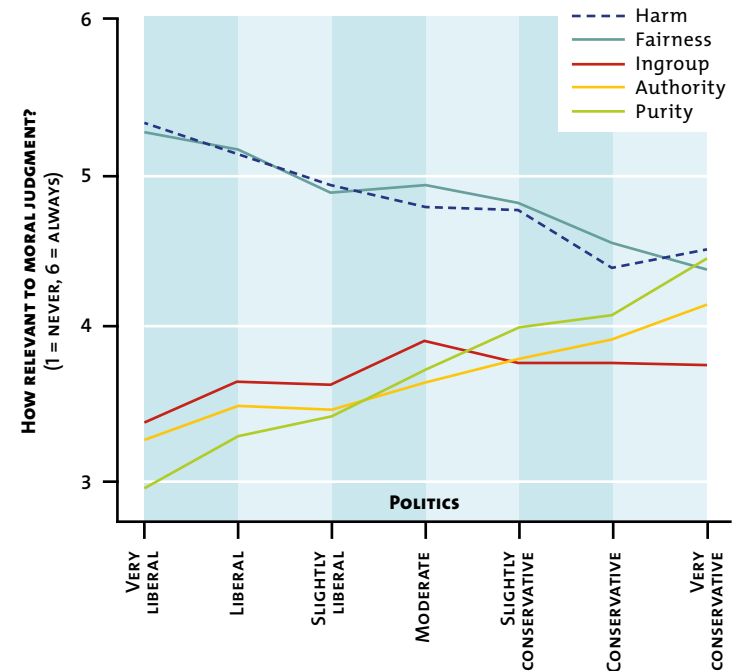
In more traditional societies across the world, all six moral foundations can be found in more or less equal strength. When compared to the rest of the world, the Western urban well-educated liberal progressive class (also identified as WEIRD[25] people) is an exception. Their morality is mostly based on care and to a slightly

lesser degree on liberty and fairness, whereas they are often suspicious of calls to loyalty, authority and sanctity. Empathy for those who are suffering and the willingness to help them is their highest moral good. On the other hand the more rural, more working-class and more conservative population in Western countries care more equally about all six moral foundations and in this sense resemble most of the rest of the world. Figure 1 shows this remarkable difference in morality between left-leaning and conservative U.S. citizens.

Reading *The Righteous Mind* for the first time was an eye-opening experience for me. It suddenly all made sense: all the different political polarisations we're seeing, the ideological divides and the fact that everybody's convinced that the other side is totally wrong and even evil. It's because our moralities differ, but we're ignorant about this being the case.

Moral Foundations Theory hasn't been without its critics, mainly from the progressive side. A typical critique on this broader perspective on morality is that the loyalty or in-group foundation might lead to discriminative behaviour and authority or respect to authoritarianism and oppression. Therefore, so the critique goes, these dimensions cannot be moral but are rather immoral.[26]

I don't think these critics are right. First, Moral Foundations Theory is of a descriptive nature. It explains what is, not what ought to be. It is not designed as a moral guide for the 21st century. Second, any virtue carried to excess can become a vice. None of the moral foundations bears only positive consequences. Even an excess in caring about the vulnerable can be perceived as unfair by others and can destabilise group cohesion. There are trade-offs to consider between the foundations. And third, all foundations transcend the self and the immediate self-interest. They are about caring for

Moral Foundation	Adaptive Challenge it evolved in response to	Description
Care/ Harm	Caring for vulnerable children	Makes us sensitive to suffering and predisposes us to help those in need
Fairness/ Cheating	Punishing free riders	Makes us concerned about proportionality and karma – others should get what they deserve
Loyalty/ Betrayal	Creating and sustaining cohesive coalitions	Makes us sensitive as to whether or not others are team players, and encourages us to ostracise those who betray our group
Authority/ Subversion	Forming relationships that benefit us at various levels with social hierarchies	Makes us sensitive to people's rank, class and status, and to signs that they are behaving according to their position
Liberty/ Oppression	Keeping tyrants, bullies and alpha males from becoming too powerful	Makes us resent anything that feels like attempted domination or oppression
Sanctity/ Degradation	Knowing which foods were safe to eat and maintaining clean surroundings	Makes it possible for us to invest objects with seemingly irrational value, which helps to bind groups togehter

other individuals as well as for the wellbeing and functioning of the group. I believe that this is a good definition for morality.

There is an evolutionary (Darwinian) explanation for each of these foundations, as shown in figure 2. Haidt believes that all moral foundations have been essential tools that enabled the success of human civilisation.

The morality of WEIRD people has helped to protect individuals and has advanced individual rights. Social justice (care and fairness) has made the world a better place with less discrimination and oppressions. But authority, loyalty and sanctity have been important tools as well in human evolution. They helped bind people together

and thereby helped advance human cooperation and the building of civilisation.

This research doesn't have a normative character. But it can provide us with a dose of realism. There is more to morality than social justice. If activists and civil society organisations want to develop ideas and strategies for a better world, it matters to know what most people in most of the world actually value. And possibly the morality of non-WEIRD people bears some wisdom about how to run societies that we can (re-)learn from.

The current political landscape makes it more urgent and more important than ever to leave our WEIRD bubble and identify pathways for society where people with differing moralities can peacefully co-exist. We need to face our cultural and genetic evolutionary past if we want to design societies that function well.

We will continue this conversation in the coming chapters.

Next, we will have a closer look at the reasons why authority became a moral foundation and whether we can draw any conclusions for what to do about hierarchies in today's and tomorrow's societies.

THE BIOLOGY OF HIERARCHY

Without doubt, hierarchies can lead to abuse of power, to oppression, domination and inequality. It is therefore understandable that many progressive activists want to eliminate hierarchies altogether and 'go horizontal' in organisations, communities and societies at large. The hope is that this will lead to liberation, personal autonomy and self-fulfilled lives for all as well as eliminate all oppression and inequalities.

This sounds like an attractive idea – except that most people (that is, most non-WEIRD people) on the planet value hierarchy as an important feature of their societies and that societies, small or large, without some kind of legitimate authority rarely survive in the long run.[28]

Professor of psychology Jordan Peterson argues that "dominance hierarchies are older than trees".[29] Hierarchy is an organising principle that can be observed everywhere in nature, within organisms and in animal life. Researchers found out that hierarchy is an ubiquitous organizing principle in biology because it drives down the cost of connection in networks.[30]

Social hierarchies have a biological origin – they are the result of gene-cultural co-evolution. Theories that try to explain the existence of today's social hierarchies purely on the basis of social construction are clearly false.

According to anthropologist Christopher Boehm, all humans are innately prepared to engage in dominance and submission behaviour: "The African great apes with which we share an ancestor have marked social dominance hierarchies with authoritative leadership, and so do humans living in chiefdoms, kingdoms and states."[31] But we also know that in the early stages of human history, hunter/gatherer groups were largely egalitarian and their leaders had little authority, if any. According to Boehm this was because they practiced what he calls "reverse dominance hierarchy". The goal of reverse dominance hierarchy is to restrain physically powerful and aggressive men through the use a variety of social mechanisms ranging from gossip and ridicule to expulsion and even capital punishment.[32]

There is an important distinction to be made between dominance hierarchies and prestige hierarchies. Professor Nicholas Christakis argues:

> "In most animal species status is usually equivalent with dominance and is measured by physical power

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In human evolution,
authority became an important
social function. Without
respect for authority it
is difficult to maintain
sensitivity to social
rules. When authority
works properly, authority
is perceived as legitimate
asymmetry, not as inherently
exploitative coercive power.

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and the costs, or potential harm, that an animal can inflict on others. [...] In dominance hierarchies, subordinates are afraid of their superiors and try to avoid them. But subordinates in prestige hierarchies are attracted to their superiors and try to get near them – to befriend, observe, copy and otherwise benefit from them."[33]

In human evolution, authority became an important social function. Human authorities take on responsibility for maintaining order and justice through the enforcement of norms and laws. Without respect for authority it is difficult to maintain sensitivity to social rules. When authority works properly, authority is perceived as legitimate asymmetry, not as inherently exploitative coercive power.[34] Hannah Arendt had a similar positive understanding of the concept that she thought was necessary for political progress.[35]

In their book *Hierarchy and Value*, anthropologists Jason Hickel and Naomi Haynes reflect on anthropologists' experiences with hierarchy in traditional societies across the world and conclude that in many places hierarchy "is central to local understandings of the good" and that "hierarchy is much more than power and certainly much more than inequality". They even argue that in these communities "hierarchy may in fact be a key way of resisting the atomising effects" of neo-liberalism and highlight "the importance of taking seriously seemingly illiberal, hierarchical ways of organising social life and being in the world".[36]

Biologist Peter Turchin argues:

"The only way to achieve a lasting positive change at the society's level is through effective political organisation, which in humans means chains of command. Of course, once leaders emerge there is a

terrible temptation for them to subvert their social power to their selfish purposes. This is why the first centralized societies quickly became despotisms. But then cultural group selection started weeding out the most despotic societies, resulting in the evolution of norms and institutions that began to restrain the worst excesses of power abuse."[37]

But what has changed with the internet? We now live in a network society, as is so often said. Does this change the way we have to look at hierarchies? Definitely; the internet is the reason that authority is now questioned at all levels, from experts to governments and institutions. Instead, decentralised horizontal structures and networks shall now rule the world, as so many people think. The historian Niall Fergusson is very sceptical:

> "Those who favour a revolutionary world run by networks will end up not with the interconnected utopia of their dreams but with Hobbes's state of nature, in which malign actors exploit opportunities to spread virus-like memes and mendacities. Worse, they may end up entrenching a new but unaccountable hierarchy. For here is a truth that is too often glossed over by the proponents of networked governance: many networks are hierarchically structured."[38]

Networks are usually not free from hierarchies. Those who have more connections have more power, the difference being that instead of vertical, its horizontal power. Also, the internet is now dominated by Google, Facebook, Amazon. They have enormous, largely unaccountable power.

We don't know to what extent the internet has the potential to reduce or eliminate hierarchies as we know them. There are many ideas, experiments and hopes, some of which we will discuss in chapters 8 and 9.

For now the conclusion is that we must acknowledge the importance that hierarchies have played in human evolution and the important role authority has had in enabling human cooperation through the enforcement of norms, without which increasingly complex societies would have collapsed.

THE BIOLOGY OF GROWTH

If we want to move to a post-growth society, where the economy functions well without having to grow relentlessly and where most people are happy without wanting to accumulate ever more material wealth, there are still many unresolved questions about how that would work and how to get there. But there is one question that is important to ask first: is there a human biological predisposition that underpins our growth-addicted economy?

Some social scientists believe that economic growth is not something natural to human beings but that it was invented in the 18th century when the modern market economy took shape and technological progress created the conditions for economic growth in ways that were formerly almost inexistent. The social psychologist Harald Welzer argues that it was during that time of early industrialisation that the concept of growth also entered our minds, or what he calls *mental infrastructures*.[39]

In contrast, evolutionary biologist Bret Weinstein is convinced that there is a deeper human drive that underpins our pursuit of economic growth: "Growth is what winning feels like in evolutionary terms."[40] According to Weinstein, humans are (by nature) interested

in discovering opportunities that might increase human wellbeing. Throughout history humans have been able to do this through the discovery and occupation of new land and through the development of new technologies that allowed them to produce more food and stuff with the same piece of land. Whenever humans can do this without interfering with other populations – for example, when moving into previously unoccupied land – these are positive-sum opportunities. We're programmed to capture new resources and use them either to feed new additional offspring or to consume more stuff.

However, when a population runs out of positive-sum opportunities, but realises that another population is not capable of defending its resources, what has often happened in human history is that these resources are captured through war, genocide or other unpleasant ways – a zero-sum game.

Weinstein believes that in our current times we have reached a situation where we have run out of opportunities for positive-sum growth and that this might be an explanation for the many instances of tribalism that we can observe currently (we actually might have to add this idea to the list of causes of authoritarianism and nationalism discussed in chapter 3).

Weinstein points out this crucial weak spot in human nature in such a direct way. The message is always the same: humans are capable of marvellous things, but we're unfortunately also programmed to commit the worst atrocities under certain conditions. We need to be aware of these predispositions, because it's the only way to avoid repeating the worst errors in human history. And most importantly, we have to find a way forward where 8 billion people can find opportunities for fulfilment and wellbeing without continuing to destroy the very conditions for life that we all depend on, the natural

environment. We will discuss what this could look like in chapter 9.

Next we will have a look at the patterns of how human culture has evolved over the course of human history and how the science of cultural evolution can offer important insights for how we can evolve in the future in order to adapt fast enough to the new conditions on Earth.

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INTENTIONAL CULTURAL EVOLUTION: THE KEY TO TACKLING COMPLEX PROBLEMS

In the previous chapter we explored some of the biological predispositions that humans universally share, and we saw that – contrary to the pure theories of social construction – genes do in fact play a role in shaping human behaviour and the way we run our societies. To be clear, I'm not guilty of the naturalistic fallacy[41] here: I'm not arguing that because human nature is the way it is, it must be good, and we should organise society accordingly. We don't have to consider our genetic evolutionary heritage a positive thing, but we do have to consider it a driver of human behaviour. Whatever changes in our society, in our political and economic system we would like to see, a good understanding of human nature can help us make better choices.

But there is another body of knowledge that is too often ignored and that I believe to be hugely important for all of us who want to find better ways to change the world: the emerging science of cultural evolution.

Evolutionary scientists Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd define culture as "information capable of affecting individuals' behaviour that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation and other forms of social transmission". They argue that "culture affects the success and survival of groups; as a result, some cultural variations spread and others diminish, leading to evolutionary processes that are every bit as real and important as those that shape genetic variations. These culturally evolved environments then affect which genes are favoured by natural selection. Over the evolutionary long haul, culture has shaped our innate psychology as much as the other way around."[42] As such, cultural evolution is part of our biological evolution.

Ironically, while historians, sociologists and anthropologists surely see culture as an important element in describing human behaviour

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To move forward in our quest to better understand human life, we need to embrace a new kind of evolutionary science, one that focuses on the rich interaction and coevolution of psychology, culture, biology, history and genes.

Joe Henrich[43]

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and social life, they often fail to see its connection with biology. On the other hand, evolutionary psychologists and many economists understand the importance of human nature, but they often ignore the role culture plays in human affairs. However, it is fundamental to understand how cultural and genetic evolution are intertwined.[44]

Evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson, one of the pioneers in the field of cultural evolution, believes that the main contribution of evolutionary theory is that it provides "a general explanatory framework that identifies why best practices work and how they can spread across all domains of knowledge and policy applications". Wilson says: "There is no question in my mind that 'this view of life' is the wave of the future. The main question is how soon it will arrive and whether it will be in time to avert the potential disasters that confront us."[45]

I think there are good reasons to believe that tapping into the science of cultural evolution and adopting an evolutionary worldview will be very useful towards more effectively tackling the big problems of our time.

Before we delve into cultural design, we need to learn how cultural evolution has brought us to where we are now.

HOW CULTURE EVOLVES

What distinguishes humans from other apes like chimpanzees or gorillas are not significantly better cognitive abilities, like information processing speed or working memory: humans are not *especially* intelligent. Where humans do stand out from the crowd of primates is our superior social learning qualities. Cultural evolution is the consequence of genetically evolved psychological adaptations for learning from other people.[46]

Typically, humans don't choose the information they learn via some kind of rational selection mechanism. It's much simpler than that: we possess a number of genetically evolved intuitions that help us choose from whom to learn. We tend to copy cultural information (e.g., about tools, beliefs, norms, economic strategies etc.) from successful people and those who have gained high levels of prestige in our group. We might also prefer copying older people or those who share our sex or ethnicity. Often, we choose to copy a trait that a majority in our group holds.

To develop a complete picture about the way cultural evolution works, we need to remind ourselves that we are social animals, that we are well adapted to social life. We respond to social norms and often prefer to interact with people that share a common group identity. Social norms emerged from our ability to learn from each other and are a crucial part of cooperation in any small group or large society. Because they harness aspects of our genetically evolved psychology, social norms are very powerful. Richerson and Boyd argue: "In culturally evolved environments in which prosocial norms are enforced by systems of sanction and reward, individual [natural] selection will favour psychological predispositions that make individuals more likely to gain social rewards and avoid social sanctions."[47]

According to one explanation that most cultural evolution scientists now subscribe to, social norms became widespread through competition between groups.

+ The question of whether cultural (and genetic) evolution happens through selection at the level of groups or exclusively at the level of the individual has been the subject of controversy among evolutionary biologists for decades. The nuances of the different views are sometimes a bit confusing for non-experts, but from my humble perspective, the case for cultural evolution happening through competition between groups at different levels is convincing and useful as a model to work with.

Joe Henrich, chair of the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University, argues:

> "Different groups culturally evolve different social norms. Having norms that increase cooperation can favour success in competition with other groups that lack these norms. Over time, intergroup competition can aggregate and assemble packages of social norms that more effectively promote such success, and these packages will include social norms related to cooperation, helping, sharing and maintaining internal harmony."[48]

There are a number of different ways groups can compete (and social norms can spread): one is through violent conflict (like war), where one group eliminates or assimilates another group with different social norms as a result of having better institutions, better cooperation or a technological or economic advantage. Other types of competition are non-violent, like when a group has institutions that are more cooperative and the group is better equipped for expanding into new ecological niches in harsh environments; groups with superior institutions outlast those with weaker or fewer norms. Another alternative is when individuals migrate into more successful groups from less successful ones. Or better social norms might lead to a higher rate of offspring in a group, allowing a culture to spread faster than others. And finally individuals can be inclined to learn from members of more successful groups, leading to a flow via cultural transmission from those groups to less successful ones. Over the course of time, these different intergroup processes aggregate and re-combine different social norms to create increasingly pro-social institutions.[49]

Monogamous marriage is one example of a prestige-based

cultural transmission that was highly successful and spread across the globe, with most countries today prohibiting polygamous marriage. The evolutionary explanation for this phenomenon is that monogamous societies reliably outcompete polygamous ones. In polygynous societies a few rich men get most of the women while many men are left with none. Research shows that marriage in monogamous societies lowers men's testosterone levels, which leads to a reduction in violence and crimes. Meanwhile, in polygynous societies, there is no drop in testosterone levels because both married and non-married men are still pursuing romantic partners. As a result, these societies generally show higher levels of violence. The data show that countries where polygamy is outlawed are more successful than those where it isn't.[50] Joe Henrich states:

> "Monogamous marriage may act as a kind of society-wide testosterone suppression system. [...] The psycho-logical effects of this unusual package of marriage norms may be precisely the reason for its successful global spread in the last few hundred years."[51]

In light of these findings, we might have to look at the more recent phenomenon of incels (involuntary celibates) from a fresh perspective.[52]

> + Wikipedia defines incels as "members of an online subculture who define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, a state they describe as inceldom. Self-identified incels are largely white and are almost exclusively male heterosexuals. [...] Discussions in incel forums are often characterized by resentment, misanthropy, self-pity, self-loathing, misogyny, racism, a sense of entitlement to sex and the endorsement of violence against sexually active people."
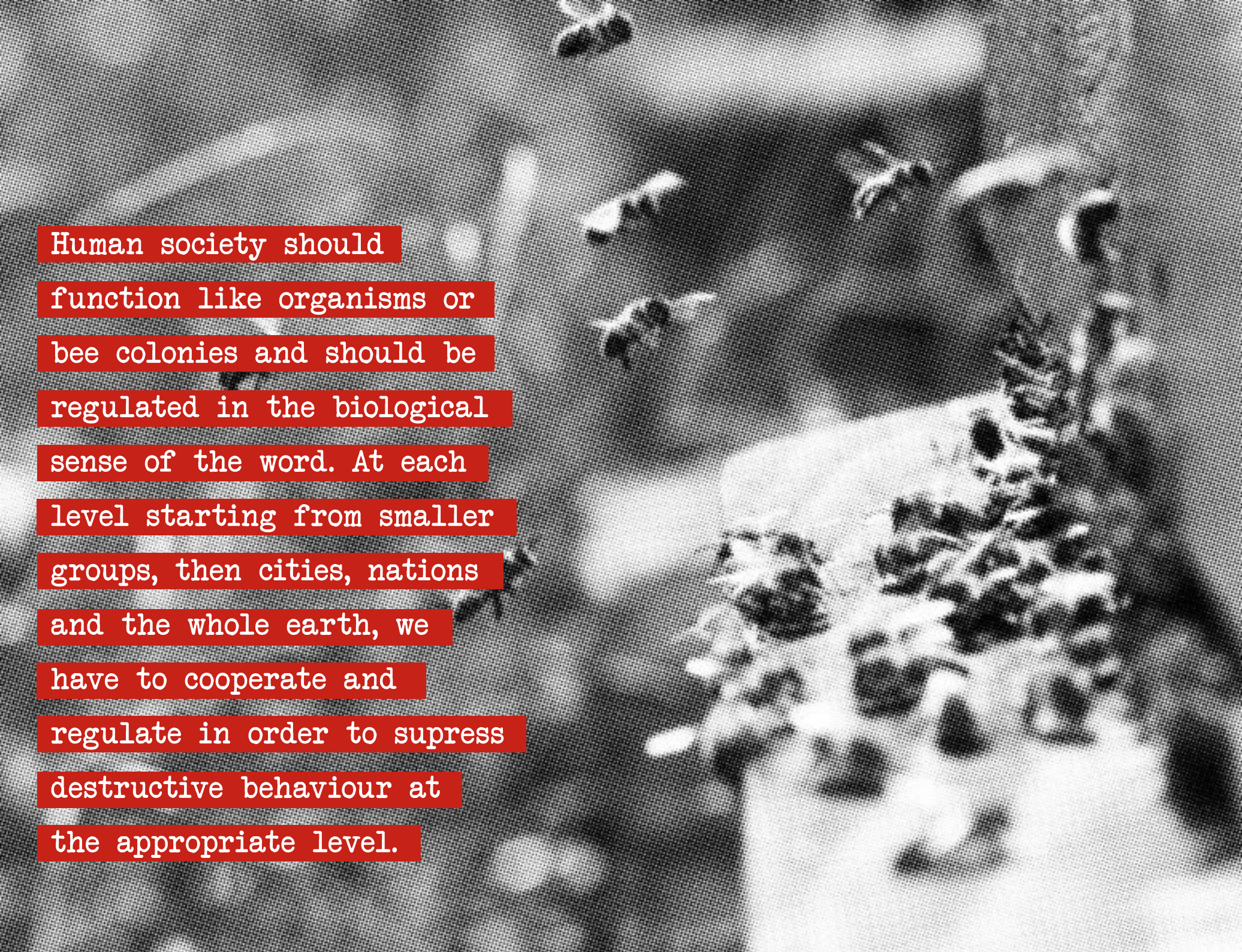
A large enough number of incels might become an indicator that successful institutions and norms of the past are failing and we're heading towards a more violent and unstable society.

In cultural evolution, social norms and their enforcement play a central role at all times. Social norms work best when they are highly intertwined with our evolved psychology, including our intuitions for shame and guilt. As such, effective cooperation is not so much about the selfless motives of individuals as it is about a functional system of norms and their enforcement aimed at suppressing self-serving behaviour that weakens the group or the society as a whole, regardless of the underlying motivation.

With this in mind, we can now analyse all kinds of different utopias, ideologies and existing systems and assess whether they are fit for purpose according to the insights we can draw from cultural evolution.

For example, many activists in the sphere of systemic change flirt with the vision that a societal system based on anarchism and horizontalism would emerge once the oppressive systems of patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, racism and sexism were eliminated.[53] Their hope – based on the Rousseauian belief that people are inherently good – is that "an ideal society of love and harmony will emerge".[54] But cultural evolution teaches us that a society without social norms and/or without mechanisms (and hierarchies) to enforce these norms will not function well and will ultimately collapse. Primatologist Richard Wrangham, who studied the way human culture has successfully suppressed humans' predisposition to violence, argues:

> "Destroy the old institutions without replacing them and violence will predictably emerge. Men will rapidly use alliances to compete for dominance: militia will bloom and fight. Male groups can confidently be predicted to use their physical power of coalitionary proactive aggression to dominate in the public sphere."[55]

Human society should function like organisms or bee colonies and should be regulated in the biological sense of the word. At each level starting from smaller groups, then cities, nations and the whole earth, we have to cooperate and regulate in order to supress destructive behaviour at the appropriate level.

A similar case to the one against anarchism can be made against the concept of *laissez-faire* or what we now call *neoliberalism*, which is based on the assumption that the market can self-regulate, and that via the famous mechanism of the *invisible hand** the market mechanism and the self-interest of its actors will serve the common good.

> + "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest..." (Adam Smith, The Wealth Of Nations, Book I, Chapter II, p. 26–7). According to Smith, the 'invisible hand' of the market allows self-interest to create wider societal wellbeing and spreads wealth across societies.

This is basically the economic system we're still stuck in and that – I'm guessing most readers would agree – needs to fundamentally change to serve human good. However, cultural evolution doesn't teach us that the market and competition are the problem in this case. Instead, what it teaches us is that we haven't set the norms and the rules for enforcement in such way that they suppress self-serving behaviour within the system. David Sloan Wilson argues that regulation in our human systems (like the economy) should be set such that the whole system functions like an organism that serves the wellbeing of the whole society. He believes that if we do this, we could again apply the metaphor of the *invisible hand* in a positive sense: "If by laissez-faire we mean a society that functions well without members of the society having its interest in mind, then nature is replete of examples."[56]
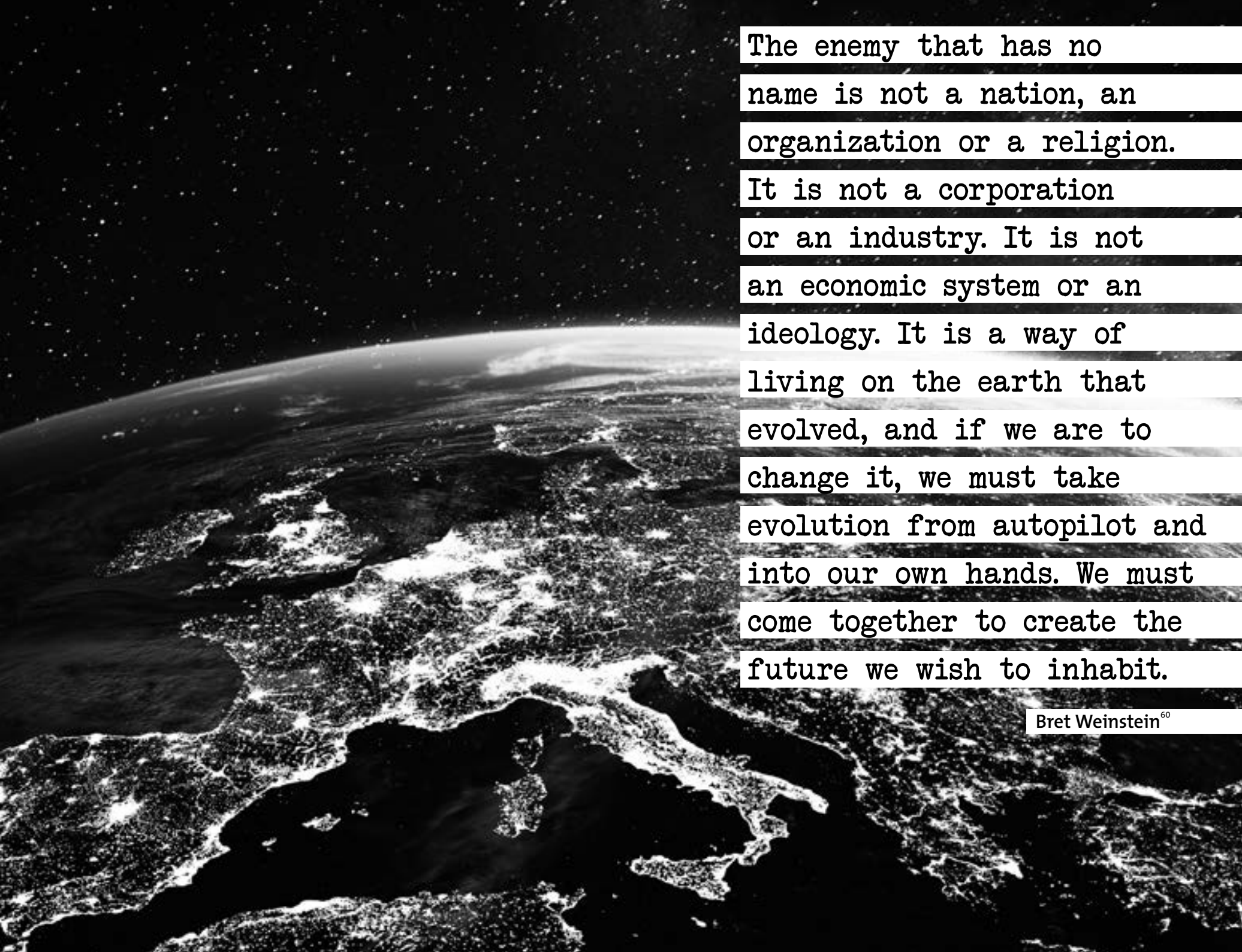
A good example from nature is the beehive: bees are genetically programmed to serve the welfare of the bee colony, not because the bees individually have the welfare of the whole colony in mind, but because the whole system works towards this aim. A multicellular organism with its genes, cells and organs functions in a similar way.

Wilson argues that human society should function like organisms or bee colonies and should be regulated in the biological sense of the word. At each level starting from smaller groups, then cities, nations and the whole earth, we have to cooperate and regulate in order to supress destructive behaviour at the appropriate level.[57]

This is not just a futuristic concept. This so-called *multilevel selection* process describes the reality of how human evolution at the level of genes and culture operates. With all their flaws, the amazingly complex large-scale societies we live in are the result of our amazing capacity to cooperate among groups and compete between groups at different levels.[58] We have successfully cooperated relatively well up to the national level and have since also competed among nations.

This process is not finished. The biggest and most urgent problems of our times cannot be solved at the levels at which humans have achieved successful cooperation to date. Our civilisation and indeed the earth's ecological systems are highly interdependent and require a level of cooperation at the planetary level that we are unfortunately still far from reaching. Wilson says: "If we want the whole earth to become a superorganism, then multilevel selection theory tells us exactly what to do: make planetary welfare the target of selection."[59]

In the next chapter, we will explore the question of how to approach the issue of planetary governance from an evolutionary perspective. But before that, let's try being creative with all the knowledge from evolutionary biology that we have accumulated so far. Let's try to build a little toolbox for intentional cultural evolution.

The enemy that has no
name is not a nation, an
organization or a religion.
It is not a corporation
or an industry. It is not
an economic system or an
ideology. It is a way of
living on the earth that
evolved, and if we are to
change it, we must take
evolution from autopilot and
into our own hands. We must
come together to create the
future we wish to inhabit.

Bret Weinstein[60]

HOW WE CAN START TAKING EVOLUTION INTO OUR OWN HANDS

Most of the gene-culture co-evolution explained above has happened without intentionally steering human evolution in one direction or another in any conscious way. The result of evolution is the appearance of design with no designer. But now this has to change. Our own success as a species as a result of cumulative cultural evolution has brought us into an extremely dangerous situation.

Our only chance now to avoid the collapse of civilisation is to rapidly and intentionally change direction away from the precipice. This is of course what the Great Transition is about (as well as all our discussions in the Smart CSOs Lab).

As change agents for the Great Transition we need to become *wise managers of evolutionary processes*: we need to design social systems that have the welfare of the whole system in mind, and we need to do this before it's too late.

But unfortunately, humans are not very good at intentionally designing effective institutions and organisations.[61] This is mostly because we're dealing with self-organising non-linear complex social systems that are never fully predictable and are difficult to model.[62] What is clear is that traditional linear ways of solving complicated linear problems are usually unsuccessful or might even make matters worse when dealing with complex social systems. We have to operate with a high degree of uncertainty. The us-versus-them social justice activism I described in chapter 4 clearly falls into the category of linear approaches that tend to make things worse, even if the activist narratives promise to deliver the solution to all systemic problems.

It is not my intention here to depress the reader. On the contrary, our understanding about how to create positive change in complex systems is making important progress.

One approach to change in complex systems, which readers who have participated in past discussion at the Smart CSOs Lab will surely recognise, is the experimental approach of creating niches for systems innovation. In describing what we called the Smart CSOs Model for systems change, we argued: "Disruptive innovators creating the seeds of the new system require support and protected spaces to incubate their innovations. Innovation and transition studies show that if we can support these pioneers by helping them build communities of influence, they will become stronger, scale their innovations and eventually institutionalise a new system."[63]

'Real-world laboratories' are based on this philosophy. These experiments operate in real-world settings and are designed to contribute to societal learning on complex problems.[64] They are promising bottom-up approaches, especially when they are designed to connect people at the local level for friendship and cooperation.

However, what I will propose here is to go one step further: I believe that we can start creating an evolutionary toolkit based on the knowledge from evolutionary biology we have been exploring so far.

When we talk about uncertainty in complex systems, it's not that we are completely in the dark in our attempts to change the system. Complex social systems don't behave in a totally random way, but instead include patterns that create a tendency in the system in a particular way. Patterns are systematic relationships between the components of complex systems that are expected to endure for a period of time.[65] It is not always easy to identify patterns, and

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Our evolutionary past compels us universally to make a basic obligatory sort of society. This blueprint also means that societies have some shapes they cannot assume and some constraints that they must abide by. Humans can deviate from the blueprint – but only up to a point. When they deviate too much society collapses.

Nicholas Christakis

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patterns don't always stay stable for very long.

However, I believe that cultural evolution research has identified a range of patterns that are very stable across cultures and time. These certainly don't constitute all patterns that exist in our complex social systems, but they underpin all human social systems and are probably the most stable ones that can be found.

Nicholas Christakis, a professor at Yale University and the director of the university's Human Nature Lab, argues in his recent book *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*:

> "Our evolutionary past compels us universally to make a basic obligatory sort of society. This blueprint also means that societies have some shapes they *cannot* assume and some constraints that they must abide by [...]. Humans can deviate from the blueprint – but only up to a point. When they deviate too much [...] society collapses."[66]

Christakis analysed accidental (unintentional) communities that were built after shipwrecks, intentional communities like the Kibbutz and the urban communes from the 1960s as well as artificial online communities he created with his lab. From the experiences of these communities he identified a number of patterns shared by all successful societies. He calls these the "*blueprint*" or "*evolutionary baseline*" for a functional society; in other words these are the similarities across societies that are based on our genes. The blueprint determines, for example, that if a society is successful, it will have created the conditions for effective cooperation, will have accommodated humans' preference for one's own group and will display mild hierarchies.

The Secret of Our Success by Joe Henrich, in a similar spirit, includes a list of insights from cultural evolution that he proposes to use for

designing better organisations, policies and institutions.[67]

Drawing on some of these insights (in addition to a few others discussed so far in this book), the following is a first draft of an evolutionary toolkit. This selection (of evolutionary insights) is particularly relevant for our purpose of designing prototypes for new institutions as part of the Great Transition. For each insight I sketch out some ways for how we can best harness our evolutionary predispositions for the wellbeing of all. The rationale underlying this toolkit is that by paying attention to our evolutionary heritage it will be much easier to identify solutions and strategies that might actually work.

EVOLUTIONARY TOOLKIT

Our evolved predispositions:

- Learning mechanisms
- Reputation system
- Respect for authority and drive for gaining status
- Groupish instincts
- Morality
- The drive to care for ourselves and compete
- The drive for growth
- Differences between the sexes
- The tendency for confirmation bias and for motivated reasoning
- Failing danger triggers

Our evolved learning mechanisms

We use cues of prestige, success, sex, dialect and ethnicity to decide who to copy / learn from. We often don't respond to facts, but are selective cultural learners who acquire practices and respond to social norms.

> **How to make it work for the Great Transition**
> - Understanding how learning happens is important if we want people to acquire new norms and practices as part of the Great Transition.
> - We can't rely on teaching facts.
> - People with a status of prestige can play an important role as role models that many others are likely to copy (there is flexibility about which norms and practices are ready to be copied/learned) – the messenger is more important than the message.

Our evolved reputation system

Humans have evolved instincts like feeling guilt or shame and the tendency to gossip that make them well adapted to responding to social norms and cooperating.

> **How to make it work for the Great Transition**
> - When third parties monitor, reward and sanction, norm violators, free-riding and cheating can be supressed.
> - Sometimes social norms can remain stable (sticky) even when they are bad for everyone.
> - Social norms often come with internalised motivations

and ways of viewing the world (guiding our attention and memory).

- Crucially, there are ways of changing social norms to make them more prosocial, including for planetary wellbeing: people's motivations are not fixed. It is possible to change what people find desirable, automatic and intuitive.
- It's important to note that different societies possess quite different social norms. Social norms imported from elsewhere often create mismatches.

Our evolved respect for authority and drive for gaining status

Successful people gain status through prestige, dominant people through threat and coercion.

> **How to make it work for the Great Transition**
> - We should accept that hierarchies are in general essential elements for functional societies. Without authority it is difficult to maintain a sensitivity for social rules.
> - The usefulness of dominance hierarchies in modern societies is limited to situations of violence and war. It makes sense to suppress these through social norms and sanctions.
> - Prestige hierarchies can play an important positive role when the prestige is granted through actions that are positive for society, in our case, if they work for planetary wellbeing. Those who have been granted prestige status are often generous, prosocial and cooperative and in turn receive attention and respect.

Our evolved groupish instincts

Our evolved psychology that makes us adept at promoting our group's interests, in competition with other groups.

> **How to make it work for the Great Transition**
> - Groupishness goes hand in hand with humans' unique capacity for cooperation and learning. This is an enormous asset.
> - We should accept a certain level of in-group bias as part of human nature and shouldn't condemn it.
> - To avoid out-group hatred, it's important that group members not feel that their identity is threatened.
> - The goal should be a balance between group pride and cohesion and tolerance for outsiders, e.g., inclusive patriotism instead of exclusive nationalism.
> - Cross-cutting multiple identities foster a tolerant society.
> - The aim should be a strong and shared identity as Team Human without threatening all other identities. E.g., anti-nationalism is counterproductive.

Our evolved morality

Human morality is based on six moral foundations found across all cultures and linked to moral intuitions we're born with. WEIRD people care especially about individual justice and fairness, whereas people in most traditional cultures care as much about the stability of groups and institutions as for the individual.

> **How to make it work for the Great Transition**
> - As people in WEIRD cultures, we need to recognise that our extreme focus on individual rights and social justice

is indeed weird (rare) and leads to misunderstandings with non-WEIRD people.

• We need to learn to respect other moral worldviews.
• Further progress for social justice is still possible, but we need to learn that there are often trade-offs. Any virtue taken to the extreme can become a vice. E.g., trying to eliminate discrimination of one sub-group might discriminate another sub-group or destabilise the future of the whole group. A truly systemic approach takes into account all these aspects.
• The Great Transition requires a movement across all these different moral cultures beyond a purely WEIRD worldview.

Our evolved drive to care for ourselves and compete

Self-interest is part of human nature. Our evolved psychology makes us compete for sexual partners, status and winning (in general).

> **How to make it work for the Great Transition**
> • We should accept that self-interest is part of the game. It's only a problem if it leads to self-serving behaviour and stands in conflict with the common good.
> • If market competition can be configured to serve human needs, it's more than welcome.
> • We need to align the incentive of every agent with the wellbeing of everyone.
> • It's important that the market not occupy every sphere of life and allow for civic engagement and cooperative instincts to thrive.

Our evolved drive for growth

Humans are interested in discovering opportunities that might increase human wellbeing. Growth is what winning feels like in evolutionary terms.

> **How to make it work for the Great Transition**
> • It's important that we recognise the drive for growth as part of human nature.
> • As widespread material growth is not a realistic option on a finite planet, a future system should provide non-material opportunities for growth.
> • A system that provides a sense of material abundance would help avoid the tribal outbursts that often follow when populations run out of positive-sum opportunities for growth.

Our evolved differences between the sexes

Due to division of labour throughout most of human history, we have evolved some physical and psychological differences (on average).

> **How to make it work for the Great Transition**
> • The societal goal shouldn't be total symmetry because on average we don't have the same interests and aspirations.
> • It's better to focus on improving equal opportunities and having honest conversations to reach a situation of true partnership among equals where everybody is comfortable.

Our evolved tendency for confirmation bias and for motivated reasoning

Our tendency to favour information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs and to adjust our arguments accordingly.

> ### How to make it work for the Great Transition
> - No one is safe from these human biases. We should always keep that in mind.
> - An honest search for truth requires group compositions that are diverse with regard to ideology, discipline and ideas.

Our evolved danger triggers, which are failing

Humans have evolved the instinct to react quickly when we perceive immediate threats, but we ignore it when the threat is slow moving.

> ### How to make it work for the Great Transition
> - Climate change is too slow moving and still too far into the future to trigger our emotional response mechanisms to danger. It's not abrupt and in your face.
> - We rationally recognise that there is a major problem, but there is a divide between the rational and the emotional brain that is difficult to bridge.
> - To create proximity we need to emphasize that climate change is happening now and talk about past losses rather than future losses.
> - People's emotional brains need to be engaged (by trusted communicators) with narratives and frames that express the danger honestly but also tell a story of positive future change.[68] (We will explore this further in chapter 10.)

I'm sure this list doesn't do justice to our rich evolutionary heritage, which we should be considering when exploring intentional cultural evolution – it's a work in progress. Similarly, the conclusions about how these insights can help us design better institutions for the Great Transition are just a first sketch. We will continue this exploration into solutions and strategies in the coming chapters.

According to Christakis, the main conclusion to be had is that "we should be humble in the face of temptations to engineer society in opposition to our instincts".[69] It won't work.

Those of us who feel ready to become designers (or managers) of cultural evolution should establish multi-disciplinary teams and networks with others across the world who share this philosophy and these goals and start developing best practices. Joe Henrich proposes: "We should take a page from cultural evolution's playbook and design variation and selection systems that will allow alternative institutions or organisational forms to compete. We can dump the losers, keep the winners and hopefully gain some insights during the process."[70]

To implement evolutionary processes, we should identify the right targets of selection, monitor planned and unplanned variation and replicate best practices, knowing that their implementation will be highly sensitive to context.[71] Wilson argues: "If we don't become *wise managers of evolutionary processes*, then evolution will still take place but will lead to outcomes that are not aligned with our normative goals."[72]

It is certainly not a simple task to set up such evolutionary processes and set the right targets of selection. One of the challenges is the large amount of work that needs to be put into integrating the various fragmented behavioural sciences into a common framework, a

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**If we don't become wise
managers of evolutionary
processes, then evolution
will still take place
but will lead to outcomes
that are not aligned
with our normative goals.**

David Sloan Wilson

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'science of intentional change'.[73] All of this needs to be integrated with the sciences of the earth system in order to understand what type of actions can reliably restore ecosystems and avoid further damage while meeting human needs.[74]

While this is not the place to enter into deeply scientific and theoretical discussions, we will keep this in mind for our further exploration.

In chapter 10 we will explore how prototyping can be a practical approach to systematically applying the evolutionary toolkit and designing for cultural evolution.

With such a broad systems perspective in mind, the next step of our journey is to examine some of the emerging solutions and building blocks of a better system.
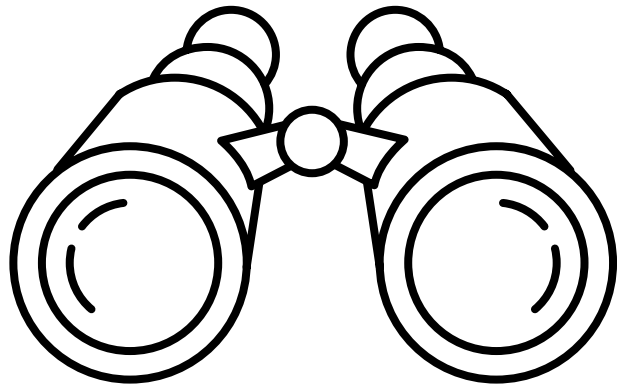
Part 3
Solutions

8

LIVING TOGETHER AS LOCAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CITIZENS

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Dear fellow citizens, somehow
we have to get along with
each other. Let's try to learn
to live together and get
along in a reasonable way,
instead of perpetuating the
spiral of escalation, as is
happening in many Western
countries at the moment.

Thea Dorn[1]

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To address polarisation and the crisis of democracy people have to regain a sense of identity, stability and belonging. On the other hand, to address the climate crisis and other global problems, we need to transcend our smaller identities and care about the wellbeing of all citizens on the planet.

Can we find workable ways of organising our societies into such a balancing act? Let's see.

PATRIOTISM

It wasn't that long ago that I thought it a good idea to eliminate all borders and get rid of the whole idea of nations, nationality etc. It's a social construction anyway, and national interest now so often stands in the way of effective global collaboration. But I have changed my opinion. Although not entirely. I still agree with Yuval Noah Harari:

> "In previous centuries national identities were forged because humans faced problems and opportunities that were far beyond the scope of local tribes, and that only countrywide cooperation could hope to handle. In the twenty-first century, nations find themselves in the same situation as the old tribes: they are not the right framework to manage the most important challenges of age. We need a new global identity because national institutions are incapable of handling a set of unprecedented global predicaments. We now have a global ecology, a global economy and a global science, but we are still stuck with only national politics."[2]

It is necessary that we build an identity as a member of Team

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Over recent decades, the European left had come to support a form of multiculturalism that downplayed the importance of integrating immigrants into the national culture. Under the banner of antiracism it looked the other way from evidence that assimilation wasn't working.

Francis Fukuyama

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Human, but I'm now convinced that we can't achieve this if we allow a significant part of our societies to feel that their national identity is threatened. As we're seeing in our current political climate, it inevitably backfires. Enough people in Europe and North America and beyond hold tight to their national identity and are willing to defend it, through strong nationalist authoritarian leaders if needed.

There are good moral reasons to argue in favour of tearing all borders down and allowing people to move freely across countries and settle wherever they like, especially given the fact that the wealthy elite can more or less do exactly this. But there are also good pragmatic reasons to limit immigration and especially to make sure that immigration doesn't make a significant number of people feel like their identity is being threatened and cause them to reject liberal democracy altogether. The problem is that this is exactly what the cosmopolitan elite in Western democracies has let happen.

One early political mistake results from multiculturalist ideology. According to Francis Fukuyama, "over recent decades, the European left had come to support a form of multiculturalism that downplayed the importance of integrating immigrants into the national culture. Under the banner of antiracism it looked the other way from evidence that assimilation wasn't working".[3]

Multiculturalism is based on the idea that all cultures are equal and that the diversity of immigrant cultures should be celebrated as enrichment. In an article for the magazine *Areo*, Gerfried Ambrosch argues: "The so-called dominant culture of the host society – a particular, constitutive set of values, principles and practices – is just one of many cultural identities on offer and has no more right to assert itself than the rest. In short, integration is largely optional. In fact, multiculturalism disincentivises integration."[4]

The result of this moral relativism can be seen in many European countries: expansive parallel societies with their own internal justice system, where liberal values like sexual equality are largely absent. This has fatal consequences. Ambrosch states: "A lack of shared values diminishes trust, reducing social capital (the real source of wealth), weakening the social fabric and further isolating immigrant communities."[5]

Multiculturalism has failed. A certain level of cultural assimilation is needed for societies to function – this is one of the evolutionary insights in the toolkit. Without trust, proper cooperation isn't possible, and Western societies will ultimately fall apart and fail.

European societies need to change. They need to change their understanding of what constitutes national identity away from one based on ethnicity. Already in the late 1990s, Syrian-born German political scientist Bassam Tibi proposed the idea of a *Leitkultur* (leading culture) as a basis for German identity.[6] Fukuyama further observes:

> "*Leitkultur* was defined in liberal Enlightenment terms
> as belief in equality and democratic values. Yet this
> proposal was attacked from the left for suggesting
> that those values were superior to other cultural
> values; in doing so the left gave unwitting comfort not
> just to Islamists, but also the right that still believed in
> ethnic identity. Germany needs something precisely
> like *Leitkultur*, a normative change that would permit
> a Turk to speak of him- or herself as German."[7]

German writer Thea Dorn argues a similar position in her recent book *Deutsch, nicht dumpf* ('German, not dull'). She believes that it would be a big mistake to hand over the idea of the nation state to the rising authoritarian nationalists. Her counter-offer is an enlightened patriotism: a love and commitment to our constitutional democratic values and evolved culture.[8]

Stenner and Haidt argue that the more exposure to difference and the more we talk about difference, the more intolerant behaviour we will see. But "nothing inspires greater tolerance from the intolerant than an abundance of common and unifying beliefs, practices, rituals, institutions and processes".[9] Multiculturalism and the current extreme forms of identity politics have been unhelpful in light of this. An enlightened patriotism can emphasise what we all share and owe one another as citizens, not what differentiates us.

This doesn't mean that we should play off the idea of the nation state against the European idea, but the European identity cannot be imposed. If the main purpose of the European Union was economic integration, it was always going to be difficult to develop a strong European identity. But this might be changing faster than it seems. For many years Europeans didn't have many common reference points other than the Eurovision Song Contest and the Champions League football competition. Now, after the Euro crisis and Brexit, Europe is becoming part of people's daily life. If the EU survives the current nationalist wave, there is a chance that the European identity might gain strength.

However, I think it's unlikely that a wonderful European unity would emerge from the ashes that would be left if authoritarians took over most of Europe's nation states. But this is precisely the rationale of political scientist Ulrike Guérot, a prominent proponent of the idea of a European republic. She believes that the authoritarians could do the "demolition work" for us by "destroying the nation states".[10] I believe that she, like many other progressives who hope for this kind of revolution, underestimate the fragility of democracy. We know

from cultural evolution how easy it is to destroy institutions of cooperation and how long it takes to build new ones.

RECONNECTING WITH DEMOCRACY

Democracy is not a given. It has to be fought for every day, and we're all responsible for this as citizens of the places we live in.

But what can be done to reconnect us all with democracy and avoid a drift towards barbarism?

To start with, I think we need a break from the online tools that currently seem to be more of a problem for our democracy rather than any kind of solution. One day we might invent online tools that help us to improve democracy, or possibly they have already been invented, but for now, social media has instead weakened our democracies. And even worse, the online world has made us feel alienated and disoriented. Yuval Noah Harari argues:

> "We have been losing our ability to pay attention to what we smell and taste. Instead we are absorbed in our smart phones and computers. We are more interested in what is happening in cyberspace than in what is happening down the street. It is easier than ever to talk to my cousin in Switzerland, but it is harder to talk to my husband over breakfast, because he constantly looks at his smartphone instead of at me."[11]

In an increasingly lonely world (the UK even has a Minister of Loneliness now), where we often don't know our neighbours and where political party association has declined for decades, I believe a promising way to reconnect with democracy is to start at the level of the neighbourhood.

This is precisely what transformation researcher Davide Brocchi first started in 2013 in a neighbourhood in Cologne, Germany. It is now spreading to other cities in Germany and beyond, called *Tag des Guten Lebens* (Day of the Good Life). It's basically a long-term process of community organising but with a yearly hook of one day where residents come together to create a future-oriented neighbourhood.[12] It is a day of encounters and togetherness. The streets are closed off to traffic. Neighbours, associations and initiatives as well as artists use the space as laboratories for ideas and joint action. They listen to music, test their plant knowledge, plant trees or discuss local development plans. As a result people start to organise politically and get to know many of their neighbours.

I particularly like the framing of 'good life' rather than, for example, 'green life', as it provides room for diverse ways of interpreting the good life and building relationships with others, while also asking every one of the participants to clarify what constitutes a good life for them. As an intended side effect, making new friends in the neighbourhood and spending time with them can lead to less online life and less carbon-intensive flying around the world.

In our increasingly secular world (in most European countries) many people lack a place that functions like a church does for religious people, a community building that provides a sense of belonging and identity and where one meets others according to fixed rituals once a week.

I remember when my grandmother's local church closed, when she was around 85 years old. She lost her community. In Spain, where I live, the local pub performs this community function, and until recently there was a pub on every street, but now many are closing. The same is happening in the UK and in Ireland. Where do people go when this happens? Do they stay at home, order their food with

When people from different
tribes, see one another as
human beings who at the end
of the day want the same
things - kindness, dignity,
security for loved
ones - hearts
can change.   Amy Chua[13]

Deliveroo and watch Netflix? Or they might buy a dog, for the company – in Spain, pet ownership has increased by 40% in the last five years.[14]

Secular community meeting places and rituals, like a weekly community dinner, need to be organised intentionally if we are to create a good society.

One initiative that aims to fill this void in our secular society is the Sunday Assembly, founded by two comedians in London in 2013.[15] It is a "secular congregation" that has become a global movement of over 70 Sunday Assembly chapters in 8 different countries where people meet regularly, sing songs, listen to talks and create community together.

Another institution that is important for democracy is the local newspaper. Many of them have disappeared or are in danger of disappearing across the world. But local newspapers enjoy very high levels of trust[16] and can help people avoid losing their bearings in the battle against online fake news. They should be re-established or saved from closing down.

Initiatives like the Day of the Good Life or the Sunday Assembly are most valuable when they successfully bring together people from very different walks of life. We need one-on-one human engagement across the political and social divide (the somewheres and the anywheres).

Given that many people have definitely realised the seriousness of the situation, there are probably by now countless initiatives aimed at exactly this. For example, in September 2018, the initiative Germany Talks, organised by the German weekly paper *Die Zeit*, connected five thousand pairs of Germans with opposing views on hot-button issues like immigration and helped them organise

physical meetings to have a conversation and listen to each other. For each encounter two people with different views who lived near each other were selected to arrange a meeting. Many good conversations were reported.[17]

While these are encouraging seeds, much more is required to make a significant impact.

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

How can our democratic institutions improve so as to represent those who currently feel unrepresented and regain the trust they have lost from people? Do we need new institutions or democratic tools in light of the deep ecological crisis?

An important sector of progressive activists rejects the entire concept of representative democracy. The alternatives that are often promoted under the banner of 'new politics' or 'radical democracy' include that all decisions be made via direct democracy or that democracy mostly retreat to the local level and decisions be made via consensus in citizen assemblies.

In 2014 I participated in some activities that led to the creation of an electoral citizen platform named Barcelona en Comú. In May 2015 the platform won the local elections, and former activist Ada Colau became mayor of Barcelona. Among the people who were participating in creating the platform, there was a strong conviction that they were taking part in a completely new way of making politics (the new politics) that was much more inclusive and allowed everybody to be heard equally. There was an unspoken assumption that the electoral program would be the sum of everyone's contributions. But in the end a small group of people at the core of the platform made the final decisions about the electoral program and

the list of candidates. This was an interesting example of setting a high standard that was impossible to meet. It's impossible to have thousands of people participate in a process without clear rules and hope that some magical consensus would emerge.

That process showed me that in Spain at the time, there was indeed a significant number of mostly young people that didn't feel represented by the traditional parties, partly also because the economic crisis had created much frustration and inequality. These people rightly joined forces to build a new political formation and compete in the elections. It was also a time when a certain sophistication of internet tools allowed for efficient processes where broader numbers of people could take part, for example, in commenting and providing ideas for the electoral programme. But to call all this 'the new politics' was setting the bar too high. It would have been better to set up a transparent decision-making process and be honest about the fact that it was impossible to include everybody at all stages of such a process. Some representative democracy was unavoidable.

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe notes:

> "There is no denying that representative institutions are in crisis in their current liberal democratic form, but I do not believe that the solution resides in the establishment of a 'non-representative' democracy or that extra-parliamentary struggles are the only vehicle for making democratic advances. Such views are popular because they chime with the idea, fashionable among sectors of the left, that the multitude could organize itself avoiding taking power and becoming state."[18]

Increasing people's participation in decision-making via consultations or plebiscites has gained popularity and has been successfully introduced in a number of countries. However, these instruments have to be applied carefully to avoid cases like the Brexit referendum where people more or less knew what they were voting against, but not what they were voting for.[19]

To improve representation of groups that are currently under-represented in most parliaments, like the working classes or ethnic minorities, David van Reybrouk, author of the book *Against Elections*, proposes to eliminate parliamentary elections and choose parliamentarians via sortition, where members of the public are asked to represent their social group. They are chosen through a lottery process, and each group, like women, young people, ethnic minorities etc., are represented proportionally in the parliament.[20] The idea is quite popular among activists and beyond, although environmental activist George Monbiot believes it is a bad idea:

> "In trying to comprehend the vast range of issues a parliament considers, the random representatives would depend on a civil service that is permanently established. The civil servants' institutional power – their knowledge of the system, their political and social connections – would be vastly greater than that of the representatives. In seeking to return power to the people, we would hand it instead to the bureaucracy."[21]

In addition, my own concern is that in such a system it would be all about representation of identity groups, in fact a continuation of the current obsession with equal representation (equal outcome) we can see in identity politics. Apart from the danger that we would end up slicing the pie into ever smaller and specific identity groups,

we would certainly lose focus on one of the core goals in politics, which is the battle for the best ideas.

Maybe it would be better to focus on encouraging societal groups who currently don't participate in public discourse and are very underrepresented in parliamentary life to organise and to develop their own voice, especially if their interests are currently not acknowledged and their views are not part of the discourse.
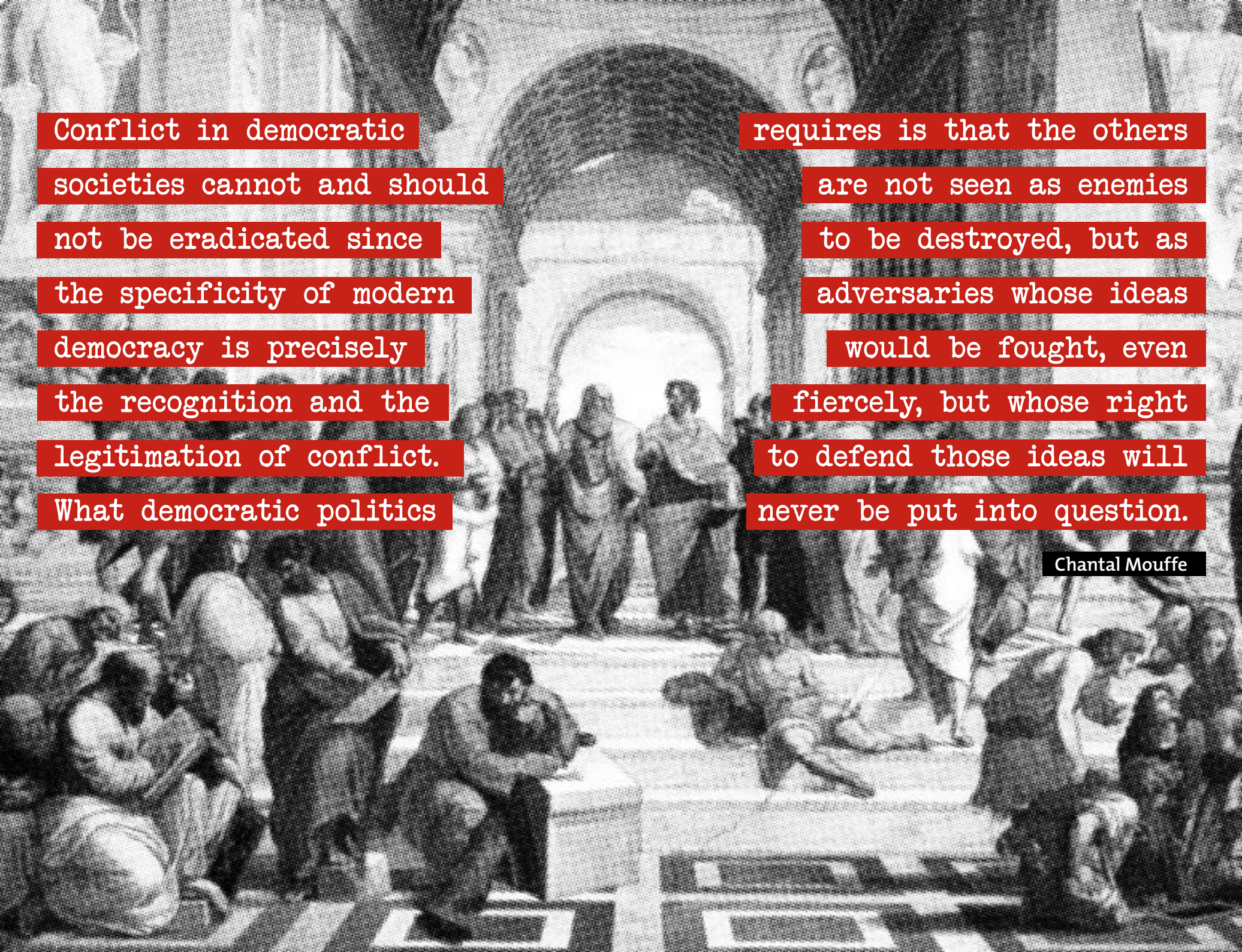
I find another proposal much more interesting: it's the idea of *future councils*, developed by political scientists Patrizia Nanz and Claus Leggewie. The idea draws on a wide range of experiences with processes of citizen participation. Nanz and Leggewie state:

> "We propose a 'future council' whose core activity lies in the formation of a dialogue-oriented agenda, but, at the same time, enables a collective learning process to run its course within a given group; such that, if successful, the council wins a place for itself alongside those legislative, judicial and executive entities, as determined by the conventional separation of powers, and is consulted on the formulation of demands and objectives and on decision-making processes accordingly. Thus the council would distinguish itself from single-issue debates or episodic participatory proceedings relating to a specific infrastructure project, in that it would concern decisive, agenda-setting measures and scenarios. But it would also distinguish itself from the mediation of disputes in which parties find themselves at loggerheads, in that it would anticipate and field debate on possible conflicts. Furthermore, citizen participation would be institutionalised and rendered binding in a future council."[22]

Future councils allow ordinary people to take part in the political process. But they work to enhance and not to substitute current political institutions of representative democracy. Future councils are groups of citizens who meet regularly during a certain time frame, for example, two years. According to Nanz and Leggewie, "it would be conceivable for members to be selected at random in accordance with socio-demographic criteria such as age, gender and education, so that participants reflect a cross-section of the population as accurately as possible".[23] These groups are tasked with elaborating and agreeing on proposals for complex 'future questions' like how to move towards a low-carbon society. The idea is that these processes should be rooted in the local level, but should then be established at all political levels, including national and European. Once institutionalised, governments would be obliged to consider the proposals elaborated by the citizen bodies and provide clear feedback about why they accept or do not accept proposals. The researchers argue that the experience with similar participatory processes show that they improve decisions taken by governments in addition to strengthening trust in democracy.

Finally, what are the prospects that the internet will fundamentally change the way we do democracy?

Although it's been around for a while, the concept of liquid democracy is still quite popular among activists who would like to see representative democracy be fully substituted by participatory mechanisms. It was first promoted by the Pirate Party in Germany in 2007.[24] In 2009 the party started to use a software called Liquid-Feedback that was developed in Germany.[25] The software is an internet-based voting system that allows one to delegate votes when one believes that somebody else has more expertise on a particular issue. In its ideal state, it is meant to completely eliminate

Conflict in democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated since the specificity of modern democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict. What democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas would be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas will never be put into question.

Chantal Mouffe

all hierarchical decision-making and allow for continuous direct democracy while offering a solution so that people don't have to vote on issues they believe to be ignorant about.

As far as I know, after the initial enthusiasm, the system wasn't taken up very widely in the Pirate Party. Also, the German Pirate Party has now declined into insignificance. While I couldn't find any hard data, I'm unaware of any success stories with LiquidFeedback software. This doesn't mean of course that future software versions of the liquid democracy concept are doomed to fail, but it remains to be seen if the internet will really fundamentally transform the democratic system and eliminate the inherent hierarchies of representative democracy.

There are ways to make democracy more participative, inclusive and future proof, but to condemn representative democracy in the absence of better alternatives seems foolish and dangerous.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFLICT

I believe that to revitalise our democracies, what is most needed is a culture of constructive debate at all levels of society and in our democratic institutions.

Most political discourse in Western democracies today consists of positioning the political opponent as the enemy who has to be brought to silence, rather than someone to debate with the aim of winning the argument. It is easy to position people who hold different worldviews to ours as bigots or extremists. The aim is rather to strengthen the own group and confirm to each other that one is on the right or good side. In contrast, Chantal Mouffe argues:

> "Conflict in democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated since the specificity of modern democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict. What democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas would be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas will never be put into question. [...] If this is missing, there is always the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identification."[26]

In many countries the liberal mainstream had for many years maintained a consensus culture where real debate was avoided and many views were not represented in public discourse. Now that the populist right has entered many parliaments and is disturbing the liberal consensus, they are met with outrage. No attempt is made to treat the new players as an opponent to be defeated through debate. Instead we continuously hear the expressed fear that a certain right-wing discourse is being normalised by the extreme right and that this has to be fought. But the authoritarian/extreme right is already too big to be silenced. The only reasonable way to fight them is by treating them like anybody else, engaging them in debate and identifying and critiquing their weaknesses.

To regain people's trust in politics and help them develop their opinion about complex matters, honest debate is essential. Debating is important not only for the public, but also for the debaters. It helps them sharpen their arguments and develop concrete solutions. Political debate also reconciles the different point of views: only when one feels heard can one accept the political compromise that differs from one's own position.

GLOBAL COOPERATION

Maybe the hardest dilemma we are facing in our times is that our biggest problems are now global while our effective governance systems are still national. The economy is global, but we haven't been able to establish global rules that would enable fair competition for companies and tax systems. The ecological crises are global, but we don't have an effective governance system to protect the natural world.

Cooperation at the planetary scale is an urgent necessity, not to eliminate competition between nations and states, but to avoid destructive competition. Cooperation at the planetary scale does not mean that we all merge into one giant super-group with a global government and without attachments to smaller units and groups. According to evolutionary scientists like David Sloan Wilson, human civilisation has become something like a superorganism that works best with a nested structure:

> "Life consists of units within units. In the biological world, we have genes, individuals, groups, species and ecosystems – all nested within the biosphere. In the human world, we have genes, individuals, families, villages and cities, provinces and nations – all nested within the global village. In both worlds, a problem lurks at every rung of the ladder: a potential conflict between the interests of the lower-level units and the welfare of the higher-level units. What's good for me can be bad for my family. What's good for my family can be bad for my village, and so on, all the way up to what's good for my nation can be bad for the global village."[27]

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Now we are at a point in history when the great problem of human life is to accomplish functional organization at a larger scale than ever. The selection of best practices must be intentional, because we cannot wait for natural selection and there is no process of between-planet selection to select for functional organization at a planetary scale.

David Sloan Wilson

~

Wilson also describes the challenge we're facing: "Now we are at a point in history when the great problem of human life is to accomplish functional organization at a larger scale than ever. The selection of best practices must be intentional, because we cannot wait for natural selection and there is no process of between-planet selection to select for functional organization at a planetary scale."[28] There is no other planetary species (as far as we know) with whom to compete and that would force us to cooperate as a planetary society. We need conscious intentionality (or conscious evolution) to design the system of global governance.

Of course, one could argue that some of that is happening in the context of the UN or the international agreements on climate change and other conventions, but it is all too slow, mostly voluntary and ineffective.

One campaign that uses evolutionary insights to foster effective cooperation between governments on core issues like climate change is Simpol, founded by British businessman John Bunzl.[29] It's based on the idea that governments don't act decisively on global issues like climate change because they are stuck in the prisoner's dilemma: they fear losing the global competition. John Bunzl and Nick Duffell argue:

> "By joining the campaign, citizens agree to give strong voting preference in all future national elections to politicians or parties that have signed a pledge to implement Simpol simultaneously alongside other governments [...]. This pledge [...] commits a politician, party or government to implement SIMPOL's policies alongside other governments, if and when sufficient other governments have also signed on."[30]

According to Simpol's website, 60 UK members of parliament in the UK have signed up.

Maybe Simpol could finally take off if it had greater support from larger parts of civil society.

Others hope that the solution lies in online tools that could tap into our evolved reputation systems and help us cooperate at the planetary scale. Paul Hughes writes on *Medium*:

> "A part of the solution to scaling human organization without hierarchies is the implementation of some kind of reputation system. If people's reputation is on the line, they are more likely to behave differently. [...] We've seen the success in these first generation of reputation systems with places like Amazon Marketplace, eBay and Airbnb. Should someone cheat, it immediately shows up in their reputation score and comments page. The incentive then for all participants is to act in good faith. So while the original 'tit for tat' solution requires repeated experiences with the same entity, reputation allows for 'tit for tat' to occur in parallel, crowdsourced by the public at large. You can with great confidence know who is the most trustworthy in a group of a million, or even a billion people. Therefore, reputation systems change the incentives from cheating (race to the bottom, tragedy of the commons), to cooperating, long-term sustainability and good behaviour."[31]

While these ideas are certainly the result of thoughtful considerations and they take into account important evolutionary insights, I'm sceptical about their potential to catalyse effective large-scale

global cooperation fast enough in light of the urgency to tackle the ecological crises, especially climate change.

Also, importantly, international cooperation has to be approached in a way that doesn't make those on the *somewhere* side of the cultural divide feel like their national identity is being threatened. To address this, political scientist Timo Lochocki argues that the need for international cooperation should be communicated by governments as the preservation and continuation of national success stories.[32]

The solution to this dilemma might ultimately be national governments calling for a war against climate change. The author William Davies writes in his book *Nervous States*: "Only the equivalent of a state-led wartime mobilisation, similar to that seen during the Second World War, could prevent a level of global warming with serious consequences for civilisation."[33]

If a number of governments agreed on a concerted war plan to retool industry and mobilise widespread action, it could be framed as a necessary cooperation in the national interest and trigger the necessary sense of common purpose and orientation.

The big question here is whether such a strategy could work even if the enemy didn't have a face but was instead an abstract threat, as is the case here. Maybe the answer is yes, but only because the danger is now close enough to trigger an emotional reaction.

If we embark on a strategy to completely redesign our economic system so that it's suited to a life in harmony with nature, we would need to develop a notion of what such an economy could realistically look like. This is what we will explore in the next chapter.

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AN ECONOMY FOR PLANETARY WELLBEING

The economic decline of the rural working classes due to global-isation and the effects of neoliberalism on their living environment is certainly one of the causes of the crisis of liberal democracy (as discussed in chapter 3). Therefore, to stop the trend towards right-wing authoritarianism, those problems that have their origin in the way the economy works have to be part of the portfolio of solutions.

The outrage from the French yellow vests against the introduction of a carbon tax, along with the rhetoric of far-right politicians against anything that resembles green politics, clearly suggests that the economic interests of the rural working classes stand in conflict with the aim of the ecological transformation of the economic system.

There are of course many policies for carbon reduction that can increase the cost of living of the rural working classes (e.g., a fuel tax) or might increase unemployment, for example, in the coal industry. The resentment towards the urban cosmopolitan elite that often vote green but show high personal carbon footprints is therefore understandable.

> + Research shows that it is often those who have most environ-mental awareness who actually leave the highest carbon footprint. It's mostly urban well-off cosmopolitans who vote for green parties. The researchers Moser and Kleinhü-ckelkotten state: "Individuals with high pro-environmental self-identity intend to behave in an ecologically responsible way, but they typically emphasize actions that have relatively small ecological benefits."[34]

However, as illogical as it may sound, I believe that there is an untapped potential of synergies between the needs and interests of the rural somewheres and the need for an ecologically sustainable economic model. I think that this is exactly what we should tap into.

Systemic approaches to changing the economic system need to address the following:

- Not everybody has benefitted from globalisation.

- The economy and especially the internet (platform) economy incentivise high amounts of value extraction (rent-seeking) that benefit few and create precarious jobs (gig economy).

- The economy (still) systematically results in environmental destruction and resource depletion and puts the burden on future generations.

- The transition to renewable energy and production processes that don't damage the environment is still far too slow to avoid the dangerous consequences civilisation faces.

- The current economic system is growth dependent, and growth offsets most of the gains made through more efficient techno-logies and the increase in renewable energy.

In the following we will explore what a better economic system could look like and where the aforementioned synergies might lie.

THE ECONOMY AS AN EVOLUTIONARY SYSTEM OF COOPERATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

It has been a core premise of the Smart CSOs Lab since its inception that the economy must change fundamentally if we want to tackle the many crises we're facing. Consequently, since then I have participated in and witnessed many discussions with progressive activists and researchers about what needs to change in the economic system and how we can get there. Many activists in the sphere of systemic change and the Great Transition have no doubt whatsoever that this is about overcoming capitalism. Mostly, people

The economy is an evolutionary system of cooperative problem solving. We define prosperity as 'solutions to human problems' and argue that cooperation is the key to solving more and more complex problems thus increasing prosperity.

Eric Beinhocker

in these circles hold strong ideas about what the different system should look like and are sure that it would work much better than the current system. They believe that the only important barrier to change is the power held by those who have vested interests in keeping the system as it is.

I don't doubt in the slightest that power and vested interest are important factors to consider, but what I have always noticed in these circles is a lack of critical reflection about how likely it is that their visions would actually work in real life. It's great to be creative and have ideas for a better world. But what if it is all naïve wishful thinking? It's just too dangerous to build castles in the air. The economy has to be fundamentally transformed to operate within ecological limits, but if the consequence is mass unemployment, the road to authoritarianism will almost certainly be unavoidable (especially in our fragile times).

The easy part is criticising capitalism, but what is it really that has made capitalism such a success story?

Eric Beinhocker, a complexity economist, has an answer to this question that I find convincing: "The economy [is] [...] an evolutionary system of cooperative problem solving [...]. We define prosperity as 'solutions to human problems' and argue that cooperation is the key to solving more and more complex problems thus increasing prosperity. In our view the purpose of capitalism is not allocative efficiency (as often argued in neoclassical economics) but rather is an institutional system for incentivising and rewarding cooperative problem solving, and evolving new and better forms of cooperation and solutions."[35]

Brendan Maton, a journalist, writes: "Capitalism, understood properly, is a system of human co-operation born out of our pro-social instincts. What has made capitalism successful is our ability to co-operate to solve problems for each other on a large scale. Markets in this context can be thought of as evolutionary competitions to see who are the best co-operative problem-solvers."[36]

The most important conclusion I draw from Beinhocker's analysis is that whatever changes we apply to the economic system and whatever we call this evolved version of the capitalist system that we currently have, it should include some kind of mechanism of competition focused on solving real human problems, whether we call it a 'market' or not. Humans have evolved to become great team players and to compete between teams. And it's only through trial and error that we can find out which solutions work. This is what the market should be about.

However, there is considerable room for improvement on the cooperation side. Robert H. Frank, the author of *The Darwin Economy*, asks an interesting question:

> "Who was the greater economist – Adam Smith or Charles Darwin? Since Darwin, the pioneering naturalist, never thought of himself as an economist, the question seems absurd. Yet his understanding of competition describes economic reality far more accurately than Smith's. Within the next century, I predict, Darwin will be seen by most economists as the intellectual founder of their discipline."[37]

Darwin saw that sometimes the interests of the individual and the group coincide, in which case Adam Smith's famous *invisible hand* applies, but Darwin also knew that the individual and the group's interests can collide (and often do).

The market can be a very effective problem-solving mechanism, but it can't solve these conflicts of interest, which only cooperation can do. Often the solution to one's problem creates another problem for

someone else, or everybody else, as in the case of carbon emissions or Facebook damaging democracy.

Beinhocker argues that the economy must be embedded at all levels in a well-functioning democracy, which helps to distinguish between problem-solving and problem-creating economic activity. "Democracy is the best mechanism humans have come up with for navigating the trade-offs and weaknesses inherent in problem-solving capitalism."[38] This directly addresses Karl Polanyi's core critique in his seminal book, *The Great Transformation*, where he argued that the economy was disembedded from society and would therefore not function for the benefit of society.[39]

Beinhocker also suggests that economic inclusion is key for the success of the economy as a problem-solving process. The more people participate in networks of innovators, the more problems will be solved. "Inclusion does not imply equality of outcomes, which is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. But it does imply fairness of process, which the psychology literature tells us is what people actually care about – inclusion means that everyone participates in and contributes to the economy, and everyone benefits in a fair way."[40]

Let's now explore some more concrete approaches to an intentional evolution of the current economic system towards one that is fairer and that tackles the ecological crisis.

HOW CAN GLOBAL TRADE BE MADE FAIR AND SUSTAINABLE?

Harvard professor of economics Dani Rodrik is famous for a concept that he calls the *trilemma* (see figure 3).[41] It states that in a hyperglob-alised economy like ours you can't have democratic politics and

Figure 3: The Political Trilemma of the world economy.

PICK TWO, ANY TWO
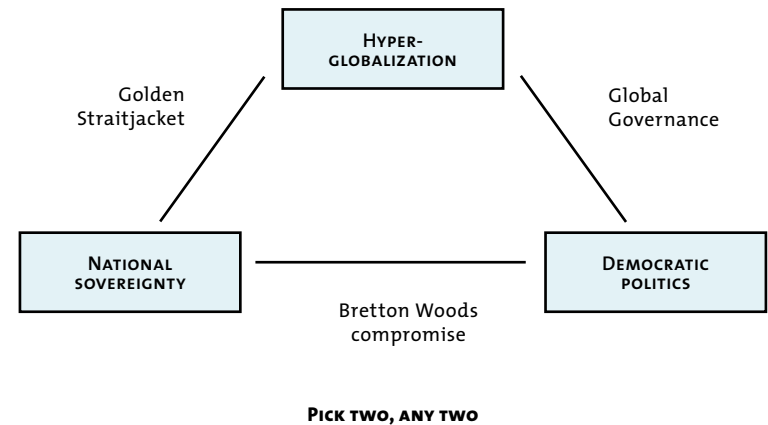
national sovereignty at the same time, or, if you want to have national sovereignty and democratic politics, you can't have hyperglobal-isation. According to Rodrik, you can only pick two of the three elements. You can't have all three. The last decades have been a phase of hyperglobalisation during which we've been maintaining national sovereignties. In the absence of global governance, hyperglobal-isation has focused on minimising transaction costs for businesses (for example, by moving production to the country with the lowest corporate tax rate as well as low costs for health and safety or low labour standards). This system clashes with democracy because its goal has not been to improve the functioning of democracy but to accommodate financial interests seeking market access at low cost as its highest priority.

This recent phase of hyperglobalisation led to the elimination of many manufacturing jobs in industrialised countries with the political consequences discussed in chapter 3.

Rodrik argues that the Bretton Woods regime that ruled the world's commercial and financial relations during the 1950s and 60s was successful because it didn't undermine national democracies. It was a limited version of globalization with capital controls and limited trade liberalisation.[42]

Given the impossibility of moving to a fully fledged global governance system any time soon, a group of economists, including Rodrik, recently proposed that trade agreements should include clauses that prevent unfair competition. Social safeguards should give governments a claim on trade authorities that a restriction on trade is necessary to maintain the domestic social contract.[43]

International trade is plenty valuable, but it can't be an end in itself. It has to be a means to achieving legitimate higher goals. If international trade creates more harm than good, then it has to be questioned. According to Rodrik, "we need smart globalisation, not maximum globalisation".[44]

The hyperglobalised free-trade paradigm of the last few decades not only created social distortions, but also has rising ecological costs: for example, 7% of total global carbon emissions are attributed to global freight transport.[45] An environmental full-cost accounting would have to include all kinds of other environmental impacts, for example, from land use for infrastructure.

It might well be that the transport costs of global freight transport would rise considerably in the event that a carbon tax (or carbon trading system) were imposed. As a consequence some portion of current trade would not be profitable anymore.

Especially in light of the need to move from industrialised agriculture to ecological agriculture, there are many good reasons to believe that most of our agricultural production should be regionalised

once more. Global trade should be complementary and stimulating, but it shouldn't displace or destroy local production.

As a step towards global governance, author and activist Christian Felber proposes that a multilateral ethical trade agreement be established under the umbrella of the United Nations. The objectives of this agreement should include giving priority to maintaining the strength of local economies with good sustainability, labour and human rights conditions; a ban on dumping in all areas; and a contingency on human and labour rights as well as environmental standards. According to Felber, the EU should support such a multilateral UN agreement instead of continuing with its strategy of bilateral trade agreements, which is increasingly failing anyway.[46]

A new approach to global trade along the lines of the proposals by Rodrik and Felber could reconcile ecological objectives with strengthening resilience and revitalising regional and local economies that have been hit hard in the recent decades of hyper-globalisation.

ARE THERE BETTER COOPERATIVE MECHANISMS FOR THE ECONOMY?

In 2009 political economist Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economics for her research on how local communities across the world successfully self-manage common pool resources like forests, fisheries or grazing lands for sustainable long-term use. Ostrom demonstrated how self-governance of natural resources was possible and could prevent ecosystem collapse and resource depletion without the intervention of markets or government top-down policies.[47]

A commons consists of three elements that are essential: the shared

resource, the user community that co-governs the resource and the community's rules for governance.[48]

Ostrom identified eight design principles as necessary conditions for success[49]:

1. Define clear group boundaries.

2. Match rules governing use of common goods to local needs and conditions.

3. Ensure that those affected by the rules can participate in modifying the rules.

4. Make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities.

5. Develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members' behaviour.

6. Use graduated sanctions for rule violators.

7. Provide accessible, low-cost means for dispute resolution

8. Build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system.

Although Ostrom didn't initially carry out her work from a perspective of cultural evolution, her core design principles are highly effective because they are entirely in line with the insights developed by evolutionary scientists like Joe Henrich and others about how gene-culture coevolution, especially our capacity to make social norms work for the group's benefit, has enabled human cooperation.

The same principles apply to the more recent phenomenon of *commons-based peer production* (CBPP) in the digital world. Here, people freely interact with each other via the internet to pool their knowledge and create value in shared open-access resources, like, most famously, Wikipedia, or Mozilla's open-source software development.

The concept of digital commons has to be viewed in contrast to the commercial version of P2P (peer-to-peer) activities. For example, as Bauwens et al. note, "social media platforms like Facebook almost exclusively capture the value of their members' social exchange, by monetising the data and selling the 'attention' of their users to advertisers".[50] Similarly, with Uber and Airbnb "there is no community nor creation of commons".

The latest wave of CBPP has moved beyond the pure digital world to the world of manufacturing.

The P2P Foundation's 'Commons Transition Primer' calls this process "Design Global, Manufacture Local (DGML). It is an emerging mode of production that builds on the confluence of digital commons of knowledge, software and design with local manufacturing and automation technologies. These technologies often include 3D printers and CNC machines, as well as low-tech crafts tools and appropriate technology – often complementing each other."[51]

The promise made by these different variants of commons-based peer production is that the artificial scarcity of knowledge that dominates the capitalist economy will be substituted by a model that acknowledges the natural abundance of the digital commons. Knowledge can therefore be used as widely as needed. Similarly, in the case of environmental commons, the naturally scarce natural resources are managed in such a way that they become sufficiently abundant. Zero-sum games can be avoided.

DGML includes a vision that avoids ecologically damaging global production and transportation as well as disincentivises built-in obsolescence.

Furthermore, the commons economy focuses much more on human needs and doesn't operate according to the growth logic of the capitalist model, and importantly, its largely non-hierarchical structure allows for self-determined fulfilling work.

My impression is that the work of the activists and researchers in the field of CBPP, especially by the P2P Foundation[52], is some of the most serious activism in the field of alternative economics. One of the reasons for this is surely that they are not just exploring utopian ideas but are actually researching an emerging phenomenon that was enabled by the rise of the internet and has the potential to transform some fundamental aspects of the economic system (at the very least).

There is much potential and need for more commons and commoning as well as for for-benefit associations to substitute for-profit companies. For example, it is easy to see how platform cooperatives owned by employees, customers and users of digital services could be a solution to the value-extracting monopolies of the likes of Facebook, Uber and Airbnb.

One of the leading thinkers in the field of CBPP, Michel Bauwens, is a visionary as well as a very nuanced intellectual. He doesn't call for a complete abolition of the market and the state. Instead he argues that "the market and the state will not disappear, but the config-uration of different modalities – and the balance between them – will be radically reconfigured".[53]

However, I feel more generally that, in the sphere of P2P/commons, as is often the case in our relatively protected activist niches, there is a lack of tough debate between proponents of different ideas. And given our innate psychological biases, I believe that robust debate is the only way to advance our thinking. I have the impression that

the commons proposals would benefit from a deeper discussion about the value of markets in the sense of what Eric Beinhocker calls problem-solving mechanisms, and more concretely how they could be part of a vision where CBPP plays an important role. My assumption here (building on the evolutionary insights from our toolkit) is that institutional settings that don't acknowledge the selfish/survival side of humans will be as big a failure as those that don't take into account our groupish/cooperative/altruistic side.

There are a number of other questions and tensions that, in my view, should be subject to much more discussion in the context of a vision of CBPP.

For example, in such a vision, it is unclear what the role of the state is beyond the (in my opinion, good) idea of the *partner state* that should support CBPP.

> + Michael Bauwens defines the Partner State as "the concept whereby public authorities play a sustaining role in the 'direct creation of value by civil society', i.e. sustains and promotes commons-based Peer Production."[54]

Assuming that the commons sector grows, the tax income of the state would drop as a consequence because an increasing share of the value creation would happen outside the monetised economy. Bauwens et al. argue: "By decreasing employment, wages and taxation, financialization and decommodification endanger the Keynesian pact underpinning social democracy. However, while decommodification can be disastrous for the current economy, it may signal the shift from an economic system based on scarcity toward one based on abundance. This is where Open Coops come in: by placing commoning at the center of our livelihood creation, we aim to decrease the dependence on market, wages, and the state by offering community-led, resilient alternatives."[55]

There is a dissonance
between Wikipedia's strong
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contributors.

I'm not sure if this is a viable vision for a fairer and more sustainable world. There are surely opportunities to localise services and make them 'community-led'. But what about the state as a guarantor of equal rights for all citizens, including social security, pensions, health care and education? What about the capacity of the state to build and provide big infrastructure projects, including public transport? What about the enforcement of the law, provision of security and state defence (monopoly on force)? I don't have the answer to these questions, but in accordance with the multilevel-selection framework discussed in chapter 7 and Elinor Ostrom's principle number eight, I argue that we need strong governance institutions at all levels.

The intellectual property rights discussion is another topic that, in my view, would benefit from a more robust, honest and knowledgeable deliberation between the different sides (between content creators who want higher pay and those defending the freedom of the internet) instead of talking past each other as I believe is often the case.

In addition, we know from many studies (as discussed earlier) that in the absence of formal hierarchies, informal ones always emerge. The same seems to happen in CBPP collaborations (as one might expect). Wikipedia has now been around for 18 years and is a well researched case. According to Dariusz Jemielniak, a member of the board of trustees of the Wikimedia Foundation (the host of Wikipedia), in the absence of leadership and formal hierarchical decision-making, over the years more and more rules were created and accumulated to form a huge bureaucracy.[56] Most of the contributors to Wikipedia have difficulties understanding all the rules. As a consequence, the few who know the rules have the power. There is a dissonance between Wikipedia's strong egalitarian discourse and the perceived reality of power play and control, which has alienated a growing number of contributors. Jemielniak argues that the culture of negating the need for leadership mainly delegitimizes natural leaders.

I don't think the discussion about hierarchies versus mutual coordination mechanisms ends here, but there seems to be a strong case for some level of formal hierarchies, especially in the case of large groups. As one possibility, organisations could have strong democratic decision-making processes while still keeping hierarchies, similar to the system of representative democracy in the political domain.

DEGROWTH VERSUS THE GREEN ECONOMY

Among environmental economists and activists there has been a long-lasting battle between two camps: on the one side are the technical optimists who believe that we can tackle the ecological crises, especially climate change, entirely through the use of new technologies without jeopardising economic growth. Some even believe that what they call the green economy might boost economic growth. On the other side are the pessimists – others might call them realists – who are convinced that it is impossible to decouple economic growth from ecological impact in absolute terms. They believe that rich countries have to reduce their economic output, a vision they call degrowth. The battle between the two sides has become increasingly fierce in recent times, because the time we have to prevent the worst consequences of climate change is running out.

The main argument from degrowth proponents is that absolute decoupling of CO_2 emissions has never been achieved in the past, and

therefore it is unlikely that we will achieve the necessary reductions under a scenario of continuous economic growth.[57]

> + *Absolute decoupling* means that while the economy grows, emissions go down in absolute terms.

However, the case can be made that we have never seriously tried to reduce CO_2 emissions. All government action so far, like disincentivise CO_2 emissions and incentivising efficiency measures, has been half-hearted at best. There are good reasons to believe that a high enough carbon tax would reduce absolute emissions and even lead to the necessary reductions over time. Proponents of the carbon tax argue that it could incentivise innovations towards low- (and zero-) carbon technologies in the most cost-efficient way.[58]

What remains unclear and what nobody can predict is whether green growth is actually possible.

Importantly, degrowth activists are absolutely right in pointing out that the ecological crisis is not limited to climate change. This was famously demonstrated by Johan Rockström and colleagues in 2009, in their framework on planetary boundaries.[59] These systemic inter-linkages make a green growth agenda even more difficult.

Furthermore, supporters of degrowth point out that economic growth is not even desirable, as much of it impoverishes our lives instead of improving them. Riccardo Mastini, a degrowth researcher, argues: "Under capitalism the logic of commodity and market exchange [expanded] to realms of life from which they were previously excluded. Indeed, what we today understand as 'economic' activities were once embedded in social institutions in pre-capitalist societies like rituals, kinship networks, and state or religious mechanisms of redistribution. Market activities were subordinate to politics and values."[60]

A growing number of economists agree that GDP is a very bad measure for human wellbeing. It measures the costs of market activities rather than the benefits – for example, the more traffic accidents, the more hospital expenditures and the more environmental catastrophes that have to be repaired, the higher the GDP. Also, GDP measures material consumption at the cost of basic needs like peace of mind, clean air and direct access to nature, while these basic needs are not captured by GDP. Since the 1960s, the increase in welfare has stagnated or even reversed to a negative trend in most Western countries, despite the continuous growth in GDP.[61]

Environmental economist Jeroen van den Bergh argues that instead of promoting either of these two extremes, green growth and degrowth, we should promote agrowth: "An agrowth position or strategy comes down to being agnostic about, i.e. ignoring, the GDP (per capita) indicator in public debates and policymaking. It means we will be indifferent, neutral or 'agnostic' about the desirability of GDP growth."[62] He believes that a degrowth discourse cannot be successful any time soon as long as most influential people as well as the wider public continue to be fixated on growth. He also suggests that the Human Development Index in addition to an income inequality measure could be good alternative indicators.

Professor Felix Ekardt, a promoter of a post-growth economy, argues that the degrowth movement is naïvely assuming that most people would agree with the notion that material wealth doesn't make one happy, that they would be attracted by the idea of concentrating on immaterial goods like friendship and family instead, or that they might even aspire to live in a commune. He argues that we shouldn't underestimate the fact that material wealth plays a role in human happiness and is usually very dependent on what others in our proximity possess or consume.[63]

I agree with van den Bergh and Ekardt. While the degrowth movement definitely proposes many good ideas, I believe that their discourse about generally reducing production and consumption in the global north is unlikely to have a wider political appeal beyond a very limited niche. And if it were successfully implemented, it wouldn't be the smartest strategy for human wellbeing within ecological limits. Degrowth does not follow a clear welfare approach nor does it make a sharp distinction between low-carbon and high-carbon consumption. It runs the risk of destroying too much welfare for the purpose of sustainability, without even guaranteeing an effective, let alone a cost-effective, way of tackling sustainability problems.[64]

I conclude from this exploration that any vision or strategy for a post-growth economy should not dismiss the opportunities that lie in setting the right incentives to market actors that would certainly unleash enormous innovation potential for sustainable technologies and consumption choices.

I personally wish very deeply that our societies could set a price for carbon emissions that were high enough to steer businesses and consumers towards commensurate reductions of emissions. We could finally live without a constant guilty conscience about consumption choices that are bad for the environment, like flying. We could make a collective choice to ensure that cheating and free-riding were difficult and costly. We could apply the principles of cultural evolution (multilevel selection) and design a system that worked for planetary welfare without each of us individually having to keep the welfare of all of humanity in mind. Instead, a new *invisible hand* would do the job for us (see also page 110).

The carbon tax is one possible instrument for this, and there are others, including taxes on the use of natural resources.

Importantly, there are ways to tax carbon emissions that don't put the burden on lower income families, for example, via lump sum transfers where the carbon taxes that the state collects are redistributed to all citizens evenly – lower income households would benefit from this.[65] This is certainly a good opportunity for politicians all over Europe who are increasingly aware and afraid that the yellow vest phenomenon might spread to their countries. It is definitely one step towards making the ecological transition work for the benefit of the working classes.

INCREMENTAL, CREATIVE STEPS TOWARDS A RADICALLY NEW ECONOMY

Leaving the big, highly ideologically charged visions for a different economy aside, we can identify incremental steps and solutions that can lead to a radically different system over time. Discourses about 'overcoming capitalism', 'socialist revolution', 'expropriation of business ownership' or 'reduction of consumption' inevitably create polarisation and resistance. This is unnecessary and unproductive, especially because nobody has all the answers for how a better system will ultimately work and look like. It will be a trial and error process, an evolutionary search process that we will have to embark upon.

One idea of economic innovation that has gained considerable support in recent years is the universal basic income (UBI). In the case of Germany, for example, some proposals suggest an unconditional monthly income of perhaps €1,000 that would be paid to all adult citizens.[66] A core argument in favour of the idea is that people would be liberated from having to worry about how to meet their basic needs. The late Erik Olin Wright, one of the pioneers of the concept, argued: "In a capitalism with basic income people are free to engage in non-market-oriented, socially productive activity."[67] This could

Altruistic behaviour and the corresponding social norms have to be cultivated because the neoliberal paradigm has had the tendency to undermine the human capacity for altruistic and cooperative behaviour.

include all kinds of voluntary work, including care-giving labour for children and the elderly or engagement in the arts, in politics and in all kinds of community-oriented activities. UBI would also improve the collective negotiating position of workers towards their employers because they wouldn't depend as much on their jobs.[68] It could reduce inequality and eliminate poverty completely. UBI could also reduce the costs of bureaucracy for both, the government and the current users of social welfare programs.

UBI has supporters from across the political spectrum, many of whom are concerned about unprecedented unemployment in the digital age. One of the candidates for the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, Andrew Yang, proposes UBI as his main policy: "In the next 12 years, 1 out of 3 American workers is at risk of losing their jobs to new technologies – and unlike with previous waves of automation, this time new jobs will not appear quickly enough in large enough numbers to make up for it. To avoid an unprecedented crisis, we're going to have to find a new solution, unlike anything we've done before."[69]

However, critics worry that UBI would have a negative effect on the work ethic of a segment of the population, who after a while would accommodate themselves to a subsidy mentality without contributing anything to society in exchange.[70] While this is an effect that supporters of UBI also acknowledge, the critics believe that the segment of the population who would behave that way will be too large and make the system too expensive in the long run.

The writer Wolfgang Höschele offers an argument against UBI from a more compassionate perspective. He argues that UBI wouldn't offer those people who are currently receiving social welfare a much more dignified life. While they might receive some more money, they would also receive the message that they're not needed anymore in our society, which would be a fatal signal.[71]

Höschele argues that it is not reprehensible to ask something in return for receiving an income. As an alternative to the UBI, he suggests that a new opportunity to generate income should be created and coordinated by the state. According to this idea every adult could make a proposal for a socially productive activity, and once it has been accepted they would receive a monthly income of €1,000 for carrying out this activity part-time. According to Höschele, this would still provide time to pursue other income-earning activities, if people wished to do so.

There have been experiments with UBI in several countries, but as far as I know none of them has been designed in a way such that meaningful conclusions can be drawn. For example, the Finnish experiment was specifically targeted at a group of unemployed people and the amount paid (€560) was too low to draw many conclusions.[72] We need a large-scale, more realistic experiment to find out its effects on human behaviour.

A group of students at the University of St.Gallen in Switzerland had a different idea for expanding the sector of voluntary civic engagement and getting all of the citizens involved.[73] They propose that by law all employment contracts should provide employees with the possibility to spend 20% of their work time volunteering. The state would provide a tax break to companies as compensation. The appeal of this proposal is that such non-monetary engagement could become part of normal life and in fact create social norms outside the market paradigm.

Altruistic behaviour and the corresponding social norms have to be cultivated because the neoliberal paradigm has had the tendency to undermine the human capacity for altruistic and cooperative behaviour.[74]

Joe Henrich provides the perfect example for how important it is to cultivate social norms:

> "In Haifa, day care centres wanted to get parents to pick up their children on time. At six of these centres fines were imposed on late parents, following typical prescriptions from economics. If people respond to incentives, then fewer parents should come late if they were fined. In response the rate of late parents doubled. Twelve weeks later, when the fine was revoked, parents still kept picking up their children just as late and did not return to pre-fine levels. That is, the fine made things a lot worse. Adding a fine had apparently changed the implicit social norm, making arriving late merely something that could be purchased with a fee instead of a violation of an interpersonal social obligation that induces shame, embarrassment, or empathy for the staff."[75]

After decades during which it has been difficult to question the neoliberal dogmas, space is beginning to open up for readjusting our beliefs about the economic system.

However, no perfect utopia will have the potential to manage the inevitable trade-offs and lead to an evolutionarily stable system.

This chapter is a small glimpse into some discussions that might be useful for going deeper and into some examples that might move the system in a better direction, away from neoliberalism and growth dependence, as well as resolve the conflict between ecological necessity and the legitimate demands of those who have been left behind by globalisation and neoliberalism.
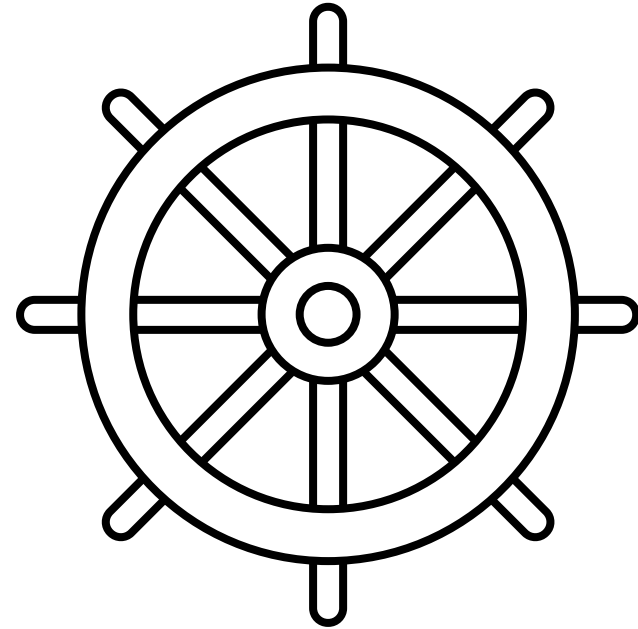
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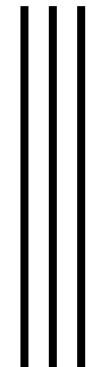
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PATHWAYS TO THE GREAT TRANSITION — WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

This book starts by showing how activism is contributing to the crisis liberal democracy is facing across the world. I claimed that humanity is running out of precious time to effectively address the multiple ecological crises we're facing. I then suggested that if progressive activism wants to make a useful contribution to tackling systemic problems, it has to break out of its ideological bubbles.

I then aimed to convince the readers that we won't be able to successfully transform society without understanding how our genes and culture have co-evolved. The evolutionary toolkit I offer can help guide us towards solutions that are based on this understanding and are more likely to create better societies. Guided by the toolkit, I have provided a glimpse of ideas and solutions in our democratic and economic systems that might be part of an intentional cultural evolution towards greater human wellbeing that is in harmony with nature.

For the last part of this book I will concentrate on what all of these insights might mean for the strategies that civil society organisations, activist networks and grantmaking organisations pursue.

I propose six action areas that I believe civil society leaders and activists should take seriously if they want to make a positive contribution to tackling the ecological crises and to creating a better society. They are:

1. **Reduce moral certainty**

2. **Build a transversal movement**

3. **Foster viewpoint diversity**

4. **Learn new ways of sensemaking**

5. **Design prototypes for cultural evolution**

6. **Tell stories grounded in truth**

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Why do you see the speck
in your neighbour's eye,
but do not notice the log
in your own eye?
You hypocrite, first take
the log out of your own
eye, and then you will
see clearly to take
the speck out of your
neighbour's eye.

(Matthew 7:3–5)

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REDUCE MORAL CERTAINTY

Most people with traditional values[1] in our Western societies are not per se rejecting the values of the open society. A study from 2019 across six European countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Italy and Greece) explored people's views on the open society and its values.[2] Only 9% of the respondents across all six countries rejected the values of the open society (e.g., freedom of religion, protection of minorities and equal treatment of immigrants). However, 59% of the respondents believe that a good society should incorporate the ideals of both the open society and also the closed society (e.g., protection of a country's borders and dominance of the traditional majority culture).[3] In other words, only very few people reject the advances made with regard to women's and minorities' rights over the last decades, but an important segment of our societies feels threatened by the speed of change over recent years. They are not the enemies of progress, but they see certain trade-offs between further progress and the stability of their societies that are unresolved.

Progressive activists and others who believe that much more progress is needed to achieve full equality for women, gays, trans people and ethnic minorities will have to urgently reduce their moral certainty and cultivate generosity of spirit. They are too certain about the superiority of their moral worldview.

Jonathan Haidt notes: "The ancients knew that we don't react to the

world as it is; we react to the world as we construct it in our own minds. They also knew that in the process of construction we are overly judgmental and outrageously hypocritical: 'Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.' (Matthew 7:3–5)"[4]

The liberal Western society (the WEIRD people) and its morality, globally speaking, is the *weird* minority. The vast majority of the global population care about their religion, nation and the traditional family as much as they care about the rights of minorities and social justice. To dismiss traditional conservative values as illegitimate is a huge mistake.

The open society can only exist if everybody is capable of being tolerant – this has to include tolerance towards those who hold traditional values. If we are not tolerant towards this significant part of our societies, it will only lead to more resistance against liberal values and trigger more authoritarian dynamics. One of the characteristics of liberal societies is precisely that people with different ways of life and views can manage to live together without aiming to convert the other side.

Progressives should realise that equality of outcome is not a good goal for achieving justice and in fact is often a very bad one. Unequal representation, for example, of women and ethnic minorities in business sectors, academia or leadership positions is not always an indicator of discrimination. It sometimes can be, but often such inequities are an expression of different interests. The introduction of a quota as a general instrument, as is now demanded almost everywhere, will certainly create new injustices. We know from experience with affirmative action in the United States that instead

of providing better opportunities for everyone, only a few already relatively privileged individuals benefit from such a system.[5] Moreover, well-prepared individuals who would have succeeded without the quota might be stigmatised for the perception of having been given an advantage, while others who are promoted into a leadership position (or similar) without having the right qualifications might suffer in trying to live up to the expectations and demands. Additionally, groups that are disadvantaged by the system might develop resentment because they perceive the system as unfair. Such unintended effects could be avoided if the focus were on creating better opportunities for everyone and investigating where potential real sources of discrimination lay, which could then be addressed more adequately.

For example, one potential injustice might lie in the fact that many of the professions that are traditionally dominated by women are low-paid.[6] This is especially the case with most care jobs, like nursing, childcare and care of the elderly. Instead of aiming at symmetry between women and men in their choice of profession, efforts could be concentrated on raising the pay in these traditionally female jobs.

In any case, it's not wise to aim at achieving 100% social justice. Like with most things in life, too much of a good thing can become a bad thing. We have seen this in the case of the admission of trans women to women's sports competitions. It meant that biological women didn't have any chance of winning in some athletic disciplines due to the physical advantage trans women had.[7] So the only way to keep fairness in women's sports might be to exclude trans women from it. This inevitably would have the effect of discriminating against a small share of the population. Campaigning for the elimination of all oppressions should not be the goal of social justice activists.

Instead, such trade-offs should be considered by activists and be managed in a wise manner if they want to win the support of majorities for their objectives in the long run.

'Nuance' should become a core principle for activists in these polarised times. Failing to acknowledge the complexity of the issue at stake will only create resistance from those who in principle would be sympathetic to our goals. It is important that we not exaggerate the claims we make, that they be based on a fair and accurate assessment so that others who don't necessarily share the same passion can see the value of the call and can develop trust in our ideas and political proposals.

We're all journalists now, in this age of social media, and we need to do this job responsibly and with nuance. We need to develop a highly critical mind, especially in a world where highly skilled actors are continually trying to hack people's minds.
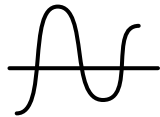
BUILD A TRANSVERSAL MOVEMENT

Tackling climate change is not a special interest issue. It's a question of the survival of our civilisation, and it should be of interest to all people. So it doesn't make sense to organise a movement for tackling climate change based on a narrow ideological basis, as is often the case with current climate justice activism. Instead, the big question has to be how to create a movement of enough people that support a political agenda that is radical enough to tackle the problems.

I agree with the political theorist Chantal Mouffe in that the

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A transversal movement for economic systems change between progressives and traditionalist working classes is a possibility if everyone learns to accept and tolerate the diversity of moral foundations and worldviews.

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traditionalist working class voters who in the past used to vote for left-wing parties, but are now often a strong base for authoritarian parties, can be won back for a progressive project. But I disagree with her stance that this can be achieved by using an intersectional frame. Mouffe often cites the Spanish party Podemos as proof that a populist left-wing party could win over the rural working classes in addition to attracting a progressive urban voter base. She calls this "[drawing] the frontier in a 'transversal' way".[8]

Spain had indeed remained free from far-right authoritarianism, but since December 2018, this has changed. The far-right VOX party has since entered the national and a number of regional parliaments. In parallel, Podemos has lost a considerable share of its electorate. In the last few years, Podemos has increasingly used a strong intersectional lens in its communications and political programme. It is likely that this has contributed to its electoral decline among the working classes.[9]

I have already argued that it is imperative that we reduce our moral certainty in these difficult times and to accept the traditional conservative moral worldview as legitimate. I have also shown in chapter 9 that the traditionalist rural working classes have much to win from a transition to a post-growth/post-neoliberal economic model.

A transversal movement for economic systems change between progressives and traditionalist working classes is a possibility if everyone learns to accept and tolerate the diversity of moral foundations and worldviews.

That doesn't mean that the progressive left should abandon its aspirations for social justice, but a better understanding of the moral foundations of many ordinary people will help create a more complete and more workable vision.

Based on the insights from the research on authoritarian dynamics (page 25), an important success factor for such a movement will be ceasing to praise the differences between the different identities in the movement. Instead, the movement should emphasise its own *oneness* and the factors that bind people together.

A transversal movement could also be seen as a coalition of pragmatism with nothing to lose and much to win. The more people currently attracted by right-wing authoritarianism that join such a movement, the more likely it is that the necessary democratic space for further social progress can be maintained.

Such a movement will not be easy to forge. At this moment in time the mistrust on both sides is arguably high. In the recent elections to the European Parliament, European far-right parties embraced climate change denial as one of their top issues.[10] This shows how receptive their electorate is to anti-green messages.

Only by truly listening to the rural working-class people can trust be regained. The ecological transformation of our societies cannot continue to be an elite project, which it has been up until this moment in time.

Psychologist Renée Lertzman offers some advice on how to take climate change and the broader ecological crisis out of the trenches of political warfare and engage people to ultimately bring them on board and join the movement:

> "As our work addressing climate change evolves to meet the pressing need for large-scale engagement, we would all be well served by tapping into the research and insights into how our minds work. [...] It requires building capacities for engagement that take into account the central role of 'affect' – how these

issues make us feel, and how overwhelming they can be for many people. Pushing solutions is itself not the only solution. Helping people see themselves as empowered actors in changing our world, framing the issue as an opportunity not a burden, is where we can find our greatest headwind. Empathy is a critical ingredient in this mix, if we are to be effective."[11]

Here it might be helpful that people who live in rural areas often still have a much closer connection with the natural environment than urban cosmopolites. This includes the many people who work in agriculture, forest management etc. It won't be an artificial exercise of empowerment, because their knowledge and experience will be very much in need when we have to transform our relationship with the natural environment. They are important actors in changing our world!

FOSTER VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY

One of the most passionate demands frequently made at progressive activist gatherings is full inclusion (at meetings) of all dimensions of society and especially of marginalised communities who often don't have a voice. The narrative goes that without representation of the oppressed and the marginalised, we are perpetuating oppressive power structures, and any discussion about systemic change is worthless.

The argument is compelling and often convinces many people. It looks like we're excluding important voices if, for instance, in

Europe we organise activist gatherings where people of migrant background from Turkey or Africa lack representation.

But there are a number of issues that are usually left completely unconsidered.

It is not usually due to active exclusion that this diversity of representation is not achieved. In my personal experience, I have tried to increase such diversity in our Smart CSOs Lab gatherings many times but have often been unsuccessful. One of the reasons certainly is that people are drawn towards projects according to their values, personalities and areas of interest. Among these ethnic minorities, which are to a large extent traditionalist and conservative[12], there are just not that many people who are keen to join a gathering about the Great Transition.

There are, of course, some progressive / social justice activists in immigrant communities, and there are, of course, activist networks that make a special effort to achieve ethnic and cultural diversity in their gatherings.

But is this real diversity? I would argue that it is actually self-deception. I am sure that if we had gatherings with real representation of immigrant communities and non-elite social classes (assuming this were possible to achieve), the conversations at activist meetings would shift radically because of the reasons outlined above. The majority of people lean far more conservative and wouldn't share many of the unquestioned assumptions that progressive activists hold.

While I don't think that anything near equal representation should be an aspiration (as discussed earlier), I think that increasing the diversity of experience, cultural background and social class is a valuable goal for any group that aims at discussing the future of our society on this planet.

How can we improve judgement and decisions, both our own and those of institutions that serve us? The short answer is that little can be achieved without considerable investment of effort. As I know from experience System 1 [the intuitive mind] is not readily educable. I have made much more progress in recognising the errors of others than my own.

Daniel Kahneman
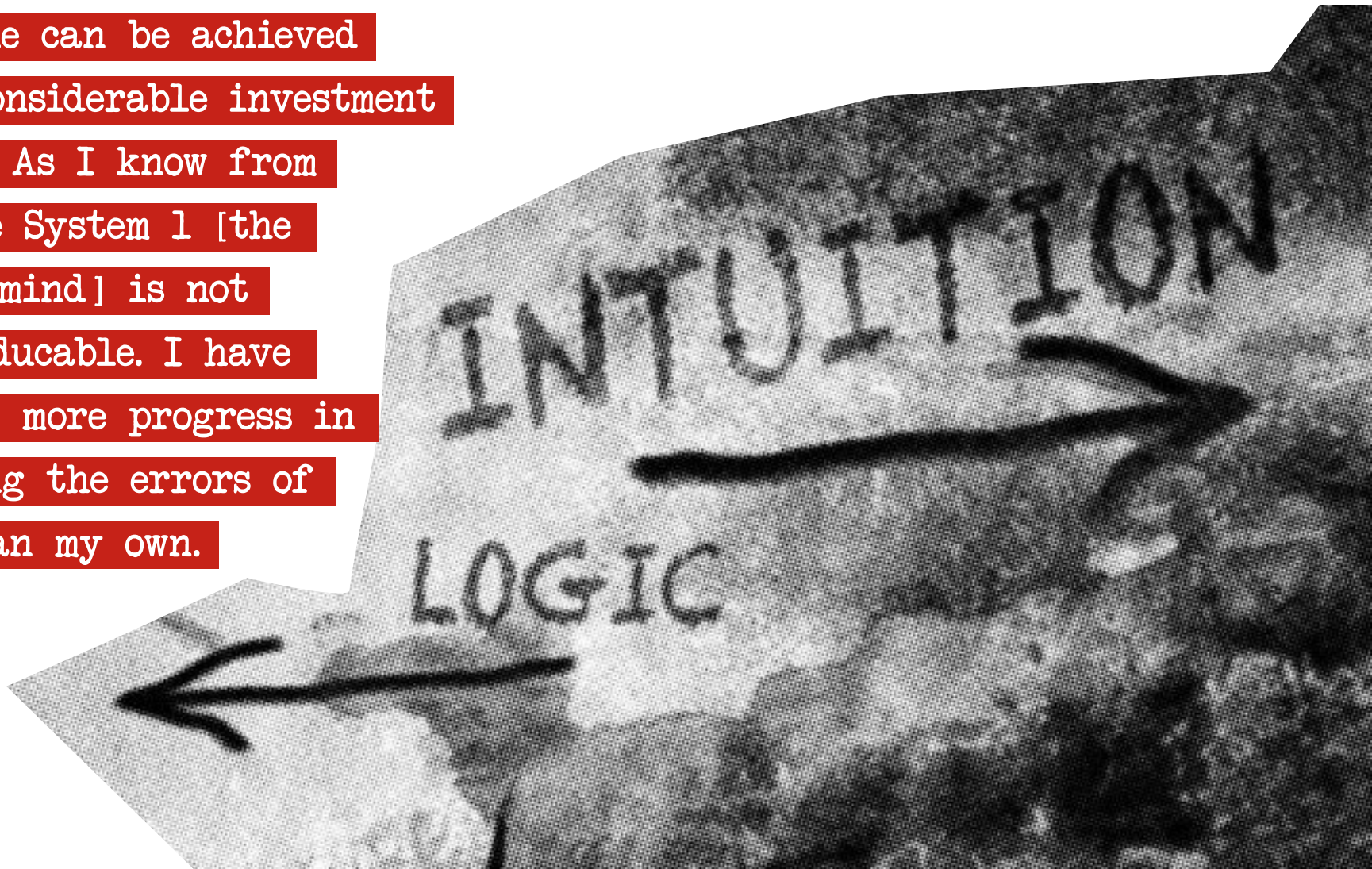
However, a much more important goal would be to increase viewpoint diversity.

As I have argued throughout this book, in order to find solutions to our most systemic problems and in order to become *wise managers of our cultural evolution*, we cannot continue looking at the world from a narrow ideologically constrained perspective. We need to take our ideological glasses off and exit the echo chamber.

This might sound like a good idea – certainly to me it does – but it's easier said than done. We cannot easily escape our innate confirmation biases and will always be prone to motivated reasoning, in spite of our best intentions. Nobel Prize winner in economics Daniel Kahneman writes in his famous book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*:

> "How can we improve judgement and decisions, both our own and those of institutions that serve us? The short answer is that little can be achieved without considerable investment of effort. As I know from experience System 1 [the intuitive mind] is not readily educable. [...] I have made much more progress in recognising the errors of others than my own."[13]

All perspectives on reality are a reduction of reality. Each of them contains blind spots that are unavoidable. The best way to improve the thinking of our groups then is to increase the diversity of thought among its members, and especially to avoid systematic biases of the kind found when most group members share the same ideology. This is of course not a new idea, but in fact was the foundational principle of the university. Scientific progress is the result of scholars continuously challenging each other and identifying errors in thought and judgement, slowly approaching truth over time. In groups that want to advance thinking about the Great Transition we need a similar approach to that of the Heterodox Academy,

an organisation that was founded to increase viewpoint diversity among faculty at U.S. universities following the analysis done by Jonathan Haidt a few years ago about the extreme liberal/left bias, especially in the social sciences.[14]

In the current culture in spaces of activism and academia, this will not be easy to achieve because the dogmatic version of intersectional ideology is still spreading, and many important ideas now lie outside the acceptable narrowly defined boundaries of what is allowed to be said (safe space culture).

However, and crucially, this is exactly why everybody who believes that the free exchange of ideas is fundamental to saving our open societies must courageously counter the current zeitgeist in favour of new spaces where legitimate ideas of good faith can be discussed freely.

Here is a great list of problematic phenomena that can often be found in activist spaces, put together by Inclusion 2.0.[15] They are well intended and aim to make these spaces more inclusive, but instead they create highly unhealthy and unproductive atmospheres:

- Oppressive rules around speech and 'political correctness'. There can seem to be a hypersensitivity to language and behaviour that can create a culture of fear.

- Endless processes of blame and accusation that don't seem to ever resolve.

- A victim–oppressor framework that doesn't allow any other narratives to come forth.

- The inversion of power hierarchies instead of their transformation (with a new group of oppressors at the top instead of no oppressors there).

Get yourself into places where your consensus reality and your habits are wilfully destroyed and get as far away from ideology as you can. Your job is not to know what the fuck is going on. Your job is to be absolutely certain that you have no idea what the fuck is going on and learn how to feel from raw chaos, from raw uncertainty.

Then and only then are you finally able to begin the journey of beginning to form a collective intelligence in this new environment.

Jordan Hall

- Devaluing of assertiveness and aggressiveness that can breed innovation, both inside a team and with competitors.

- Creating a talent drain as some leave rather than speak out.

- A monoculture that only values a narrow range of attitudes, politics, personality types, and communication styles.

- The demonization of those with differing views.

- A focus on internal politics and policies which draws too much attention away from action and movement forward.

LEARN NEW WAYS OF SENSEMAKING

Allowing different views to be heard is important, but on its own it won't be enough.

According to futurist Jordan Hall, we need to recognise that our way of making sense in the world used to work, but doesn't anymore, and that we need to set ourselves free to begin learning anew. Hall notes:

> "This by nature must in fact be exploratory – so learn to swim. Do not make sense prematurely, in spite of the fact the world feels dangerous – in spite of the fact you may want to protect yourself. Doing so too quickly will not allow your natural exploratory approach to do what it needs to do. [...] Get yourself into places where your consensus reality and your habits are wilfully destroyed and get as far away from ideology as you can. Your job is not to know what the fuck is going on. Your job is to be absolutely certain that you have no idea what the fuck is going on and learn how to feel from raw chaos, from raw uncertainty. Then and only then are you finally able to begin the journey of beginning to form a collective intelligence in this new environment."[16]

We have to learn to truly listen to other people's ideas and learn the skill of critical thinking to parse what is true and what isn't. We will also have to learn synthetic thinking, to make sense of what seems true but seems quite different from another truth. How do these different truths or realities actually fit together?

The need to improve our sensemaking apparatus very much relates to the question of consciousness and the need for an upgrade to human consciousness.

As our social systems on this planet have become ever more complex, so our human consciousness has increased. Integral theory, proposed by thinkers such as Ken Wilber and Don Beck, maintains that the collective consciousness of humankind has evolved through premodern, modern and postmodern structures and is emerging into a new structure of consciousness, the integral stage, which is characterized by an ability to think and act from multiple worldviews.[17] As I have argued earlier in this book, our current Western culture is still dominated by a postmodern worldview, which includes a strong focus on social justice. Its ethics have given birth to the civil rights, feminist and gay rights movements, as well as environmentalism. But people who hold this worldview often reject the modern (science and reason) and traditional values. In contrast, the integral worldview recognises the importance of all preceding

stages of development and holds a systemic understanding of human interconnectedness.

The activist-scientist Daniel Schmachtenberger argues that the type of shift in consciousness that humanity has to go through now is towards a win-win worldview that we have never had before. "The level at which we can affect each other, because of exponential technology, requires that we take full consideration for making sure that we're not externalising harm at that effect, on a planet that can't handle the externalisation load anymore."[18] Win-lose games are not an option any more. It will be either lose-lose, which would be the collapse of civilisation, or it will be win-win, the upgrade to our consciousness that will allow us to create what Schmachtenberger calls 'civilisation 2.0', where the incentive of every agent (every person or group) in the system will be aligned with the wellbeing of every other agent.

What level of consciousness will be required from all eight billion people on this planet who shall be participants of the Great Transition, and how fast the consciousness upgrade can happen, I don't know. What I do believe is that those of us who want to become *wise managers of evolutionary processes* need to develop a high level of awareness of reality and an integral worldview.

On the individual level, the right practices of meditation can help raise one's consciousness and level of attention, and so can psychedelics create an experience of profound connection with life and the world, when administered carefully.[19]

Most importantly, we need to develop and practice our skills of sensemaking and holding complexity in meaningful conversations with others who share this purpose. We need to figure out how to talk to each other with generosity and enough precision to convey something important and to understand the other person's cognitive model. This is how we can reach a shared cognitive model and reach increasing depth and insight in our conversations.

As far as I know, there are not yet many groups and spaces that have freed themselves from ideological boundaries and have moved towards new ways of sensemaking.

One of these few groups is the so-called Intellectual Dark Web that consists of mostly U.S. academics and thinkers whose political beliefs span the spectrum. They hold regular exploratory online conversations where they often reach a level of depth about difficult topics that is impossible to find in the mainstream media. Their podcasts and YouTube videos often reach an audience in the seven-digit range.

The British journalist and filmmaker David Fuller believes that the Intellectual Dark Web "is an early, but significant evolutionary leap in public thought and discussion, that has been facilitated by the medium of the internet – and that the spread of the name is the coming to public consciousness (and self-consciousness) of a conversation that is existentially important".[20]

Fuller himself co-founded the Rebel Wisdom media platform, which amplifies voices from the Intellectual Dark Web and from other thinkers to foster deep conversations about transformative ideas.[21] Rebel Wisdom also organises workshops and events to open up this conversation and learning experiment to a wider public.

We need more spaces similar to Rebel Wisdom and to expand them to other European countries and beyond.
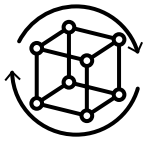
DESIGN PROTOTYPES FOR CULTURAL EVOLUTION

If you have read this far, we have explored many important questions and ideas, and we have learned some ways of approaching our complex world in a more systemic way. We have learned how gene-culture co-evolution happens and have developed an evolutionary toolkit for intentional cultural evolution. But you might still ask yourself what civil society organisations can do more systematically to put these ideas into practice.

Bret Weinstein notes: "Evolution gets you here and it almost certainly will end in a self extinguishing event if you keep playing the evolutionary game. You can't continue to dance with the one that brought you."[22]

How can we switch off the autopilot and take evolution into our own hands? How can we become designers of evolutionary processes that can effectively upgrade our civilisation and help prevent its collapse?

Dave Snowden invented the *Cynefin framework for decision-making* that became famous as a practical tool to help identify and work with complex systems. He argues: "Leaders who try to impose order in a complex context will fail, but those who set the stage, step back a bit, allow patterns to emerge, and determine which ones are desirable, will succeed."[23]

Design thinking works well in this domain, where we can explore multiple prototyping and experiments.

The philosopher, scientist and software developer Forrest Landry has some important advice on how to go about the design process and what is fundamental to consider.[24]

He believes that nature can teach us important lessons about how to create better design (for cultural evolution). For example, in nature, solutions and systems are self-healing. They also tend to solve a whole constellation of problems simultaneously, which is exactly what we need when looking for better solutions for our civilisational problems. We don't get to the kinds of solutions that we need by optimizing for any single metric, or even a finite set of metrics. Instead we need to know what principles and characteristics a good solution needs to have. Does a potential solution meet the necessary and sufficient criteria in order for it to actually be a solution in this space that it's supposed to be a part of?

For example, system solutions should help restore the earth's ecosystems and re-align human activity with the evolution of ecosystems and become partners in that evolution. They should also support fairness in our social systems and increase human wellbeing and reduce suffering where possible.

Bret Weinstein offered a list of criteria against which prototypes for what he calls Game B[25] should be measured. According to Weinstein, solutions should be sustainable, antifragile, fair, upgradable, rewarding, humane, capture resistant, attainable and scalable.[26]

Antifragility is a system condition that is similar to but goes further than resilience. The resilient resist shocks and stay the same; the antifragile get stronger. Natural complex systems are antifragile. It's the property behind evolution. It's important not to suppress randomness and volatility. It's better to create an antifragile structure and learn from trial and error than to try to get everything right in a fragile ecosystem. Overprotection makes systems and people fragile.[27]

Importantly, we should make use of the evolutionary toolkit (chapter 7) when designing prototypes for the Great Transition. Surely one of the most important criteria would be to build structures that are designed for abundance as a way to prevent tribal outbursts that tend to occur when humans run out of positive-sum opportunities for growth.

In an analogy to software development, Landry argues that we shouldn't "trash" the old system and start the new system from scratch.[28] We shouldn't "[throw] out the baby with the bathwater" because "all of the problems that the old system effectively was a solution for have to be addressed again from scratch. And half the time we don't even know what those problems are, what those solutions and the techniques of solving those problems actually were." Instead he suggests we first analyse what problems the current system does indeed solve as well as identify previous assumptions, both those that might no longer be valid and those that still apply and need to be preserved. Landry says:

> "When you have clarity about those kinds of things, then you can start replacing components one at a time. You can start basically going through the system and using the components of the old one to build the new one. Having a clear sense of what a successful architecture looks like means that to some extent you understood the old architecture – and understood it well enough to understand what problems it was a solution for, and what things it was not a solution for – so that when you're designing the new thing, you're in a sense encompassing and incorporating all of the learning and all of the knowledge of the thousands of programmers that came before you."[29]

~

The prototyping design process is not about fighting the existing system, but building new ones that are fundamentally more adequate and meet needs better than the old systems. The new systems will then outcompete the old systems because they have a selective advantage (in evolutionary terms).

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The prototyping design process is not about fighting the existing system, but building new ones that are fundamentally more adequate and meet needs better than the old systems. The new systems will then outcompete the old systems because they have a selective advantage (in evolutionary terms).

All systems become feeble over time and then it becomes relatively easy to compete against them, especially when most people are dissatisfied with the old system. Complexity researcher Orit Gal argues that when complex systems become dominant "a different set of dynamics begins to set in – systemic tensions. A tension is a dynamic by which emerging patterns seem to be putting opposing pressures on individual actions and opportunities. [...] Systemically, it seems every dominant trend seems to emerge with its own 'anti-trend' in tandem."[30] Gal argues that 'rival systems' cannot be destroyed, but they can be transformed by enhancing and disrupting the dynamics flowing within them.

Prototyping is an adaptive approach: probe, sense, respond. How do we take civilisation-wide dynamics and make iterative shifts on them that move the whole system forward?

The Dutch school of *transition governance* has about ten years of experience on how to organise similar processes. Transition governance provides a structure to support a prototyping process with many simultaneous experiments.[31] From the practice of transition governance we can draw the conclusion that for prototyping cultural evolution we need three activities:

- Developing a vision for a world of planetary welfare (or Game B)
- Seeding and supporting a pool of cultural evolution experiments
- Maintaining an infrastructure that extracts the learning from these experiments and feeds them back into the vision

My sense is that greater efforts need to be put into setting up multidisciplinary teams with the capacity, skills and energy to get involved in prototyping processes for intentional cultural evolution.

TELL STORIES GROUNDED IN TRUTH

A powerful way of transmitting and intentionally changing culture is through narrative and stories. The way new narratives emerge is that stories are told and retold many times by many people and converge into bigger, coherent narratives.

Stories are so effective because they affect people on an emotional level. Stories reach both people's emotional and rational brain, which is critical to galvanising action (in contrast to pure rational information and facts, which don't reach the emotional brain and are therefore often ineffective).[32]

Most importantly, stories can create deep cultural meaning and impact. In his book *Winning the Story Wars* acclaimed storyteller Jonah Sachs writes about the stories that have been told for generations, across centuries and even millennia. These stories that make sense of the world he calls myths. Sachs argues that "myths are the glue that hold society together, providing an indispensable meaning-making function. [...] They allow us to see the world through powerful symbols that stand in for and remind us of deep truths."[33] Alex Evans, author of the book *The Myth Gap*, states:

"Once upon a time, our society was rich in these kinds of stories, and we called them myths. Today, though, we have a 'myth gap'. Religious observance is declining steadily, leaving instead a focus on literal, scientific truth. Almost unnoticed, the old stories that used to bind us together – stories about meaning, identity, and what matters in life – have disappeared. Yet new ones have not emerged to take their place – creating the perfect environment in which the Trumps and Farages, Putins and Le Pens can flourish."[34]

The Brexit campaign that convinced a majority of UK voters in the referendum used a story of 'taking back control' to tap into the myth gap with a story of a proud nation that only had to free itself from its shackles to regain its former glory and strength on the world stage. It was a way to make meaning, provide identity and a sense of direction. It was a powerful story because it correctly addressed the discontent with liberalism that was bubbling under the surface. But it is also a fatal story because the solutions and pathway it provides will only create more misery.

Similarly, the *oppression story*, with its popular memes like *white male privilege* and *toxic masculinity*, falls on fertile ground in a postmodern and individualistic society that has social and psychological needs which in the absence of religious beliefs and community are often unmet.[35] The frame of social justice provides meaning, identity, community and moral guidance for what is right and wrong – it plays a similar role to a religion. But ultimately, identity politics and the oppression story turn people against each other and instead of resolving grievances, they create a greater sense of unfairness and new injustices.

Jordan Hall notes: "This is how delusions fall apart. Try as we might,

our desire to interpret reality to mean what we want it to, at the end of the day, will always be checked against what reality actually is. It may take some time because we're pretty good at making things up and pretending, but eventually reality is reality."[36]

The problem with all these stories, be it the *oppression story* or the *take back control story*, is that they might seem true at a superficial level, but they fail to be grounded in real truth.

In these times of disorientation and pessimism, we need to come together around powerful emotional stories about who we are, where we're coming from and where we're heading. But instead of preaching ideological wishful thinking, effective stories have to be grounded in reality and truth. They should be honest about difficult and uncomfortable truths and provide a sense of direction for a better future.

A truthful account of our evolved nature should be part of the story of where we're coming from and who we are, taking the good along with the bad. How the evolutionary toolkit empowers us to create a better society should be an essential part of the story of where we're heading.

An important part is the human story of ever increasing human cooperation – and how we're heading towards the whole earth becoming a superorganism. Alex Evans writes: "While history is by no means predetermined, it does have a basic direction – one that tends towards more and more non-zero-sum cooperation and higher and higher levels of social complexity."[37] But, as Evans says, "this could still go either way. The collapsitarians' predictions of catastrophe – an outcome of extreme zero-sumness [...] might yet be vindicated. Equally we could be about to tip decisively towards seeing us part of a 7 billion *us*. This is the extraordinary drama of the moment in history that we inhabit. And the single factor that will do

most to decide how we fare, as we face the test, may ultimately be which stories – myths – we reach for to explain the transition we're facing."[38]

George Marshall, the author of the important book *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, suggests that climate change "lends itself to multiple interpretations of causality, timing and impact. This leaves it extremely vulnerable to our innate disposition to select or adapt information so that it confirms our pre-existing assumptions – biased assimilation and confirmation bias. If climate change can be interpreted in any number of ways it is therefore prone to being interpreted in the way that we choose. These constructed narratives therefore contain the final reason why we can ignore climate change: they become so culturally specific that people who don't identify with their values can reject the issues they explain."[39]

Marshall argues that we should make explicit our psychological biases and recognise that many may be subconscious. He offers some important advice for how to frame stories with real potential to bring people on board and take action[40]:

- To address that our evolved danger triggers fail because we perceive climate change as a distant threat, we need to emphasise that climate change is happening here and now.

- Our sense of loss looks backwards rather than forward. We should express climate change as an opportunity to restore past losses: lost community, lost values, lost ecosystems, lost species, lost beauty. (Possibly, therein lies a real opportunity to get away from the apocalypse spirit of environmentalism. The restoration of the earth's ecosystems offers immense opportunities for a large movement where millions of people can become active in a useful way.)

- We interpret the ecological crises through frames, which focus our attention but limit our understanding. We should resist simple framings and be open to new meanings in order to avoid limited frames that exclude meanings that lie outside the frame.

- Because the ecological crises are wicked problems, they're in danger of becoming entirely defined by a frame or a solution that is proposed. We need to ensure that we constantly discuss a wide range of solutions that are under review, and be honest about the fact that nobody has the definite answers to the problems.

- We need to avoid enemy narratives that fuel division. Campaigns should create alternative narratives where the enemy might be our 'internal weaknesses' rather than an outside group. We need narratives of cooperation that bring people together around a common cause.

- Stories can help shift social norms, but people will only trust the message if they hear it from trusted communicators (people with status of prestige). If it comes from someone they don't trust, the opposite effect is possible: it can increase resistance.

- The stories should be honest about the danger, but (again) this will only motivate people if they hear it from trusted communicators.

- Importantly, stories should start with affirming wider values. This makes people far more willing to accept information that challenges their worldview. This includes respect for authority, personal responsibility and loyalty to one's community and nation.

Marshall states: "I warn environmental liberals that the measure of success will inevitably be the emergence of some new ways of talking that you may find unpleasant. Similarly, never assume that what works for you will work for others. Indeed the fact that you strongly like something, may well be an indication that people with other values will hate it."[41]

11

THE DOS AND DON'TS OF FUNDING SYSTEMIC ACTIVISM

For many years, private grantmaking organisations have been donating the bulk of their money to tackling single issues like conservation of species, climate change, child poverty or women's and gay rights. The solutions that were advocated for with the help of these funds were mainly symptoms oriented, as is the case, for example, with advocacy for renewable energy or aid transfers to poor countries.

Much of the grantmaking is still single issue and symptoms focused and lacks the systemic perspective that is necessary for long-term positive welfare. However, increasingly funders do understand that in an ever more complex world, the old approaches are mostly inadequate and often even counterproductive. These organisations are creating spaces for learning to develop better strategies and approaches for complex systems.[42]

The following recommendations are intended to be an impulse to these discussions among grantmakers. They are important conclusions that follow from the insights discussed in the preceding chapters of this book. Yet the list is preliminary and does not purport to be a complete list of recommendations for systems change.
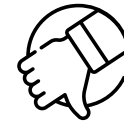
SEVEN THINGS FUNDERS SHOULD NOT FUND OR DO LESS OF

The collapse narrative – There is no scientific evidence for the prediction that our civilisation will inevitably collapse. However, if enough people believe in the collapse myth, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. People will panic and become more tribal instead of becoming more cooperative.

The enemy narrative – Enemy narratives like those of the modern version of identity politics increase the tendencies for destructive tribalism in our societies, and what is worse, these strategies are highly unsuccessful. In most cases they create lose-lose situations.

The oppression narrative – Activist strategies and campaigns which convey that most persisting inequities in the Western world are the result of systemic oppressions and of an alleged ideology of whiteness and patriarchy are at best an unhelpful oversimplification, but mostly a false and dangerous description of today's reality. Funders should be suspicious when reading campaign slogans that follow the exact, albeit vague, script of the intersectionality narrative (power, privilege, whiteness, patriarchy, systemic oppressions etc.) that rarely describe any concrete discriminations. Also, the frequent justifications on the basis of anecdotes and personal experience are no substitute for hard facts and doing the research, e.g., population-based studies.

Blank slatism / anti-science – The fact that scientific research is always plagued by biases doesn't disqualify science as a whole. The only alternative is to improve science by identifying the real biases

and correcting them. All activist approaches based on the idea of the blank slate and that ignore or fight against a truthful description of our evolutionary heritage should be rejected.

Single-issue maximisers – Single-issue campaigning can be highly problematic as it often doesn't consider the many trade-offs between different societal concerns and goals. Without an honest acknowledgement of the trade-offs that a choice might entail, these campaigns only speak to those who are already on board. They don't persuade those at the centre who are torn between the sides and could be persuaded by nuanced arguments. And even when the campaigns are successful, they only lead to more polarisation. Often, the policy changes that the campaign achieves don't last.

Ideological bubbles – Research shows that groups that hold certain common positions and share an ideology tend towards the extreme end of that position over time, i.e., the most extreme positions held by any individual in the group become the group's mainstream.[43] This is an important aspect to take into account when deciding on tools like *participatory grantmaking* mechanisms. When funders become more open and transparent in their decision-making, this is a positive step. But outsourcing the responsibility for decision-making to groups that are ideologically very biased due to their composition can lead to bad outcomes and further polarisation.

Diversity obsession – While making groups more diverse by inviting in more women and different ethnic groups is a positive objective in principle, it shouldn't become an obsession. The time lost in desperately trying to achieve a certain level of gender and ethnic diversity that is difficult to reach cannot be justified. Often the main reason for these inequities has to do with different subgroups at different moments in time having different levels of interest in certain activities or questions. Funders shouldn't make this a priority.

SEVEN THINGS FUNDERS SHOULD FUND OR DO MORE OF

Understanding and combatting tribalism – Tribalism is a deep-seated human drive. History shows how the right circumstances can activate our genetic predispositions, put us into tribal mode and make us capable of committing the worst atrocities. Culturally, we need to develop much more awareness of the fact that the enemy is within us. It is not some kind of outside group of bad people – it's us. We need to develop systems, institutions and a culture that prevent us from getting into tribal mode. This requires first developing a good understanding of the social mechanisms that make the situation likely. Preventing significant segments in our societies from feeling threatened is a good starting point.

Adopting an evolutionary worldview – Instead of dividing the world between bad and good people or seeing it mainly as a result of structures of oppression created by the dominant classes, activism would gain much from taking an evolutionary worldview. It much better explains how we have arrived to where we are now. It explains the ugly part of human history (domination and oppression), but it also shows that hierarchy, competition and our groupish instincts have played a positive role in creating the amazing civilisation that we have. Most importantly, an evolutionary worldview will help us find better solutions and strategies for our (intentional) cultural evolution. To cite Nicholas Christakis once more: "We should be humble in the face of temptations to engineer society in opposition to our instincts."[44]
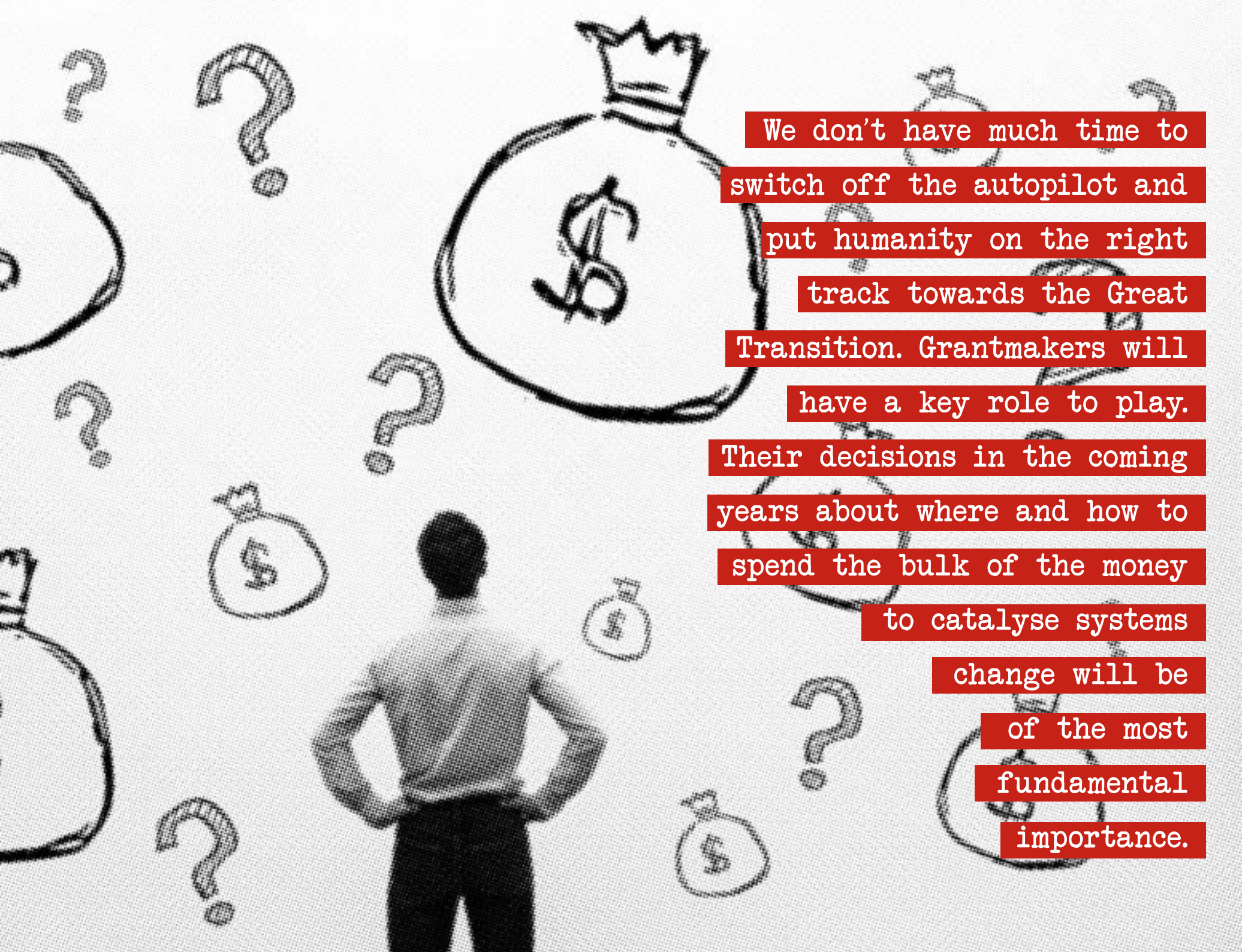
Thinking polarisation and ecological crisis together – We are currently experiencing a continuous spiral of polarisation in our societies. It is unlikely that we can successfully transform our whole economic system to tackle the ecological crisis in the face of growing opposition to this project by a significant segment of our societies. Progressive civil society in the Western world is far from having understood the dynamics that are at play in this process of polarisation and what role they themselves play in this process. Everybody who supports the Great Transition should also support ways to stop and reverse polarisation. Funders should make this a priority.

Supporting viewpoint diversity – Viewpoint diversity is arguably more important than ethnic diversity. Activism would benefit from groups that allow a broader diversity of ideas to be part of their discussions. In other words, the ideas shouldn't be judged by their ideological loyalty but by their quality and capacity to solve the multidimensional problems we're facing. Also, to create new, out-of-the-box ideas, we need disagreeable people who don't conform to the group's thinking. But creative individuals who score low on the personality trait of agreeableness can easily be silenced or ignored, if the focus is on consensus building in groups. Creative new ideas often don't emerge from group processes.[45] Disagreeable people should be given opportunities and be encouraged to develop their ideas.

Creating spaces for sensemaking – One way to reverse the spiral of polarisation is to create new spaces where everybody can develop and practice their skills of sensemaking and critical thinking as well as hold complexity in meaningful conversations with others who share this purpose. Grantmaking organisations can play an important role in creating such spaces that break out of the narrowly confined thinking of today's progressive activism.

Funding spaces for prototyping – This book is presenting a preliminary set of ideas for how we should approach the project of intentional cultural evolution for the Great Transition. My impression is that we are still in an early stage of developing the evolutionary toolbox for a successful transformation of our societies. As a next step we need to set up processes with multidisciplinary teams who have the capacity, skills and energy to get involved in prototyping for intentional cultural evolution. In the spirit of evolution, these teams would be seeding and supporting a pool of cultural evolution experiments. The goal would be to design variation and selection systems that will allow alternative institutions or organisational forms to compete with each other. Such processes require significant amounts of funding. Grantmaking organisations keen to support the Great Transition and with sufficient financial capacity should make this action area their priority.

Telling stories of a larger us – Instead of the collapse narrative, the oppression narrative and the enemy narrative, we need stories about a larger us, stories that correctly and honestly describe why our societies have been drifting apart, what still unites us and how we can find unity again and confront the challenges together.

We don't have much time to switch off the autopilot and put humanity on the right track towards the Great Transition. Grantmakers will have a key role to play. Their decisions in the coming years about where and how to spend the bulk of the money to catalyse systems change will be of the most fundamental importance.

Epilogue

My hope is that this book can provide an impulse for strategic discussions in the civil society and funder communities on how to find better strategies towards the Great Transition in our polarised times.

I hope that I have successfully convinced the reader to take the insights from evolutionary science as seriously as they take the climate sciences. If we want to develop strategies and solutions that set humanity on a positive path, understanding the biological sciences our behaviour and social systems are rooted in is as important as understanding the sciences that explain the 'behaviour' of the earth's systems.

As an important first step to get out of the current mess, we the liberal progressive Westerners should indeed realise that we are the WEIRD minority, globally speaking. We have to learn to live alongside this majority of people who don't fully share our morality. Only from a position of respect will we be able to focus on what unites us as citizens of this planet. Our fate depends on each other.

In my view this exploration has only been the beginning of developing and applying the evolutionary toolbox for the Great Transition.

As a way to evolve our work in the Smart CSOs Lab I hope to collaborate with other likeminded change agents to continue developing this thinking, and most importantly to apply it in prototypes and experiments for intentional cultural evolution. For this, we need to successfully create spaces that are *safe* for exploring our most vital and challenging questions, openly and undogmatically.

References and Notes

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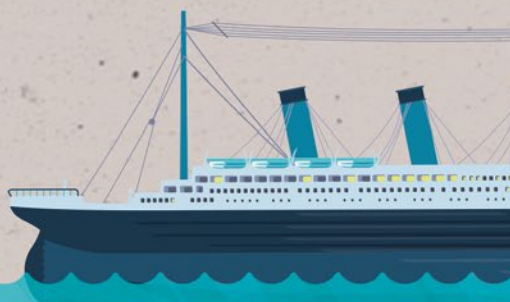
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PART IV

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