



We are more than this

Coleridge Lecture, Bristol, 2016

Andrew Simms

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Andrew Simms is co-founder of the New Weather Institute, a research associate at the Centre for Global Political Economy, University of Sussex, and a fellow of the New Economics Foundation, where he was policy director for many years. He tweets @andrewsimms_uk and his books include:

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Do Good Lives Have to Cost the Earth?

Eminent Corporations: the rise and fall of the great British corporation (with David Boyle)

The New Economics (with David Boyle)

Cancel the Apocalypse: the new path to prosperity

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The Coleridge Lecture
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Foreword

This lecture was given at the Festival of Ideas in Bristol on in May 2016. Since then, a backlash against remote, technocratic government, alienating and impoverishing economic policy has rocked the United Kingdom and the United States. It has swelled the ranks of progressive activists, but in terms of winning votes darker, fearful and more reactionary forces have triumphed. One argument as to why this has happened is the failure of progressive movements to articulate a plausible, practical economic alternative. Although written delivered long before these events, this lecture is a brief description of just such alternatives, things which I argued can form the basis of ‘practical utopias.’ In summary it describes how:

- we are all, much more than the self-interested caricatures of mainstream economic theory
- we can work less and live better
- we can afford and benefit from guaranteeing a basic income for all
- known solutions to housing and energy crises

will solve other problems too

- the kind of 'DIY' economics that emerges when markets fail shows how people can 'take back control'

With the eyes and curiosity to see, we will find that there are already pathways that lead through both the stale orthodoxy and the bitter backlash against it, to a much better world.

Andrew Simms, November 2016

We are more than this:
A new economic design for life
*(or, what does utopia smell
like?)*

Hello. Thank you for being here. But I am worried.

This lecture is in honour of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the lectures he gave in Bristol. I am told that when he got up to speak, the merchants of the city would heckle and generally give him a hard time. But I am not the first to be nervous advocating economic heresies here. When Thomas Clarkson arrived in Bristol, it was the first stop in his long campaign to abolish slavery, and he described his feelings:

“The bells of some of the churches were then ringing... It filled me, almost directly, with a melancholy for which I could not account. I began now to tremble, for the first time, at the arduous task I had undertaken of attempting to subvert one of the branches of the commerce of the great place which was then before me . . . and I questioned whether I should even get out of it alive.”¹

There is, apparently, a perfume you can buy for £300 called *Apocalypse*. It is made from everything mentioned in the Book of Revelation that carries a In Proverbs (29:18) it says: *'Where there is no vision, the people perish.'* But, in an observation attributed to several great minds, it's also said that: *'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than a change to the current economic system.'* So, I wondered, if the odour of the *Apocalypse* is available to purchase, in this anniversary year for Thomas More, what does Utopia smell like?

We are in the grip of accelerating climatic upheaval and divisive global inequality – characteristics of an economy hardwired to endless expansion and stubbornly disinterested in ecological thresholds. Rapid transition to a new economic system is urgently needed. But, just as many thought a new model of politics was emerging, older interests wed to orthodox and aggressive market economics took power. Extraordinarily, the old order restored itself using its own economic failure to justify more of what caused the problem in the first place. A market failure was cleverly transformed in the public imagination into a problem to do with public spending.

The official message is that there are no real alternatives after all. But is that true?

Because, around the world practical people of all political persuasions, from Conservative and Republican city leaders to left, independent and

anarchist activists are departing from the old orthodoxies, creating radical working examples of a new economic system. A moment of global despair is being turned by people of goodwill into an opportunity to re-imagine how we can organise our lives and economic affairs.

They reveal how, perversely, even wars, crises and disasters can create chances for new beginnings. Where reactionary, short term interests apply the 'shock doctrine', others are using the hope principle to lay the foundations for a rapid transition to a better world in which everyone might thrive within planetary boundaries.

In its limited time, this talk presents just a few, highly selective field notes of hope, not from imaginary lands but from practical utopias. There are many, many more with no time to mention. These places and initiatives may not be perfect, and that, we'll see is probably inherent, but represent real people proving that better worlds are possible.

The first practical utopia I want to begin with – one that belies the orthodox model of the economy – and which could not be more fundamental as it is the foundation upon which everything else is built - is US!

In other words, if I'm asking what utopia smells like, let's start with the personal hygiene of 'economic

man'. What is the stuff we are working with to exercise our utopian ambitions? It is of course ourselves. But who are we? Of course, we are manifold – part of Darwin's 'endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful' that have been and still are evolving – even, as Darwin points out, from the harshest circumstances of the 'war of nature, from famine, and death'.²

But how we organise the world often fails to acknowledge or respect this glorious diversity, and famously, in the case of mainstream economics it tends to make some sweeping, and highly reductive, assertions about who we are. And, there are reasons to believe these assumptions can be conveniently self fulfilling.

'You are narrowly self-interested, perfectly informed and rational – you are economic man – and your world is, competitive, infinite and barrier-free.'

You have evolved through Jeremy Bentham's concept of the importance of 'utility' - the greatest good for the greatest number, French mathematician Leon Walras' general equilibrium theory of the economy, and seek to 'maximise your utility through 'expressed preferences.' But here's the trick – the only way the mainstream has been confident enough to measure that, is through *what* you spend – regardless of *why* you spend – and how all that adds up into our national income – or GDP.

Famously, that means we are meant to be living the dream whether we're spending on wild flower seeds for

the garden, extra door locks through fear of crime or asthma inhalers due to poor air quality. That is literally the bad smell of mainstream, *aka* apocalyptic economics. In the eyes of GDP, that cannot distinguish economic quality from the quantity – more is always better.

I am simplifying – but that means the success of the dominant economic model of the Anthropocene is measured by the voracity with which we over-consume – and, in doing, so overburden our biocapacity, undermining our life supporting ecosystems. Hence, and gnomically, our success is in fact measured by our failure.

There's a niche in the economics literature that explores the question: does studying economics make you a bad person?'³

Professor Robert H. Frank was one of its early exponents, based at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He was struck by the insistence in economics on the essential selfishness of human nature - like the economist Gordon Tullock's assertion that 'the average human being is about 95 per cent selfish, in the narrow sense of the term'.⁴

Frank and his colleagues chose to investigate whether the 'self-interest' model of the economy was a reflection of how people in essence were, or whether it

was an artificially constructed model that attracted an unrepresentative, more selfish sample of society to its cause, and was actually making people selfish. His troubling conclusion was that the appeal, study and internalisation of neoliberal economic models did indeed select an unrepresentative, more selfish slice of society.

A study at the dawn of the Reagan–Thatcher economic revolution noted that economics undergraduates were more likely to behave selfishly, and ‘free-ride’ off the more public-spirited behaviour of others. And, more recently, Yoram Bauman, an environmental economist at the University of Washington, looked at the impact economics teaching on students majoring in other subjects. Those who began as part of the more generous majority, not full-time students of economics, actually became more selfish as a result of exposure to studying the ‘dismal science’.

That’s an old term but, according to Dr Marc Arvan, an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Tampa in the USA, it could be an understatement. He conducted an experiment looking into the relationship between ‘moral judgments and three ‘dark’ personality traits: Machiavellianism (tendencies to deceit), narcissism (over-inflated sense of self-worth), and psychopathy (lack of guilt and remorse)’. To do so, he looked at people’s beliefs concerning several issues including ‘economic libertarianism’ –

the notion that the role of the state in relation to the market should be minimal, only intervening to prevent or punish the breaking of the law.

This is the ideal habitat in which economic man is supposed to prosper. But Arvan found that this view ‘correlated significantly . . . with all three dark personality traits.’ In other words, the projection of an economic system built on foundations of self-interest, individualism and self-regulation, which is supposed to be good for everyone, in fact describes the habitat for a dark triad of personality dysfunctions including psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism.

The materialism relied on by neoliberal markets displays similarly self-reinforcing and negative dynamics. It has been shown in countless studies, summarised by American academic Professor Tim Kasser, that holding more materialistic values is an indicator for having relatively lower levels of well being.

Classic studies show that merely being exposed to images of fancy consumer goods triggers materialistic concerns, which makes us feel worse, AND behave more anti-socially.⁵

Children, for example, exposed to advertising were seen to be less likely to interact socially. Other studies show how by simply referring to people as consumers rather than, say, citizens, triggers more competitive and selfish behaviour. When you can be exposed to anything from 500 to 3,000 daily ‘cues’ to think in this

way from exposure to media and advertising, it can have a huge cumulative effect – not just on our own well-being – but on others through how we behave toward them.⁶

The psychology professor Dacher Keltner points to research that show how image-conscious people who drive the highest social status cars, also exhibit the most anti-social behaviour on the roads.⁷

To combat what they called the visual pollution of excessive advertising, Brazil's biggest city, São Paulo, led by the city's conservative mayor, Gilberto introduced the Clean City Law in 2007.⁸ The result was a near-total ban effecting billboards, digital signs and advertising on buses. Several US states strongly control public advertising too and, in Paris, recent rules reduce advertising on the city's streets by 30 per cent and cap the size of hoardings.⁹ No adverts are allowed within 50 metres of school gates.

The fact that we might not fully be in the driving seat of our own lives can be felt as an affront. It can feel like a weakness, an insult to our sense of ourselves. But not only is the evidence overwhelming that our choices are hugely influenced by cues in the environment around us and the behaviour of others – it seems that much of the time 'rational economic man' is often not making conscious rational choices at all, in the way supposed in mainstream economics.

There is a debate about how much, but research in neuroscience indicates that many of our choices are

made during pre-conscious brain activity, a mixture of highly subjective, conditioned and instinctive processes.¹⁰ If anything, the brain can be that kind of friend who, whatever you do and for whatever reason, pats you on the back after the event and says ‘good call’ – you took charge and did the right thing.

The doctrine of neoliberalism, it seems, pushes you towards becoming the kind of human being that it relies on. The study of this branch economics seems to behave like an intellectual version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, turning the host mind to its own preset purpose. It is a kind of reality-by-assertion.

But does humanity really smell this bad, because if so, the prospect for any Utopia is rather sulphurous.

In fact, there has been a deluge of findings recently from evolutionary biology, anthropology, psychology, ecology and neuroscience that contradict the reduction of humanity to competitive vessels of short-term, self-interested individualism.

From our primal beginnings, biology reveals that the emergence on Earth of life itself owes as much to processes of symbiosis and association as to competition.¹¹ This appears to be the case with early-evolving bacteria, engaged in a kind of giant social networking exercise in which micro-biological forms

evolved the tricks that still lie at the heart of life.

Nature – often – is riddled with strategies that contradict the market myth that life is a brutal individual struggle of the survival of the fittest. There are evolutionary victories for symbiosis, for example, in the bacteria that fix nitrogen in plant roots and which consequently makes life continuingly possible. And, for collaboration, as was the case with primeval slime mould which got life going.

There is also the co-evolution that gave us the pollinating honey bee, responsible for those one in three mouthfuls of the food we eat. And then there is ‘reason’ itself, another advantage for problem-solving animals like elephants, dogs, cats, rats, sperm whales and, apparently, sometimes, humans. In a world witnessing the unhealthy concentration of economic power and cultural homogenisation, optimal diversity is also a key condition, nature’s insurance policy against disaster.

Yet we regulate the economy in favour of one-sided, competitive individualism, and ironically in the process, through the failure to control emerging monopoly and oligopoly, allow the spread of monocultures and clone towns that are increasingly vulnerable to a wide range of external shocks. Interestingly, companies with more progressive governance structures, co-operatives like John Lewis and mutuals like the Nationwide, proved more resilient and successful after the financial crisis.

In fact, what seems to make humanity fairly special is our prodigious and skillful capacity for empathy and co-operation. In this broader, view we are in fact ‘super-co-operators’ who are living in an ‘age of empathy’.

Professor of biology and maths at Harvard University, Martin Nowak, notes that contrary to the pseudo-Darwinian caricature of animals caught in a death struggle, mechanisms of co-operation including direct and indirect reciprocity are fundamental. In fact, from David Hume to Darwin himself, and Kropotkin writing in *Mutual Aid*, the power of co-operation is the forgotten story of ourselves.

Science now shares a lot with the truths stumbled on by the world’s great religions that value unselfish action. Nowak writes that: ‘They have come to the conclusion that love, hope and forgiveness are essential components of what is needed to solve the biggest problems.’

And that he is ‘struck – perhaps awestruck – by the extent to which humans co-operate: ‘No animal species can draw on the mechanisms (of co-operation) to the same extent as seen in human society’.

Empathy is the antithesis of market-sociopathy and the biologist and primatologist Frans de Waa, sees this as the great, under-recognised human quality. The fact that we are ‘hard-wired’ for altruism, the expression of our ability for empathy, has kept society as a whole from falling apart. ‘Feeling’ for each other, in such a

way that it shapes mutually supportive, rather than competitive, behaviour is designed-in. To flourish, we need an economics that plays to these extraordinary strengths, rather than contradicting and suppressing them.

De Waal sees amusing contradictions in the highly selective co-option by mainstream economics of evolutionary theory. Just as a rejection of real Darwinism, or refusal to endorse it, washes over the religious, conservative branch of the Republican movement, the very same political persuasion promotes a Social Darwinism that depicts 'life as a struggle in which those who make it shouldn't be dragged down by those who don't'.

Hence, neo-conservatives draw invisibly on early misinterpretations of Darwin's theories and their application to the world of business. It was the philosopher Herbert Spencer, for example, in the nineteenth century who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest'. He thought equality was a bad idea, and that it was counterproductive 'for the "fit" to feel any obligation toward the "unfit"'.

Yet, quite the opposite is true in practice. Not only is inequality associated with economic disasters – it tends to peak before collapse – it also raises costs to society as a whole, as we see in the work of Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson. Equality, on the other hand, is very productive indeed. Calling on our inborn capacity for empathy, writes De Waal, 'can only be to

any society's advantage'.

I think it is time for a paradigm shift in which the colossally erroneous notion of 'economic man' is removed from the centre of our theoretical solar system, much as the Earth once had to be replaced by the Sun to correct a similarly mistaken belief.

It turns out that one of the greatest barriers to that shift might just be our reluctance to believe in its possibility – a reluctance that itself appears to be based on misunderstandings about how the world actually is, and wrongly second guessing what other people are truly like.

To begin with, *New Scientist* magazine described how:

“Many theories ... begin with the idea that inequality is somehow a beneficial cultural trait that imparts efficiencies, motivates innovation and increases the likelihood of survival. But ... rather than imparting advantages to the group, unequal access to resources is inherently destabilising and greatly raises the chance of group extinction.”¹²

The behavioural economist Dan Ariely conducted a survey in the USA, based on a classic thought experiment by the political philosopher John Rawls. First, people were asked to estimate how wealth was

actually distributed in the country. Respondents were broken down according to voter persuasion, Republicans and Democrats, men and women, and high-, medium- and low-paid. All groups, with very little variation among them, substantially overestimated how equal their society actually was.

They were then told to imagine that they are going to be randomly inserted into an income group in the society – it could be richest, poorest or somewhere in the middle – and asked what they think would be the ideal distribution of wealth in that society. Of course, this isn't just hypothetical: random insertion to an income group is precisely what happens to us when we are born. In the answer to this question, a fascinating thing happens – all the groups with only minor variation opted for a very substantially more equal distribution of wealth.¹³

Perceptions and misperceptions are fundamental to believing in the possibility of change. In a groundbreaking recent survey by the Common Cause Foundation, people were asked to talk about their own values and what they thought were the values of others. Regardless of age, geography, wealth and voting behaviour – people attach more importance to compassionate values – embracing justice, tolerance and responsibility – than to wealth, image and ambition, the so-called selfish values. About 74 percent of us prioritise in this way. But – when asked about the values we think others hold – 77 percent of us think

others hold dominantly selfish values.

From the point of view of how utopia smells – we seem to think the odour from each other is worse than it is – which might partly explain the lack of political enthusiasm for more shared, common, collective solutions to our problems.

We want and need more than the impoverishing view of humankind offered to us by the economic mainstream - and I believe we ARE more than this. There are sweeter smells rising all around us.

Where are they to be found, here's just a few examples, there are countless more – that is the positive thing – so please don't pick me up on what I leave out...

From John Stuart Mill to John Maynard Keynes, being able to cultivate the 'art of living' – rather than accumulating wealth and property – has been a constant theme of how a good economy can improve the human condition. To do that, two conditions are vital: the liberation of time and sufficient, basic financial security – in other words: *time and money*.

In Thomas More's *Utopia* – published exactly 500 years ago – he imagines both a shorter working day of just six hours – and a liberating and levelling economic proposition that is once again gaining interest: a basic income for all.¹⁴

More's protagonist describes a conversation with a smug, disciplinarian lawyer who was bragging about how many petty thieves – driven by hunger to steal – were getting the death penalty:

“We're hanging them all over the place', he said.
'I've seen as many as twenty on a single gallows.
And that's what I find so odd. Considering how few
of them get away with it, how come we are still
plagued with so many robbers?’”

To which More's protagonist replies:

“You English... remind me of these incompetent schoolmasters, who prefer caning their pupils to teaching them. Instead of inflicting these horrible punishments, it would be far more to the point to provide everyone with some means of livelihood, so that nobody's under the frightful necessity of becoming, first a thief, and then a corpse.”

We may feel we have moved far from such concerns, but in modern Britain the High Pay Centre says we are on course for Victorian levels of inequality, and under a new, more punitive benefits regime nearly 90 people per month are dying after being declared fit for work under the rules of the Department for Work and Pensions. But good ideas never really go away and now there is increasing interest in the idea of a citizen's

wage. With broad-based political support, Finland is set to experiment with a partial basic income scheme in 2017.¹⁵ Switzerland has a referendum planned for June on a similar scheme.¹⁴

Ontario in Canada included allowance for an experimental scheme in its Spring budget in March this year. When a scheme was previously tried in Canada in Manitoba in the 1970s, it laid to rest several of the objections often raised to the idea. It didn't discourage work except understandably in the case of new mothers and teenage boys – who weren't just slacking, but rather opted to stay in school to graduate. Immediate health benefits were reported, including fewer low birth weight babies and a drop in mental health related hospital visits.¹⁶

The Dutch city of Utrecht and 19 other municipalities plan the quiet introduction of an effective basic income through a policy of 'no-deductions' when social security claimants find additional income.¹⁷ In France, the main consultative body, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council, an assembly representing employers, unions and civil society, is undertaking a study of the likely social and economic impact of a basic income policy.¹⁸

¹⁴ Although launching a national debate, the Swiss proposal, which was not supported by the government or unions, received the support of only around one in four voters (23.1%), and so it was defeated.

The attractions are many, of course. It destigmatises welfare, is simpler to administrate, releases human potential – allowing us to pursue what we are vocationally driven to do – and it frees our positive entrepreneurialism in its broadest sense. As a way of injecting money into the economy, it is vastly preferable to the huge sums from orthodox Quantitative Easing. The RSA has spoken in favour of it and an EDM proposing a citizens wage is currently before the UK parliament to ensure ‘genuine social security and a boost to entrepreneurialism’. At the time of writing, it is supported by 35 MPs.

Then there is reclaiming time.

Almost daily, we are told that we will have to work longer hours and later in our lives. It is a long way from Keynes’ prediction that, by the end of the last millennium, economic and technological progress would mean working no more than about two and half days a week.

But the mantra of working till you drop is not universal. There have been many experiments in shorter working weeks, some forced by economic circumstance, and some simply chosen, that have been successful. Responding to a recession in the early 1990s, the public sector in the Netherlands began offering a four day week to staff to save money. Since

then it has spread and become common employment practice, with the option offered to workers in all sectors of the economy.

As a result, job sharing has become the norm in the health and education sectors. It is common to have part-time surgeons, engineers and bankers making the much hyped work-life balance in modern industrial economies a practical reality.

The Dutch call it 'Daddy day' and one in three men work either part time or compress their hours working five days in four to enjoy a three day weekend. Three quarters of women work part-time. The situation seems to work because almost nobody working part time – 96 percent of them – want to work longer hours.

It is not just liberal Northern Europe that has seen the benefits of shorter working weeks. In the teeth of the financial crisis in 2008 – faced with recession, rapidly rising energy prices, growing lines at food banks, rising unemployment and mortgage foreclosures – instead of simply bringing a knife to public spending and pushing austerity measures, Utah's Republican governor John Hunstman surprised people with an experiment to save money.

At only a month's notice, 18,000 of the state's 25,000 workforce were put on a four-day week and around 900 public buildings closed on Fridays and the impact was studied. Eight out of ten employees liked it and wanted it to continue. Nearly two thirds said it

made them more productive and many said it reduced conflict both at home and at work. Workplaces across the state reported higher staff morale and lower absenteeism.

There were other surprises. One in three among the public thought the new arrangements actually improved access to services. It wasn't the main objective, but at a stroke the four-day week also reduced carbon emissions by 14 per cent, a huge annual, climate-friendly saving. In 2013, the Gambia also introduced a four-day week for public sector workers.

In Britain, we have the paradox of overwork and unemployment, making for a divided country burdened with high related social costs. The TUC calculates that 5 million workers give the equivalent of a day's worth of free overtime to their employers every week. A shorter working week could better share the benefits of employment AND liberate time for the art of living, to be better friends, citizens, family members and invest in the great project of economic transition.

Fundamental to a better world is the simple aim of a keeping an affordable roof over our heads. But hemmed-in by prevailing economic assumptions, we are in the grip of a great market failure, have become deskilled, and the government

appears impotent to solve the housing crisis.

In the 1950s, when Britain was far more indebted than today, the number of homes built by local authorities hit 250,000 – and that was under a Conservative government. In the mid 1960s, under Labour they still managed about 200,000. In 2014-15, local authorities managed to build just 1,350, and the private sector built less than half what it did during the mid 1960s.

Building homes is important but the housing crisis won't be solved without tackling the speculation, ownership patterns and rent-seeking equal to profiteering that makes homes unaffordable. Yet we know from several great cities that checks and balances are possible.

Berlin has a track record of rent controls – and recently a new law called the Mietpreisbremse or 'rental price brake' was introduced in Germany. It applies to market hotspots such as big cities like Berlin, Munich and Düsseldorf.¹⁹

In New York, in spite of constant roll-back, there are around 40,000 properties with strict rent controls (controlled rise and a cap) and many more that are 'rent stabilised' (controls rises and guarantees option to renew lease). And protecting them has become a priority of New York's mayor, Bill de Blasio.²⁰

I love the fact that, amongst many others, the town of Sleepy Hollow in Westchester County has rent controls – so, if you're worried about housing, you

should be able to get a good night's sleep.

For more visionary, or 'practical utopian' solutions, we can look to the Lilac development in Leeds – which brings together zero carbon construction with a carefully judged balance of the best aspects of communal and private living, insulated against rising land values.

You can probably guess where I think the energy for a practical utopia should come from, and in spite of progress being too slow, things are happening.

Last year Costa Rica, generated 99 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources, for 285 days its grid went 100 per cent renewable.²¹ Back in Europe this month, Portugal reported a period of four continuous days when its electricity came just from wind, solar and hydropower.²²

With an enlightened policy framework, in two decades from 1983 Denmark was providing 39 percent of Danish electricity.²³ Sonderborg in Denmark, a centre for technology research and roll-out, is like a green silicon valley.

Interestingly, the human brain needs less energy to function than an old light bulb, so quite why we are making such a mess of energy policy in this county is genuinely hard to understand. The UK is a windy place and we have in total about 14GW installed capacity of

wind energy. But we have barely scratched our potential and, in fracking, seem almost wilfully to cling to the fossil fuel past. Even in the United States, 8GW of wind were installed in 2015.²⁴ China introduced much more than the UK total, nearly 20GW, in a single year (2014).

Work at Stanford University produced scenarios whereby every state in the USA could be 80-85 per cent renewable by 2030 and 100 per cent by 2050.²⁵ And, since 2013, the world has been adding more renewable energy capacity than coal, natural gas, and oil combined.²⁶ Even Saudi Arabia – the ultimate petro state – recently signaled an end to oil addiction in its Vision 2030 plan: bringing to mind the Saudi saying: “My father rode a camel. I drive a car. My son flies a jet-plane. His son will ride a camel.”

The future is voting with its feet for a more decentralised, renewable and, importantly, mutually owned energy system.

According to our own Department for Energy and Climate Change, community-owned renewable energy projects give 12 to 13 times more value to communities and local areas than those which are privately owned – through more jobs and investment returns staying locally.²⁷ Germany has over 900 energy co-operatives which enjoy the right to sell energy directly to third parties – and, in Hamburg, citizen action led to the grid coming back into public control.

But we still have a problem with ‘stuff’. All that energy we produce, clean or otherwise, goes into making goods which add to the aggregate over-consumption burdening the biosphere.

This is the dysfunctional relationship that materialism and consumerism produce, not just with ourselves and each other, but with the very fibre of the material world. But here too there are signs of hope.

An old economic model of debt-fuelled over-consumption has tried steadily to reassert itself in Britain, with consumer debt rising again in a pattern that preceded the 2007-08 financial crisis, causing jitters at the Bank of England.

But there is a quiet and significant shift in attitude – one we might call a new materialism – in that it is respectful and careful of the material world, rejecting listless, passive consumerism and disposability, visible in the hack and making movements. Even in the cultural self-medication we can see in popular culture and television, from the surge of interest in everything from baking to sewing, ceramics to allotments, and housebuilding to entertainment. The list of knitting clubs is growing like a scarf, and there is a vast (and active) network of guilds, societies and ‘Craft Mafia’.

‘Hack’ and ‘makerspaces’ are spreading fast global.²⁸ From Albania to Argentina, Poland to the Philippines and Nigeria to Norway people are meeting and making. The UK has dozens.²⁹ The movement is thriving in the home of old consumerism, the United

States.³⁰ In the thriving international Transition Town movement and Buen Vivir initiatives in Latin American, this reskilling forms part of a collaborative, mutually supportive and ecologically enlightened new economics.

In situations where the conventional economic system fails completely, like Argentina and Greece, initiatives like this dismiss notions that they're merely a disenchanted post-industrial world at play, because they reveal themselves to be essential and successful survival strategies. Call it the circular economy, the green collar economy or the old mantra of repair, reduce, reuse, recycle – it is all about reconnection with our own abilities, our needs rather than our wants, and with the limits and tolerances of the real world.

Iceland was at the heart of financial crisis and nearly destroyed by it. But, after the meltdown, a 'pots and pans' revolution, led to a new citizen-drafted constitution, engaging half the electorate. Rather than making the public pay for the crisis, as the Nobel economist Paul Krugman points out, Iceland 'let the banks go bust and actually expanded its social safety net' and instead of placating financial markets, 'imposed temporary controls on the movement of capital to give itself room to manoeuvre.' Did I mention that the country also gets all its electricity and heat from renewable sources?

The crowd-sourced constitution ultimately fell foul

of legal technicalities and the Supreme Court, but that didn't stop the new mood creating lasting conditions for change and the desire for new economic approaches.

Where other countries largely let banks off the hook, in 2015 Iceland's Supreme Court upheld convictions against bankers at the heart of the crisis.³¹ Finance is now so sensitive that, when the Prime Minister was caught up in revelations about from the Panama papers, he was forced from office.³²

I am often amused by Brexit campaigners who rail against losing sovereignty to Europe but seem quite happy for our livelihoods to be held ransom by unaccountable financial markets and dictated to by private ratings agencies. A sense of our own agency over finance and the market matters.

In what will be music to the ears of anyone interested in deeper financial reform – especially in a city like Bristol that has its own currency – in February this year (2016), there was a Monetary Reform resolution in Iceland to create a special commission to review “*the arrangements of money creation in Iceland and to make recommendations for improvements*” with a view to reclaim from private banks the benefits of money creation for the public.³³

Iceland is a small country of just 300,000 – a microcosm of global economic shock and reaction. But, the biggest city in the world, Mexico City, is also now crowd-sourcing ideas for a new constitution

overseen by the mayor and a citizen's committee of 27 people. It is set to be voted on in September 2016 by a constituent assembly.³⁴

Elsewhere under Finland's 'Citizens' Initiative Act', new laws can be crowdsourced and proposed by registered voters. The support of 50,000 gets the law put to the vote in the Finnish parliament. At a very local level, the introduction of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre in Brazil, where the community decide how their taxes get spent, saw dramatic improvements in local services like sanitation and transport in poor neighbourhoods, and greater trust in, and payment of, taxes themselves.

It can be in the direst of circumstances that the boldest experiments may emerge – the idea of 'paradise built in hell' as the writer Rebecca Solnit puts it. Although barely reported, just such an experiment is happening in the autonomous Kurdish region of Northern Syria, Rojava.

There, Syrian Kurds have set up a secular, ethnically inclusive and bottom-up democratic system. They struggle, successfully so far, against attempts by ISIS to erode their territory, aided by a feminist army – the Union of Free Women (or YJA star) and, on a day to day basis, a significant part of the economy is run by women-only co-operatives, who are also key to feeding the people. David Graeber describes Rojava as a 'remarkable democratic experiment... despite the hostility of almost all of its neighbours'.³⁵

What can we achieve and how quickly?

I came to Bristol by train and was reminded that, in 1892, a large group of well-coordinated workers upgraded 177 miles of track on the Great Western route – in a single weekend. They started work at dawn on Saturday and were finished by Monday morning.

The past shows what we can achieve. The present is showing we are capable of better, even in the direst circumstances and against the odds. We do it by working together and with the confidence of knowing we are capable of more than this.

Don't let fear of smell of the Apocalypse paralyse you. As Thomas Hardy wrote, 'If a way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst.' But we need to believe confidently that there is a way to the better. Yeats wrote, that 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.'

That very intensity can be hypnotic, feeding an insecurity in those wanting change that 'the worst' may own a deeper truth, and we may be stuck with what we have. But courage too is an ingredient of progress. A gradual evacuation of intellectual self-confidence preceded the sudden collapse of communist Eastern Europe, and I see a different but similar loss of confidence in the mainstream economic model.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman says that the good society is the society that does not think it is good enough. Utopia *per se* cannot be achieved, because to be utopian is precisely to engage with the world in a

state of hope that it can be better.

Gardeners he calls ‘obsessive compulsive utopians’, because their job is never done. This echoes the late Latin American chronicler Eduardo Galeano, who describes how, as quickly as he walks towards utopia, it recedes from him. ‘What then,’ he asks, ‘is the purpose of utopia?’ To walk, he concludes, and to advance. And to find a direction, we can follow the scent of the flawed but practical utopias being built right now by people who want more than what the old economics offers, and ARE more than its impoverished view of humanity.

The potential for a more progressive, equal, co-operative, and positively interdependent world is here – one that seeks a dynamic equilibrium with the biosphere and doesn’t view it as a business in liquidation.

Bauman quotes the author Italo Calvino, himself putting words into Marco Polo’s mouth:

“There are two ways to escape suffering it (the inferno): the first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”

And so, simply because you are here to debate these

issues, and in being here indicate that you are not of the ‘inferno’: may you all endure – may you all have space – and may you catch often the scent of a better world in the making.

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