

Envisioning an Ecological Civilization

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DO YOU FEEL LIKE OUR society is coming apart at the seams? Does it seem like, as soon as one crisis passes, another one rears its head before you can even settle back to some semblance of normal? If so, you're not alone. Across the globe, people are beginning to realize that the world they inherited from previous generations is unraveling—and it's entirely unclear what will take its place.

When COVID-19 first swept across the globe in early 2020, there was a general sense that, if we all battened down the hatches, the storm would pass. We would go back to normal. But what is normal? For Black Americans, normal means not feeling safe in their own country. It means knowing that every day of their lives is a struggle against institutionalized racism. And it means that white Americans—even those who claimed to care—are doing nothing to change it. When George Floyd's brutal murder was caught on film, it kicked off a wave of protest across the country, waking up white people to their own silent complicity with an indelible message: there is no going back to normal—normal is unacceptable.

It's no coincidence that these waves of protests should occur in the middle of a pandemic that impacts Black and other minorities far more lethally than affluent white communities. And we can expect further disruptions over the coming months and years catalyzed by COVID-19. This is because the pandemic reveals the structural faults of a system that have been papered over for decades. Gaping economic inequalities, rampant ecological destruction, and pervasive political corruption are all results of imbalanced systems relying on each other to remain precariously poised. As one system destabilizes, expect others to tumble down in tandem in a cascade known by researchers as "synchronous failure."

Ultimately, there is no going back to normal because normal no longer exists—except in the messages of the mainstream media and politicians paid to keep the public in a consensus trance while a small elite sucks the wealth out of

human communities and natural ecosystems, all in the name of the dominant ideology of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism has been a part of global mainstream discourse since the 1980s. It propagates the fiction that humans are essentially individualistic, selfish, calculating materialists, and as a result, unrestrained, free-market capitalism provides the best framework for every kind of human endeavor. Through their control of government, finance, business, and media, neoliberal adherents have transformed the world into a globalized market-based system, loosening regulatory controls, weakening social safety nets, reducing taxes, and virtually demolishing the power of organized labor.

Neoliberalism is the logical outcome of a worldview based on separation: people are separate from each other; humans are separate from nature; and nature itself is no more than an economic resource. The value system built on this foundation is the ultimate cause of the world's gaping inequalities, our roller-coaster global financial system, our failure to respond to climate breakdown, and our unsustainable frenzy of consumption.

Heading for Collapse?

As our civilization hurtles toward the precipice, we will encounter ever greater shocks that will make COVID-19 seem like a leisurely rehearsal by comparison. This is a result of our society's ecological overshoot: the fact that, in the pursuit of material progress, we are consuming the Earth's resources much faster than they can be replenished. Our civilization is currently running at forty percent above its sustainable capacity, with no plans to reduce growth in consumption. Imagine you had a friend who inherited vast wealth but could only access it in the form of an annuity. Dissatisfied with his annual stipend, he hires lots of lawyers and accountants to find ways to retrieve his wealth more rapidly. Now, living in palatial surroundings, his accountants warn him that he will soon clean out his account, but he ignores them. If he then turns to you and proudly claims that his opulent lifestyle is a sign of progress, you might consider him to have lost his mind. This is the current state of our global society.

While there are multiple dangers arising from our society's reckless overshoot, the looming climate catastrophe is without doubt the most dire. Since the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a warning to humanity in 2018 that we have just twelve years to turn things around before passing the point of no return, the world has continued its trajectory of uncontrolled emissions. Scientists warn of tipping points in the climate system that, once triggered, cause a cascade of further tipping points, leading to runaway climate catastrophe—and an unrecognizable world utterly

the point of no return—no one knows for sure—but we know that each year of growth in emissions brings us closer to that doomsday point.

Even if the climate crisis were somehow brought under control, continued economic growth in future decades will bring us face-to-face with a slew of further existential threats. We're rapidly depleting the Earth's forests, animals, insects, fish, freshwater—even the topsoil we need to grow our crops. We've already transgressed three of the nine planetary boundaries that define humanity's safe operating space. Global gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to triple by 2060, with potentially irreversible and devastating consequences. In 2017, over 15,000 scientists from 184 countries issued an ominous warning to humanity that we are running out of time to shift away from our failing trajectory—it will soon be too late.

A Transformation in Values

As long as government policies emphasize GDP growth and transnational corporations relentlessly pursue shareholder returns, we will continue accelerating toward global catastrophe. These practices ransack the Earth without regard to long-term effects. If we are truly to “shift course away from our failing trajectory,” the new era must be defined, at its deepest level, not merely by the political or economic choices we make, but by a transformation in the very way we make sense of the world, and by a concomitant revolution in our predominant values.

The depiction of humans as selfish individuals, the view of nature as a resource to be exploited, and the idea that technology alone can fix our biggest problems are all profound misconceptions that have collectively led our civilization down this madcap path to disaster. We must recognize the destructive nature of the dominant mainstream culture and reject it for one that is life-affirming, embracing values that emphasize growth in the quality of life rather than in the consumption of goods and services. We must emphasize core human values of fairness, justice, and compassion as paramount—extending them through local neighborhoods to state and national government, to the global community of humans, and ultimately to the community of all life.

In short, we need to change the basis of our global civilization. We must move from a civilization based on wealth accumulation to one based on the health of living systems: an *ecological civilization*. A change of such magnitude would be an epochal event. There have only been two occasions in history when radical dislocations led to a transformation of virtually every aspect of

the human experience: the Agricultural Revolution that began about twelve thousand years ago, and the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century. If our civilization is to survive and prosper through the looming crises of this century, we will need a transformation of our values, goals, and collective behavior on a similar scale.

An Ecological Civilization

An ecological civilization would be based on core principles that sustain living systems in natural ecologies. Over billions of years on Earth, life has evolved resilient processes that allowed it to spread in rich profusion and stunning diversity into virtually every nook and cranny of the planet. As a result, if left undisturbed by human depredation, natural ecosystems can persist in good health for millions of years.

Living systems are characterized by both competition and cooperation. However, the major evolutionary transitions that brought life to its current state of abundance were all the results of dramatic increases in cooperation. The key to each of these evolutionary steps—and to the effective functioning of all ecosystems—is *symbiosis*: the process by which both parties in a relationship give and receive reciprocally, reflecting each other's abilities and needs. With symbiosis, there is no zero-sum game; the contributions of each party create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

An important result of symbiosis is that ecosystems can sustain themselves almost indefinitely. Energy from the sun flows seamlessly to all the constituent parts. The waste of one organism becomes the sustenance of another. In contrast to our current civilization, which built its wealth by extracting resources and letting waste accumulate, nature has a *circular economy* where nothing is squandered.

The complex interconnection of different organisms in a symbiotic network leads to another foundational principle of nature: *harmony*. Harmony doesn't mean bland agreement. On the contrary, it arises when different elements within a system express their own needs so that the system as a whole is enriched. Harmony arises when the various forces of the system are in balance. This can manifest as balance between competition and cooperation; between the system's efficiency and its resilience; or between growth, maturation, and decline.

In a natural ecosystem, the type of exponential growth that our civilization is currently experiencing could only occur if other variables were already out of balance. Growth of that sort would lead inevitably to the catastrophic collapse of that population.

From microscopic, intracellular structures to the entire Earth system, nature uses a fractal design. Coherent self-organized entities are embedded within larger systems: cells are part of an organism, which is part of a population, which is part of an ecosystem. In all cases, the health of the system as a whole requires the flourishing of each part. Each system is interdependent on the vitality of all the other systems. This universal precept leads to the ultimate objective of an ecological civilization: to create the conditions for all humans to flourish as part of a thriving, living Earth.

The symbiosis intrinsic to natural systems translates in human terms into foundational principles of *fairness* and *justice*, ensuring that the efforts and skills people contribute to society are rewarded equitably. Recognizing that the flourishing of the system as a whole requires the health of all its constituent parts, an ecological civilization would foster *individual dignity*, providing the conditions for everyone to live in safety and comfort, with universal access to proper housing, competent healthcare, and quality education.

An ecological civilization would celebrate *diversity*, recognizing that its overall health depended on different groups—self-defined by ethnicity, gender, or any other delineation—developing their own unique gifts to the greatest extent possible. It would be built on the axiom that a system's full potential can only be realized when it is truly *integrated*—a state of unity with differentiation, wherein the flourishing of each constituent part generates the wellbeing of the larger whole.

The principle of *balance* would be as crucial to an ecological civilization as it is to natural systems. Competition would be balanced by collaboration. Disparities in income and wealth would remain within much narrower bands and would fairly reflect the contributions people make to society. In the same way that an animal requires robust circulation of its lifeblood to maintain health, a life-affirming economy would be designed to enable the widespread circulation of its wealth throughout the entire community. And crucially, growth would become part of a natural life cycle, slowing down to maturation once it reaches its healthy limits—leading to a steady-state, self-sustaining economy designed for wellbeing rather than consumption.

Above all, an ecological civilization would give rise to an all-encompassing *symbiosis* between human society and the natural world. Human activity would be organized, not merely to avoid harm to the living Earth, but to actively regenerate and sustain its health into the long-term future.

An Ecological Civilization in Practice

Transitioning to an ecological civilization would require fundamentally redesigning our economy. Across the world, the success of political leaders is currently measured by how much they've managed to increase their nation's GDP. However, GDP merely measures the rate at which a society is transforming nature and human activities into the monetary economy, regardless of the ensuing quality of life. Anything that causes economic activity of any kind, whether good or bad, adds to GDP. In place of an economy based on perpetual growth in GDP, a life-affirming society would emphasize growth in quality of life, using alternative measures such as the "Gross National Happiness" index established by the state of Bhutan, which assesses qualities such as spiritual wellbeing, health, and biodiversity.

Ever since the nineteenth century, most economic thinkers have recognized only two domains of economic activity: markets and government. The great political divide between capitalism and communism arose from stressing one or the other of these two poles (with social democracy somewhere in between). An ecological civilization would incorporate government spending and markets, but—as laid out by progressive economist Kate Raworth—would add two critical realms to the old framework: households and the commons.

In particular, the commons would become a central part of economic activity. Historically, the commons referred specifically to shared land that peasants accessed to graze their livestock or grow crops. But in a broader context, the commons refers to *any* source of sustenance and wellbeing that is not appropriated either by the state or private ownership: the air, water, sunshine, and even human creations like language, cultural traditions, and scientific knowledge. The commons is virtually ignored in most economic discussions because, like household work, it doesn't fit into the classic model of the economy. But the global commons belongs to all of us. In an ecological civilization, it would once again take its rightful place as a major provider for human welfare.

The cumulative common resources that our ancestors have bequeathed to us through untold generations of hard work and ingenuity represent a vast reservoir of wealth—our shared human *commonwealth*—compared to which the value added by any individual is a drop in the ocean. An ecological civilization, recognizing this, would fairly reward entrepreneurial activity but would severely curtail the right of anyone to accumulate multiple billions of dollars in wealth, no matter what their accomplishments.

On the other hand, it would recognize the moral birthright of every human to share in this vast commonwealth. The transition could effectively be achieved through a program of unconditional cash disbursements to every

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person alive on the planet, known as *universal basic income*. The dominant neoliberal view of human nature leads many to assume that free money would cause people to become lazy, avoid work, and exacerbate addictive behaviors. In every test conducted, however, the opposite turns out to be true. Programs consistently report reductions in crime, child mortality, malnutrition, truancy, teenage pregnancy, and alcohol consumption, along with increases in health, gender equality, school performance—and even entrepreneurial activity. For these moral and practical reasons, universal basic income would be integral to the design of an ecological civilization.

The transnational corporations that currently dominate virtually every aspect of our global society would be fundamentally reorganized and made accountable to the communities they purportedly serve. Corporations above a certain size would be required to be chartered with the explicit purpose of optimizing not just for shareholder returns, but also for social and environmental outcomes. This approach—sometimes referred to as the “triple bottom line” of people, planet, and profits—already exists in the form of what are known as certified B-corps and benefit corporations. Currently, these charters are voluntary, and very few large corporations adopt them. If, however, they were compulsory, it would immediately transform the intrinsic character of corporations. Strict enforcement procedures would be necessary to ensure all three bottom lines were optimized. In my proposal, these would include the threat of a corporation losing its charter to do business, based on regular determinations by panels composed of representatives of the communities and ecosystems that are covered in the company’s scope of operations.

In place of the vast homogenized monocropping of industrial agriculture, food would be grown worldwide based on principles of regenerative agriculture, which means greater crop biodiversity, improved water and

carbon efficiency, and the virtual elimination of synthetic fertilizer. Manufacturing would prioritize circular flows with efficient re-use of waste products built into processes from the outset. Locally owned cooperatives would become the default organizational structure. Technological innovation would still be encouraged, but would be prized for its effectiveness in enhancing the vitality of living systems rather than minting billionaires.

Cities would be redesigned on ecological principles, with community gardens on every available piece of land, essential services always available within a twenty-minute walk, and cars banned from city centers. The local community would be the basic building block of society, and face-to-face interactions would again become a central part of human flourishing. Education would be re-envisioned, its goal transformed from preparing

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students for the corporate marketplace to cultivating the wisdom, discernment, and emotional maturity that are required for each student to embark on a lifetime of pursuing their own wellbeing as valued members of society.

Local community life would be enriched by the global reach of the internet. Online networks that have already achieved scale, such as Facebook, would be turned over to the commons, so that rather than manipulating users to maximize advertising dollars, the internet could become primarily a vehicle for humanity to further develop a planetary consciousness. Cosmopolitanism—an ancient concept from the Greeks which literally means “being a citizen of the world”—would be the defining character of a global identity. We would celebrate diversity between cultures while recognizing the deep interdependence that binds all people into a single moral community with a shared destiny.

Governance would be transformed to a polycentric model, where local, regional, and global decisions are made at the levels where their effects are felt most. While most decision-making would devolve to the lowest feasible level, a stronger global governance would enforce rules on planetary-wide issues, such as contending with the climate emergency and halting the Sixth Extinction. A

worldwide Rights of Nature declaration would put the natural world on the same legal standing as humanity. Personhood would be ascribed to ecosystems and high-functioning mammals, and the crime of ecocide—the destruction of ecosystems—would be prosecuted by a court with global jurisdiction.

Toward the Great Transition

While this vision may seem a distant dream to those who are transfixed by the daily frenzy of current events, innumerable pioneering organizations around the world are already planting the seeds for a life-affirming civilization.

In the United States, the visionary Climate Justice Alliance has laid out the principles for a just transition from an extractive to a regenerative economy that incorporates deep democracy with ecological and social wellbeing. In Bolivia and Ecuador, traditional ecological principles of *buen vivir* and *sumak kawsay* (“good living”) are written into the constitution. In Europe, large-scale thriving cooperatives, such as Mondragon in Spain, demonstrate that it’s possible for companies to provide effectively for human needs without utilizing a shareholder-based profit model.

Meanwhile, a new ecological worldview is spreading globally throughout cultural and religious institutions, establishing common ground with indigenous traditions that have sustained their knowledge and lifeways for

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millennia. The core principles of an ecological civilization have already been set out in the Earth Charter—an ethical framework launched in The Hague in 2000 and endorsed by over two thousand organizations worldwide, including many governments. In China, leading thinkers espouse a New Confucianism, calling for a cosmopolitan, planetary-wide ecological approach to reintegrate humanity with nature. In 2015, Pope Francis shook the Catholic establishment by issuing his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, a masterpiece of ecological philosophy that demonstrates the deep interconnectedness of all life and calls for a rejection of the individualist, neoliberal paradigm.

On the secular front, economists, scientists, and policymakers, recognizing the moral bankruptcy of the current economic model, are pooling their resources to develop alternative frameworks. The Wellbeing Economy Alliance is an international collaboration of changemakers working to transform the present global economic system to one that promotes human and ecological wellbeing. Similarly, the Global Commons Alliance is developing an international platform for regenerating the Earth's natural systems. Organizations such as the Next System Project and the Global Citizens Initiative are laying down parameters for the political, economic, and social dimensions of an ecological civilization, and the P2P Foundation is building a commons-based infrastructure for societal change. Around the world, "transition towns" are growing into an international movement and transforming their communities from the grassroots up.

Perhaps most importantly, a people's movement for life-affirming change is spreading globally. When Greta Thunberg skipped school in August 2018 and went to the Swedish parliament in order to draw attention to the climate emergency, she sat alone for days. Less than a year later, over one and one-half million schoolchildren joined her in a worldwide protest to rouse their parents' generation from their slumber. A month after Extinction Rebellion demonstrators closed down Central London in April 2019 to draw attention to the world's dire plight, the UK Parliament announced a "climate emergency." Similar declarations have now been made by over 1,500 local and national governments worldwide, representing over ten percent of the global population. Meanwhile, a growing campaign of "Earth Protectors" is working to establish ecocide as a crime prosecutable by the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Is this enough? When we consider the immensity of the transformation needed, the odds look daunting. Yet no one can say that the task is impossible. As the world system begins to unravel on account of its internal failings, the strands that kept the old system tightly interconnected also get loosened. Each year that we draw closer to catastrophe—as greater climate-related disasters

rear up, as the outrages of racial and economic injustice become even more egregious, and as life for most people becomes increasingly intolerable—the old story loses more and more of its hold on the collective consciousness of humanity. Waves of young people are looking for a new worldview—one that makes sense of the current unraveling, one that offers them a future they can believe in. Remember that people who lived through the Industrial Revolution had no name for the changes they were undergoing; it would be a century before their age received its title. Perhaps the Great Transition to an ecological civilization is already occurring, but we can't yet see it fully because we're in the middle of it.

The chapters of this book that follow help to blaze the trail for what is now possible. As you read them, I invite you to consider what brings the most excitement into your heart, and then to explore that direction further in your own engagement. Like an immune system protecting its host from toxins, more and more caring, compassionate humans are drawing together in expanding networks and devoting their energies to life-affirming activities. An ecological civilization will only emerge when enough people around the world decide they no longer want to allow humanity to hurtle off the precipice and begin to work together collaboratively to shift the direction of our species. Each of us has a part to play in co-creating our destiny and bequeathing a vibrant Earth to future generations.