

# Freedom & Security in a Complex World

Dirk Holemans

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# Prologue

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People all over the world are taking their future back into their hands. Together, they are taking initiatives in the fields of renewable energy, local food production, sharing tools, and so forth. This is the most hopeful movement of our time. Where the market and state fail, people are taking action. As free citizens, they are reinventing the collective, with open partnerships where personal development and social engagement go hand in hand. This observation seems to contradict what we experience every day. The system errors of our society model fill the newspapers: climate crisis, unstable banks, refugee flows. Accepted wisdom is that uncertainty is increasing. But both trends are happening, not by coincidence, at the same time.

It's time to wake up. For thirty years, we have believed in the fiction that the era of the Grand Narratives is over. The fall of the Berlin Wall made ideologies useless. Meanwhile we know better. After three decades of economic globalisation, we are seeing more losers than winners. Progressive politics without a passionate story for the future has driven the losers into the arms of right-wing nationalists, who feed the illusion that folding back on ourselves can be a fruitful form of cooperation.

We have to dare to rewrite history. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the welfare state developed from the progressive response to an industrial free-market economy. From the 1950s, citizens in the West enjoyed increased freedom while the government established social security. After thirty years, the economic engine broke down, which led to the neoliberal period for the next thirty or so years. In this period, a specific 'Constitution of Liberty' (Hayek 1978) was implemented, in which the market again became the dominant way to organise. This has led to a more unstable world with extreme inequality and a deepening ecological crisis. The answer we have to develop in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the socioecological society, a project that strives for equal freedom for all people to flourish in security, within the boundaries of the planet.

It's not a simple project because it takes on the paradox of our time. Certainty has little to do with the preservation of our present world. To build a certain future, we must change everything. In order for us to be able to develop freely, we need sustainable systems. In the future how we produce food, produce energy, work and earn an income will all be different. We need new social institutions and a cultural change about what we consider to be 'the good life'. Fortunately, this is not a distant future dream. While most governments are sleepwalking towards disaster, more and more citizens are taking power into their own hands. Although they are rarely featured in the news, they are the growing and positive counter-current of our society. Together with progressive local governments, they are incubating a new socioecological society. How we can make it happen is the subject of this essay, with freedom and security at centre stage.



To be sure, the relationship between freedom and security is intriguing. Hannah Arendt, the philosopher, wrote that freedom is connected with the openness of the future: every action triggers a chain reaction of unexpected and unpredictable effects. That is logical and almost self-evident. If everything were fixed, then there would be no choice, no space for manoeuvre. And a life in which everything is so sure that nothing changes is not something to long for. But how free are you; should really everything be insecure? Does life in total uncertainty not lead to feelings of deep fear?

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman stated at eighty-five, after sixty years of research, that every person in his life needs two things: freedom and security. They are a Siamese twins. These two concepts are always linked together in a balanced society. Bauman described our current time as 'liquid modernity'. All institutions providing us with security (nation state, family, etc.) have been dissolving in a society of liquid flows of people (from tourists to refugees), capital and goods that provide little or no support.

We must now leave this period and build a new one by transforming our world into a socio-ecological society. We need equal freedom for all people to develop, linked to an economy and lifestyle that demands ten times less of the planet. Certainly, in our present unstable times, such an immense challenge initially creates much uncertainty and resistance. It is therefore important to formulate the necessary changes as a constructive societal project for the future; a politicising message of hope from which we can secure certainty in the long process of realisation. It is up to the green movement and its political representation to play a key role in this road ahead. This is not only the period for smart analyses and inspiring ideas - it's also about mobilising people for their future.



# Introduction

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The first edition of this essay was written in 2017 in what I described as “the background of increasing stresses and shocks and systemic risks that are linked”. All of these became stronger in just a few years. Considering global heating, 2020 was the hottest year ever recorded with unprecedented forest fires and harvests lost to extreme droughts. Inequality rose further with an increase of precarious jobs in the platform economy while extractive economies further robbed the Global South of resources. Last, but not least, authoritarian populists demonstrated in unthinkable ways the vulnerability of our democracies. However, what happened on top all of this was beyond our imagination. A global pandemic has halted parts of the economy worldwide, strained health systems and caused great physical and mental suffering to many people. It exposed the lack of resilience in our economy, which depends on global supply chains very limited stocks. For instance, before the Covid-19 crisis, who knew that Europe receives painkillers mainly from India and masks from China? The crisis holds up a hard mirror to us, magnifying what already went wrong before. Our growth-addicted economy, built on a rat race of everybody competing against one another, leads to accelerating ecological destruction and rising inequalities. It no longer collates with improvements in wellbeing and lacks resilience.

Even long before the crisis, of course, Green and progressive actors had pointed out the flaws of our economic system. But more recently, mainstream institutions acknowledged that the future can't be a continuation of the present. For instance, the report, 'Beyond Growth: Towards a New Economic Approach', written by then OECD Secretary General's Advisory Group, insists we need a new conception of economic progress, built on the core recognition of the sociality of human beings.<sup>1</sup> The European Union has also changed its course. In 2017, its policies were still fully immersed in neoliberal politics, with the European Commission promoting the so-called 'Washington Consensus': the belief that liberalised markets are the best way to tackle societal challenges, while at the same time being skeptical of government intervention, and not being strong enough on climate and biodiversity policies. The newly established European Commission following the 2019 European elections really changed course with the launch of the European Green Deal. It has clear goals, such as the 2050 climate neutrality objective, a transition to a circular economy, and preserving Europe's natural capital. This only can be applauded; at the same time, critical support is still necessary. It still puts a lot of emphasis on competitiveness and growth, believing the latter can be decoupled from resource use. But, as the report, 'Growth without Economic Growth' from the European Environmental Agency points out, this is an illusion.

The Covid-19 crisis may serve as a wake-up call for our dysfunctional economy, though it will not lead automatically to an economy within planetary boundaries of providing a good life for all. On the contrary, many jobs have been lost and more people are suffering. We also are now very aware that rise of so-called zoonoses (infectious diseases caused by a pathogenic micro-organism that has jumped from vertebrate animals to humans) is related to the destruction of forests and other habitats of vertebrates, such as bats.



These insights don't automatically lead to the necessary change in our economic model. It is still about producing faster, more and cheaper; driven by profit and the urge to grow in a globalised economy. Looking, for instance, at our agricultural model, fodder for European cattle still comes from South America, where biodiverse rainforests are still disappearing for soulless monocultures, full of exploitation and pesticides. And all because we think it logical that farmers worldwide compete with each other, social and ecological protection is a side-issue and chicken at the lowest price means great added value. Maybe all of that is wrong. Economists speak of global value chains. Should we not speak better of global devaluation chains? For the profit of a small group of investors, we extract or destroy what is of value in Brazil, while European agribusiness pays farmers little and pollutes rivers and soils. It is an economy that is still far from decolonising itself.

This soulless globalisation in agriculture bears similarities with the tsunami of home-delivered packages as an illustration of the worldwide consumer palace. Online buying was already on the rise; international lockdowns took it a step further. Multinational technology giant Amazon shows the madness of the current internet economy: its CEO, Jeff Bezos, is now the richest man in the world, while workers in his warehouses worldwide have to organise strikes to demand decent working conditions. In Austria alone, Amazon destroyed more than a million returned parcels last year. We know that Amazon is systematically destroying new goods: another example of a so-called global "value chain". What constituted the social security system and universal rights protecting workers and their families against risks connected with the labour market is now turned upside down. It is no coincidence that precarious groups such as the *gilet-jaunes*, - the *yellow vests* - in France organise themselves to protest against so-called eco-taxes on the fuel for their cars they need to go to work (in the absence of decent public transport), while the elite rejoice in the abolition of a wealth tax and fly tax-free around the world. It shows that the much-needed transformative changes will only gain sufficient societal support if we assure that no one is left behind. The transition will be just or it will not be.

For realising a just transition, we need a systemic approach to see connections and interactions between seemingly disconnected events and evolutions. It starts from a historical picture that allows for a future-oriented perspective. In Western Europe, the Welfare State has been transformed since the 1980s into a State of Neoliberalism. This has replaced the government as central principle of steering and organising society with the market principle based on competition. In this ever-increasing globalised economy – while still neglecting the environment - a growing group of the population feels abandoned. This is slowly making more and more people angry at the democratic system; so in response, they vote for populist leaders that do not care about climate policy or much else. In European countries, this always includes the populist rhetoric that all problems come from 'Brussels'. This leads to even more uncertainty about the future. And while Europe is struggling with migration, there is hardly any debate on the systemic links between our hunger for fossil fuels, the instability of the Middle East, climate change and refugees. Surely, we need a narrative for a new era: a Sharing Society that delivers Freedom & Security: a good life for all. We need a vision where a Partner State works hand-in-hand with the current wave of committed societal citizens, recreating the commons, and looking beyond the market or state alone to local communities as the third fundamental way of organising in our society.



Meanwhile, we can draw three key lessons from the Covid-19 crisis. First: we need to listen to what the science tells us, while at the same acknowledging the divergences in the scientific debate and evolving insights. If scientists urge us to flatten the climate curve, we better take urgent and radical action. Second: politics and public services matter (and the Washington Consensus is misery). Governments can and must steer society and reorganise the economy for the better of all within planetary boundaries. Third: the burst of civil engagement in the crisis, from people sewing masks to solidarity groups taking care of those left behind in cities, is a clear sign that, while at the top, our democracies are threatened by populist parties, and at the grassroots level, civil engagement is more vital than ever.



# 1. Freedom & Security in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: The Welfare State

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The construction of the current ‘welfare state’, the societal project of western industrialised countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has consisted of two phases: roughly one before and one after the Second World War. It was namely during the Second World War that the British Government asked Lord Beveridge to develop a plan for a *national* social security system that would provide more assurance than the existing patchwork of small sectorial support funds. Beveridge’s report from 1944, *Full Employment in a Free Society*, set the foundation for the social security state and introduced the central role of the national government in shaping that new welfare state. As many politicians from mainland Europe had fled to London during the war, they took his ideas home after the end of the war.

Using the example of Belgium, we can show how the aim of security was central to the establishment of the welfare state. The law introducing the welfare state literally puts its central objective as ‘to guarantee social security to all’. This 1944 Act settled a lot of things: a proper pension (‘to take care of the elderly’); compulsory unemployment insurance (‘the fear of being unemployed because of a lack of work’); a higher child allowance; compulsory insurance against sickness and disability (‘the fear of an accident or illness’). It was literally a matter of removing fear - fundamental uncertainty. It is a bitter irony of history that, while writing this essay, Deliveroo drivers supported by unions are protesting against the fact that they have no insurance in case of an accident, which is quite likely, since they drive their bikes all day in busy city traffic. <sup>2</sup>

The 1944 Act built on the work of representatives of trade unions, employers’ organisations and some high officials and reflected a *common vision of wealth distribution*. Employers committed to contribute to social security to improve the quality of life of workers and their families. Workers gained a prospect of higher wages. On the other hand, trade unions committed to maintain the social order, which reassured employers because they were worried about the growing attractiveness of communism. Governments installed a fair tax system that formalised the distribution of wealth including high progressive taxes on capital.

During the following three decades (1945-1975), the social security system evolved from an insurance against social risks to a guarantee of a decent livelihood for all. The goal was no longer to just support people in specific problematic situations. All citizens now had an equal right to a decent life and it was up to the government to take care of it. A core dimension of this social security was its universal character, which, according to social scientists, has proven its validity: *“The experience in Western prosperity democracies teaches that a low degree of poverty is associated with a universal character, aimed at all levels of the population, and not just at the poor. In countries where the government wants to care only for needy people, poverty is the highest. Look, for instance, at the United States. The explanation for this is simple: the universal approach works preventively: one does not wait until someone is poor to intervene”*. <sup>3</sup>



This was the core of the post-war project: a fair distribution of the wealth produced so that everyone could enjoy it. Looking at current political debates, it is clear how much we have lost in aspiration to social equality. Which government in Western Europe dares to call for more equality (and thus redistributive taxes) for universal systems, instead of the limited poverty relief that the right-wing parties are installing?

## 1.1 Freedom by security

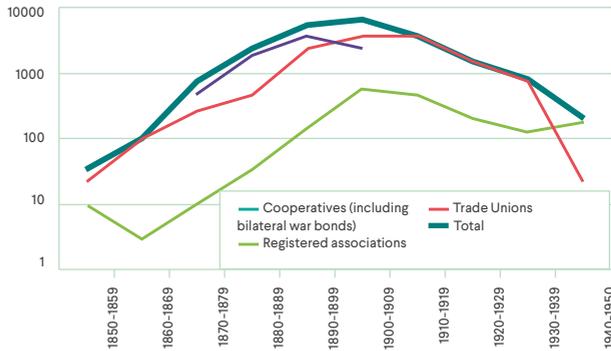
Establishment of the Welfare State led to a period of increasing security: of work, health, housing and in retirement. During this period, people also gained more freedom. This was partially due to increased purchasing power, but also part of the political project: in particular, the ideological reformulation of socialism. As the Dutch political leader of that time, Joop den Uyl, stated: *“Socialism has always been a movement that envisaged the liberation of the individual.”* This was reflected in his 1951 report, entitled “The Road to Freedom”, in reference to the anti-egalitarian perspective on freedom by Hayek (Hayek 1944). The journalist Marcel ten Hooven summarises this post-war policy: *“Den Uyl formulated a programme to give people a greater grip on their own existence and more freedom. With higher public investments, he wanted to bring welfare, culture, good education, decent care and good housing within everyone’s reach, to order to increase the chances of self-development. The underlying thought was that people would get more freedom to develop if the welfare state would free them from the economic uncertainties of life.”*<sup>4</sup>

*Security of living and emancipation were the classic objectives of the welfare state. Personal development was linked to increased freedom. However, it is important to note that this vision pre-dates socialism. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum shows in Creating Capabilities, it is also an integral part of liberal thinking.*

Security of living and emancipation were the classic objectives of the welfare state. Personal development was linked to increased freedom. However, it is important to note that this vision pre-dates socialism. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum shows in *Creating Capabilities*, it is also an integral part of liberal thinking. She refers to Thomas Paine, one of the authors of the US Constitution. Paine called for progressive taxes, with a rate of 100 percent for the highest incomes, and for reduced unemployment by implementing public works.



## 1.2 Laying the foundations of the Welfare State



Evolution of the number of new institutions for collective action (cooperatives (including bilateral war bonds), trade unions, and registered associations) per decade in the Netherlands, 1850-1950 (log scale). Source: De Moor, T, 2013: 17.

The development of a national social security system after the Second World War didn't come out of the blue. Of course, governments felt the need to reward their populations for the immense sacrifice they made during the war. And they were fearful of communist parties growing too powerful. But as the Beveridge Report showed, the process of replacing local systems by a universal national system did not start from scratch. From the start of the industrial revolution, people organised themselves to denounce inhumane working and living conditions. This led to sometimes violent street protests and new political movements. These highlighted how the wild capitalism of the industrial revolution had impoverished the working class and displaced peasants, transforming urban areas into pitiful and unhygienic ghettos. Would we now accept working twelve hours in a factory and be hardly paid for it and to live in slums and have our children work instead of learn?

*As research shows, there was a wave of such citizens' initiatives for over a century before the introduction of the welfare state.*

Decades before the birth of national security systems, citizens had already organised themselves around two connected goals. One was the social fight for better

politics, putting pressure on politicians to introduce laws on maximum working hours, working conditions and an end to child labour. At the same time, an enormous spectrum of self-organisation emerged. Workers set up their own local saving banks, co-operatives for affordable bread, local forms of health insurance (sickness funds), unions and other forms of mutualisation. As research shows, there was a wave of such citizens' initiatives for over a century before the introduction of the welfare state. Professor of History Tine De Moor explains this as a reaction of the population against a situation of insecurity, as a result of the combination of government and market failure. Governments were not sufficiently regulating the new emergent forms of labour and living conditions, which were leading to very unequal life changes as markets were disembedded from the social fabric they were depended on.



### 1.3 Forgetting the South and the Earth

In these three post-war decades, there was a broad consensus that government and public sector were central in defining the future of the country. Markets were strictly regulated, which included financial markets. Whilst they focused on continuous economic growth, governments were complicit and yet blind to two fundamental system faults: the exploitation of the South and of the Earth. It is no coincidence that at the end of this period, the Club of Rome's first 'Limits to Growth' report was published in 1972. It showed that blind exploitation and pollution of the earth led to severe environmental and public health problems. The report contained the clear message that without a radical change, humankind would not be able to live within our planet's limits in the future. Economic progress in the Global North was moreover based on the exploitation of countries in the Global South, from imperialism in the past up to uneven center-periphery relations in current times. Just as in the centuries before, products from the South are arriving with blood attached. The enormous growth of Western manufacturing came at the expense of countries and communities in the South, extracting more and more natural resources and, in doing so, building an enormous ecological debt.

During this period of welfare capitalism, there was a special feeling of certainty in the West. Not that everyone had a better life right away, but the expectation was that one could make progress in life, or one could at least offer the own children a better future. That sense of a good future translated into the 40/40 job career. Major factories - think of the automotive industry - offered people of diverse education a permanent job. The prospect of working for forty years, forty hours a week, with the same boss, with the same colleagues, was an attractive offer after the dark job-insecurity of the 1930s and 1940s. Nowadays, this seems hard to imagine. Who wants to sign as a 25-year-old a contract for life?

*This period of thirty years of progress came to an end during the seventies. Overproduction, two oil crises that made energy expensive, the closing of old industries and the rising competition of new production areas - such as Japan - put the industrialised countries in a deep crisis.*

## 2. The Uncertain Fight for Freedom: The State of Neoliberalism

During the late seventies, the traditional politics of the left was in bad shape, lacking innovative answers for the deep economic crisis. This led to the election of new leaders with a radically different view on how to organise society. In the US, the republican Ronald Reagan won the elections with the vision that '*Government is not part of the solution, but is part of the problem*'. In the UK, the conservative Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister with a clear view that '*There is no such thing as society, there are only individual men and women who must look after themselves*'.



These two elements are crucial to the new neoliberal period that was to last for at least the next thirty years. It is now taken for granted that the market principle (competition) is the best way of organising different domains of society, which means the liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation of former public sectors. So, for instance, in the Netherlands, the national public health insurance has been replaced by a system in which private insurance companies play a central role. Freedom as well as security is from now on an individual task, as everyone has to become the entrepreneur of their own life. In this period, we can observe the fight between two concepts of freedom. Or to be more precise: two different combinations of freedom-security, which we label as 'emancipation' and neoliberalism'.

## 2.1 The project of emancipation

The first freedom project, although its roots are much older, becomes very visible in the symbolic year of 1968 with the civil rights movement in the US, students' protests all over the globe and in the Prague Spring. These events championed emancipation and evolved into social movements focused on themes such as peace, the environment and women's rights. Their concept of freedom was clear: everyone has the right to self-direction, to make one's own choices, separate from the yoke of church and state. This implies a more horizontal and other power relations through institutions such as schools, medical centres and democracy itself. From the 1980s onwards, Green parties reflected this fight for more autonomy and a good life for all in politics. They were able to translate important demands of the new emancipation wave into distinct politics, such as innovations in social security and freedoms (such as the right for parental leave, time credit, equal rights and gay marriage) and environmental security (environmental and health standards and climate policies), amongst other things.

The sociologist Blühdorn described this freedom project as 'first-order emancipation', which may be understood by *"Referring to the 1970s and 1980s, when increasingly self-confident citizens, seeing themselves as the subject of authentic reason, struggled for liberation from the guardianship of traditional elites and were determined to assume responsibility for the common good, which they aimed to negotiate and implement in participatory-democratic ways"*.<sup>5</sup>

This is in line with the analysis of one of the founders of ecological thinking, André Gorz. He emphasises that the ecological movement from the beginning was more than just environmental or nature conservation. Resistance to the destruction of the autonomy of individuals or groups lies for him at the origins of the ecological movement itself: *"The underlying motive is always the defense of the "life world" against the authority of experts, against quantification and monetary evaluation, against the exchange of autonomy and ability to self-determination of the individual for mercantile, dependent client relations."*<sup>6</sup> Without denying its enormous achievements, the ecological movement has, from the beginning, been critical about the paternalistic dimension of the welfare state, based on the assumption of a core family with the man as breadwinner. It questions, in a fundamental way, labour ethics connected with a growth economy based on the endless circle of more production and more consumption.



## 2.2 The neoliberal concept of freedom

If the government is the problem and there is no society to bond with, the concept of autonomy gains a totally different meaning. Now everybody is on their own, in a competitive environment, and life becomes a permanent contest. The best image to capture this view of humankind is a sailing race of solo boats. To move fast in your small boat you need to do two things: first, find the best wind, and second, put your competitors out of the wind. In this life, such *strategic/opportunistic navigation* leaves no room for empathy or cooperation. Authors such as Richard Sennett have described the effects of the introduction of this image in companies, schools and human relations, etc. What used to be a stable job is now replaced with the task of being flexible. Sennett questions what it means if detachment and superficial cooperativeness are better for dealing with current realities than behaviour based on values of loyalty and service.<sup>7</sup>

Neoliberalism is not just about retreating governments or *laissez faire*, but contains active policies aimed at weakening public sectors and sustaining private sector initiatives. Neoliberal politics are now developing juridical systems that allow maximum space for international companies (with free trade agreements and their investor-state dispute settlement system as a clear example). This is especially true for the financial sector, where banks are now allowed to speculate with the savings of citizens and start developing a never-ending spectrum of speculative products. The neoliberal concept of freedom does not aim at strengthening citizens so they can make their own choices; it wants maximum freedom for corporations, for the principle of competition.

This market approach is also embedded in the construction of the European Union. In February 1992, not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Maastricht Treaty led to further integration through the founding of the European Union. Member States now have to follow the so-called 'Maastricht norms' on monetary policy, while norms on social policy were totally absent. Professor Patrick Deboosere describes this as a neoliberal experiment without a safety net in stating that: "... *different analysts pointed to the danger of a systematic demolition of the welfare state by an inevitable levelling down in the absence of clear standards for a social Europe.*" In 2004 and 2007, European economic space expanded to 27 countries with very big differences in wages and social security systems. Deboosere concludes: "*The big European companies have won their battle: free movement of capital, goods and services and especially a labour market with a large surplus of labour where the free competition could play.*"<sup>8</sup>

More positive analysts point to the advantages of a unified EU market without borders. They state that the economic impulse that comes from the greater market will boost economic growth that in turn will allow the new countries entering the EU to raise their wages and living standards to the level of countries like Germany. The same is true for environmental standards, where the EU norms have led to stronger national policies.

On an individual level, the market approach presents the importance of excessive consumption for communicating who you are. Our dominating consumer culture tells you that there are only two things important in life: you and your buying power. If you work hard and make enough money, you can buy whatever you want. If you have a bad day, the wellness centre welcomes you. *Because you are worth it*, whispers the advertisement



in your ears. Our identity is communicated by the things we buy. And with the invention of consumer credit, longing does not need to wait: I want it all and I want it now. What nowadays is evident - you don't wear a sweater but a brand - is an invention of this period. Consumer culture says you no longer buy sporting shoes but long for a new pair of Nike.

This new reality also creates new forms of insecurity: if you are not able to buy the most expressive brands, or make the right choices, you have the feeling of underperforming. Our consumer possessions and obsessions have displaced our connections to each other and our environment as the source of our identity. Love, which is reflection of what we are connected to, has been pushed aside by a constantly-advertised hunger after what we do not yet own. This is a period of new words and abbreviations you can already hear on the playground: *loser* (if you don't win the race) and *YOLO* (you only live once).

Blühdorn describes this as second-order or reflexive emancipation. It refers to “*a trend in evidence since the 1990s, entailing partial deliverance from the very responsibilities citizens had previously fought for enthusiastically. In particular, it seeks liberation from moral and intellectual overload and calls for reassessment of restrictive social or ecological imperatives.*”<sup>9</sup> One could question whether the adjective ‘reflexive’ is the most appropriate; it could also be ‘perverted’, based on the broken promises of neoliberalism, which we will discuss later.

### **2.3 The radical innovators**

This dominant evolution shouldn't overshadow the fact that active citizens made crucial innovations during this period. Who built, for instance, the first modern era wind turbine to generate renewable power or re-popularised thrift shops, the forerunner of the local ‘circular economy’? These were engaged citizens, in different countries, already building another Europe. Also, the sharing economy was re-imagined at that time by citizens campaigning for ways to restore good air quality in their cities: long before companies or governments were thinking about it, the *provo*'s (provocateurs) introduced the so-called *white bikes* in Amsterdam to be used freely by everyone.

This teaches us an important lesson: crucial social innovations are not developed at academic institutions or big corporations per se. We should never underestimate what cooperative citizens are capable of. Moreover, their political campaigns prevented dangerous plans, such as covering Europe with nuclear power stations. In Denmark and Ireland, protests led to the government abandoning plans to build them. In Belgium, more than half of the twenty nuclear plants planned, including the first at the coast close to Bruges, were never built.

In other words, trying to free themselves from the neoliberal dominance, citizens didn't only protest, but developed alternatives at the same time. They experimented in a very active way with a whole range of social innovations. They protested against nuclear plants while laying the foundations for the *Energiewende* (German for renewable energy transition plan. An example is Freiburg, which is still a frontrunner of sustainability). A lot of those active in the green movement were later also active in Green politics.



In summary, we talk about much more than the legacy of playful student protests and flower power. It extends to a critical questioning of the foundations of the welfare state and formulating the (ecological) question of whether more welfare still leads to more prosperity.

## **2.4 The Third Way: the emptiness of the Left**

We described above how, in the 1970s, the political right-wing had opted for neoliberalism in response to the economic crisis. Also, since this decade, the left has needed a renewal of its vision of society, or at least a new pragmatic course to stay in power as a centrist party. This became known as the ‘third way’: an alternative to both Keynesian policies and neoliberalism. Centrist Labour parties have adopted the neoliberal assumption that the market is more effective than government intervention. While the creation of social wealth remains an important goal, more responsibilities are now ascribed to the individual. The relationship between risk and security has shifted, so much that active risk-taking is now viewed as a core element of a dynamic economy and your personal life. Social democrats still don’t accept inequality but have redefined equality, focusing now on equality of opportunity, as opposed to equality of outcome. Peter Mandelson (UK Labour politician) famously said that he was “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich” in 1998. This focus on personal responsibility was reflected, inter alia, in the reform of social security by making benefits dependent on the duty to work.

*While the creation of social wealth remains an important goal, more responsibilities are now ascribed to the individual. The relationship between risk and security has shifted, so much that active risk-taking is now viewed as a core element of a dynamic economy and your personal life.*

Such “Third Way” thinking shares the critique of the emancipatory movement on the suffocating frame of the welfare state. This does, however, not lead to a choice for new, liberating social forms of affiliation. Instead, the focus is on individual responsibility and market forces.

This is also reflected in the environmental policy adopted by this ‘New’ Labour, with the concept of ‘ecological modernisation’ in Europe and ‘natural capitalism’ in the US. This view no longer questions the economic model. It foresees an effective environmental policy based on technological innovation, increased market activity and corporate environmental management. We need not change the world: making it greener will do.

To what the Third Way has led to is now well known. Electorally, it initially appeared a smart move (for example, for the UK Labour party from 1997 to 2010). However, this policy led to increasing inequality and a large sell-off of parts of the public sectors to the private sector. Ideologically, it meant a farewell of the left from its roots. They renamed themselves as ‘progressive’, so they could redeem themselves from the moral duty to fight for the weakest in society. The second-order emancipation was in full operation.



Moreover, the unilateral focus on the individual (more rights at the ethical level, such as gay marriage, alongside more obligation at the economic level, such as the duty to work) led to a political taboo on everything related to collective value, community-based cooperation, and so forth. This emptiness of the left gives maximum free space to right-wing parties on the political-ideological level.

## **2.5 A sober balance**

From a distance, it is clear that the neoliberal concepts of “freedom” and “security” became dominant (at least in the West) by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is especially true in the field of international trade and economy through economic globalisation. The incredible growth of the financial sector has led to the financialisation of almost everything (you can now even speculate on the future price of food) and shifted power from democratic, elected governments to global elites and corporations. But it has also intruded further into the life of every citizen. For example, public goods that were available for most citizens in the seventies (e.g. good and affordable public health services and public education) have become services with a lower level of quality and are more expensive and selective in many countries. You have less security, but also the ‘freedom’ to choose in these increasingly marketised systems.

This evolution goes hand in hand with the introduction of a model of personal responsibility and fault. It is your personal task to ‘make it’ in life; to be successful. You have ample opportunities (or it seems to be this way). If you make it, you’re fantastic. If you fail, there is only one person who is to blame. How social security, deformed by austerity and market principles, can lead to social catastrophes is shown in the movie ‘I, Daniel Blake’ of Ken Loach. Blake, a carpenter who had never worked with computers, falls ill and is literally shattered by health authorities who have to work according to market principles (all communication with the system is digital). The movie shows how solidarity and compassion are replaced by solitary people and merciless systems.

The story of Daniel Blake is not only about social security. The economic transition to a service economy also meant the loss of a lot of jobs for workers. For men in Western Europe with only a lower secondary school certificate, employment decreased from 70% in 1976 to 33% in 1997. Nearly half of these unemployed people would live in poverty without government intervention. It is more than a rhetorical question: is this connected to the rise of right-populist parties in Europe?

For both the emancipatory movements and its political translation, Green parties, the 1990s are the years of bloom and relapse. For example, there was the successful Rio Conference on sustainable development in 1992, and Green parties started to take part in governments in many European countries. Strong environmental policies were developed, natural areas were protected, new forms of time credit are introduced, which increased citizens’ autonomy. Nevertheless, the emancipatory freedom concept has not conquered society: it is successful, to some degree, but does not achieve its goal. This shift in society and politics, with success and relapse of the emancipatory ideal, is connected with the greater success of the neoliberal liberty concept. This concept of freedom succeeds in reducing



*Nevertheless, the emancipatory freedom concept has not conquered society: it is successful to some degree but does not achieve its goal.*

the build-up of identity into an individualistic project, where consumption plays an important role.

How did it happen? A first explanation concerns the struggle for the liberated societal space. The emancipatory movement wanted more space for citizens by reducing the reach of the state and other disciplinary, bureaucratic and paternalistic traditional structures. Neoliberal ideology also advocates another role of government: not so much retreat, but creating active space for business – planning for the market (Hayek, 1978). The 1980s and 1990s are the battleground of these two freedom-based concepts, of the two other actors besides the state: civil society and business. A crucial difference lies in scale: while businesses are organised worldwide, this is less evident for new civil movements and unions. Only the anti-globalisation movement would later bundle forces across borders. Meanwhile, large corporations have taken up the free space for the most part and concentration of market power has reached an unprecedented high (UNCTAD 2017).

A second explanation concerns the evolution of most of the new social movements. Starting mostly from a position of a radical critique, professionalisation and building a relationship with the current mainstream elected politicians leads to a pragmatic attitude. Proposals must now be feasible within the framework of the current policy. The increasing dependency on subsidies as well the membership fees of mainstream political voters of many non-governmental organisations has sometimes led to uncritical inscription into government policy options. Movements transform into depoliticised NGOs, often with a clear consultancy approach; because they focus strongly on current policies, they no longer put into question the overall system. Of course, all these movements are children of their time. They do not arbitrarily focus on the feasible and do not want to scare off anyone; their radical basis of critical citizens has evolved to soaring consumers over the years, expressing the second-order type of emancipation.

This analysis leads to two conclusions.

Firstly, the radical inquiry of the industrial consumer society and its ideological translation into *ecologism* has been elaborated and exhausted through different phases, from radical ideas to achievable proposals to practical realisations. This is not a disaster - on the contrary, a lot has been achieved to be proud of - but an observation that calls for the right conclusions: *back to the roots*. Political ecology is due for an update, while its basic questions and principles have not lost value. You could say that the circle is closed. It is time for a second circular movement that restarts a radical survey of current society, its power relations, increasing inequality and ecological destruction.

Secondly, the dream of self-management by autonomous citizens has not been achieved. The hope of the emancipation movement was that more and more activities could be detached from the grip of the market and the state. This has certainly been done on a number of levels, but there is also a high price that has been paid. The same is true on the individual level. While the ecological movement wanted to work on personal devel-



opment in the context of mutual care, the individualisation was developed in the form of *opportunistic navigation* instead of *autonomy in connection*. In a competitive environment, we are encouraged not to be structurally connected anymore, but to instead choose for short term gains in a context of multiple uncertainties. This leads to a strong assignment for a hopeful societal project: raising the bar between personal freedom of choice and societal responsibility and commitment.

Luckily, we can add to this analysis of that the circular movement has started. For several years, we have seen how new movements are questioning in radical ways the insufficient progress that has been made towards the goal of a good life for all within planetary boundaries. The Youth for Climate movement and Extinction Rebellion rightly point out that climate policies lack sufficient ambition while biodiversity still is collapsing. And the Black Lives Matter movement denounces structural discrimination and violence towards non-white people, fighting for racial justice. At the same time, many different groups around the world insist on the need to decolonise, including Western world view of the extractive economy, which is still robbing the South of its resources.

## **2.6 The broken promise of neoliberal growth**

As the post-war economic model of the *production society* broke down, neoliberal politics promised better times with the emergence of the *consumer society*. Delocalising production (and pollution) to China would provide us with cheap products while we could invest in clean technologies and well-paid service economy at home. With the image of humankind as *homo economicus*, everybody in competition with everybody, the world would become a better place for all of us. But this promise is broken in two respects, socially and ecologically.

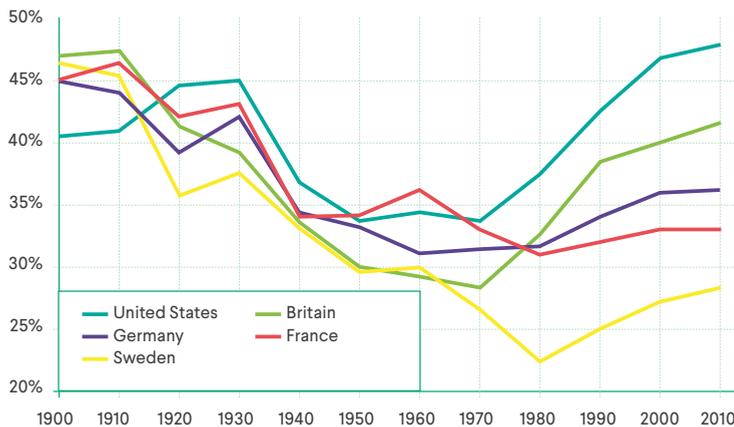
The welfare state, as the biggest societal project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was able to reduce the social inequality to the lowest level ever measured in capitalist market economies. The French sociologist Rosanvallon calls it, not without reason, the *century of equality*. As Thomas Piketty has shown in *Capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, this great accomplishment is now lost in countries such as the US and the UK and, to a lower extent, in countries like Germany. What is sometimes described as ‘winners and losers of globalisation’ is quite visible in this graph. If, in the UK, the 10% people with the highest incomes received less than 30% of total income, it rose during the neoliberal period to the previously unseen level of almost half of the total income. Even with a raising buying power on average, this means that low incomes have now stagnated for decades. We could add to this graph a map of France, with the regions with a lot of low-skilled people and unemployed and the regions where the extreme right party of Le Pen is very successful. The correlation between the two is much higher than coincidence could allow for.

It is also no coincidence that the rich are getting richer: it is directly connected with the core neoliberal policies - lowering taxes on companies and capital while reducing and/or privatising public services such as health care, pensions and education.

The ecological destruction did not halt either in this period. The belief that *growth is a tide that lifts all boats* (Kuznets) - that economic growth is good for society and socio-ecological



development - was misguided. Despite the development of national environmental policies and the greening of the business world and consumption, economic growth has led to a further increase of the continuous degradation of both local ecosystems and the overall planet. We are now beyond the limits of a safe operating zone in the fields of climate change, biodiversity loss and biochemical cycles in our oceans. So, we have to replace the axiom with the new saying that *growth is a tide that will flood all boats*. We can describe the neoliberal period as the time where we, as humankind, missed the chance to change our society in a real, strong sustainable way, staying within the borders of the carrying capacity of human earth. The lessons of the Club of Rome report were neglected.



The top-decile income share in Europe and the United States, 1900-2000. In the 1950-1970s, the top decile income share was about 30-35 percent of total income in Europe as in the United States.

Source: <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/capital21c/pdf/G9.7.pdf>

## 2.7 Europe, a house without a roof

Europe is a house without a roof: there are a number of political and economic rooms, but there is no social protection for the citizens. Figuratively speaking, when there is bad weather, a lot of people get wet. Europe has created a common market, but has not embedded it in strong ecological and social regulation framework. This has led to a race to the bottom; a playground where companies put nations in competition with each other to minimise taxes.

However, the uncertainty in the economic system is deeper than its neoliberal design. The fundamental uncertainty is linked to the inherent imperative of competition and growth, which in turn is driven by a money-based system based on interest and debt and the endless necessity to out-do others. Whoever borrows has to pay back with interest and earn more money than one would pay without lending, which means producing more. This was also the case in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: crises are an inherent part of the system.



In the last decades, an additional dimension has been added to the system: the so-called 'financialisation' (as an escalation of commodification and monetarisation). More profits can be made speculating with financial products than through trade and production of real goods or the provision of real services. This fundamentally undermines the attempts to achieve a stable and secure economic system. Financing should serve the real economy. Under financialisation, however, it has little to do with the real economy. Financialisation is a reality in which financial markets, institutions and elites gain importance. A mortgage loan is no longer (just) a means to buy a house, but it is a financial product that is split up and repackaged in new products to be sold on the financial markets. The same forms of speculation are reflected in almost all sectors - think of future grain production or crude oil prices within three years. If it goes wrong, like in 2008, the financial-economic system can come close to collapse. At that stage, Europe missed an unique opportunity to install fair and strong financial regulations that would combine the reduction of the financial sector with its true goal (being subordinated to democratic objectives and supporting society and economy) with the introduction of a fair tax system (making tax evasion impossible).

## 3. Europe at a crossroads

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### 3.1 The End or the Future of History

In 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the American conservative thinker Fukuyama published an essay (and later the book): *The End of History*. It was cited all over as the just interpretation of the new era that had come. Countries that arrived at the stage of the combination of a parliamentary democracy and a free market economy were judged as the best, most stable and final place of civilisational evolution. It is like you are in heaven, so why would you leave the place?

A deregulated economy doped with unlimited credit from a derailed financial sector is, however, highly unstable. The financial crisis proved this once again. It created the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s and demanded unseen public spending to re-stabilise the banking sector: private debt was transformed into public debt. To take the example of Belgium, a small country, the national debt, to be repaid by its citizens, increased by the incredible amount of 100 billion euros. It made the Eurozone unstable and forced the European Central Bank to start with the creation of unimaginable amounts of money, of which Europe's cities and citizens saw not a eurocent. At the same time, this abundant money is pushing the value of assets, creating asset inflation, especially in the form of soaring rent and housing prices.

In 2012, Fukuyama wrote another essay that was remarkably less frequently quoted: *The Future of History*. In this analysis, the author admits to his own complete misjudgement 20 years before: "*The model of permanent economic growth was an illusion based on US consumers borrowing masses of money. The ideology of the free market became a religion. That created a*



*false impression of prosperity, and I think everybody knows that this system, with its inherent instability, has no future. It is clear: the completely misplaced belief in the self-regulation of the free market is the cause of the crisis.”*

He was also critical with the other half of the duet he had praised in 1989. Developed democracies are facing long-term problems for which their political system has no answer: “The current political organisation does not really allow the liberal democracies to tackle the problems, and in some cases, makes the situation only worse. In view of the failure of the market, we need to reassess the importance of politics, reflect on our political institutions.”<sup>10</sup>

### **3.2 The land of two currents**

Since the beginning of the financial crisis of 2008, Europe has been at a crossroads of two different currents. The dominant stream was the neoliberal current, implemented by governments focused on austerity policies. The same policies were applied by the European Commission, where the treatment of Greece showed a dogmatic focus on austerity, monetary targets and an inhumane blindness to the consequences of dismantling social security systems. And, as a result of decades of deregulation and free trade agreements, large multinationals now have more power than small nation states.

What we can expect in a neoliberal scenario is an increasing commodification of society and the systematic reduction of public services on a planet in peril. We will constantly receive the message that life is a party if we take it into our own hands, while the collective facilities and ecosystem services that make it possible diminish. Yes, many people will have a smartphone, there will be free WIFI everywhere, and the city trip to Barcelona will be, for quite a while, still almost free. Such freedom is apparently smiling at you with a nice emoticon. Meanwhile, the price of medical care increases, as do university enrolment fees, and more and more small children get asthma because of air pollution. In this scenario, insecurity creeps under everyone’s skin, making them uneasy and constantly stressed.

Neoliberals still believe that the future will just be the continuation of today. They forget that we are and will be confronted with increasing stresses and shocks for which we must prepare for; or, even better, had done something to prevent. All of these systemic risks are linked: the shaky financial system can collapse again; rapidly rising greenhouse gas emissions will lead to climate shocks; migratory movements can tip precarious democracies into autocratic regimes. For example, climate change is already reducing food security in Africa and adding to instability and violence in the Middle East, while the overvaluation of stocks of fossil fuels threatens the stock market valuation of oil companies. And all these uncertainties give fuel to politicians seeking to exploit our fears and focus in their answers on unsafety. This usually leads to being a plea for more focus on law and order, with more budget for police, the military and disciplining, which in turn raises new fears, whilst failing to address any of the root causes. These charlatans seek to gain and retain power by failing to deal with the greatest issues of our time.



Neoliberalism was the dominant current in Europe until 2019, with governments and the European Commission imprisoned (and imprisoning us) in a neoliberal policy: the belief that liberalised markets are the best way to tackle societal challenges, while at the same time being skeptical of government intervention. It is the stream of the future forgetters. The fervent support for CETA and MERCOSUR showed the ongoing adherence to the illusion that a free-market economy spanning the whole world - based on profit and competition - allows us to build a human world, aiming at prosperity. It assumed that more economic global integration in line with financialisation and market concentration would support increasing political cooperation in and beyond the European Union. But the opposite has to become true, with the sad example that Brexit shows.

Meanwhile, two game changers happened. First, the European elections in 2019 led to a new European Commission that puts substantially more emphasis on decisive policies in the field of climate change, circular economy and biodiversity. The new European Commission really changed course with the launch of the European Green Deal. It has clear goals, such as the 2050 climate neutrality objective, a transition to a circular economy, and preserving Europe's natural capital. This only can be applauded, though critical support is necessary. It still puts a lot of emphasis on competitiveness and growth, believing the latter can be decoupled from resource use. But as the report 'Growth without Economic Growth' by the European Environmental Agency points out, this is an illusion. Another weak point is the gap between policy ambitions and the concrete budgets. The European Green Deal is far from perfect; consider, for instance, the gap between its 'Farm to Fork' progressive vision on agriculture and food, and the reality that the Common Agriculture Policy also in the next years will stimulate agrobusiness, with 80% of the subsidies going to the 20% biggest farms.

However, at the same time, the European Union again wants to lead in the global climate policy arena and has raised its own ambition. The great merit of the European Green Deal is that it is a systemic approach: it acknowledges that if you really want to realise transformative changes, you have to make substantial changes in all sectors, from mobility to finance, economy and housing.

The second gamechanger was, of course, the Covid-19 crisis. Our globalised economy, driven by growth and profit and based on a world-wide supply chain and no stocks, suddenly proved immensely vulnerable. We painfully found out that outsourcing the economy comes with a high price: you are no longer able to produce in your own industries masks or painkillers, with most of these coming to Europe from China and India respectively. Suddenly, the CEOs of companies that always called for deregulation and as little state involvement as possible demanded public support for their companies as quickly as possible. Governments re-discovered their power to steer the economy and shut manufacturing companies if public health was threatened. They rediscovered that well-being should be prioritized over profit. Other taboos died very quickly, such as the notion that governments incurring debt is a very bad and dangerous thing. And, although things are not running smoothly, EU cooperation on buying vaccines prevented an unbounded vaccine nationalism; a race where the richest countries would win and the divides in the EU would become bigger. At the same time, the relationships between the EU and national governments and the one hand, and big pharmaceutical corporations on the other, is coming to a head.



It is shameless that the European Commission doesn't have the courage to, at least for a limited period, put patents on the vaccines on hold, so factories all over the world can produce enough vaccines for every person on earth. However, just like with agricultural policy, the debate is the table focuses on how we should recalibrate the power relation between the public and the private sector.

The Covid-19 crisis has also highlighted another crucial point: the willingness and ability of citizens to self-organise. In a short period of time, people started to produce their own masks and develop mutual help groups in cities and neighbourhoods. For researchers looking at the rise of citizens' initiatives, this did not come as a surprise. They were already describing a new wave of these so-called commons. It is this new reality that constitutes the second current of the crossroads Europe has been standing at since the financial crisis of 2008.

This second current from these crossroads can be referred to as an undercurrent, steadily growing year by year, but receiving a major boost in 2020 with the emergence of the Covid-19 crisis. It is composed of citizens' initiatives from across Europe, developing the seeds of new systems for food production, transport, energy, money, and so on. Consider the example of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), where citizens restore their relationship with local producers. In the Flemish region of Belgium, the first farm started in 1997 and it took two years for the second to emerge. This was long before the 2008 financial crisis and such initiatives were considered to be naive. However, in 2015, we counted more than 40 CSA farms, alongside a spectre of other citizens' initiatives in the field of short-cycle agriculture. In 2020, more than 80 CSA farms are active in Flanders, often with a small to non-existent waiting list for new families that want to become members.

This is more than just an impression. Research in the Netherlands and Flanders show a significant increase in citizens' initiatives: in 2014, there were ten times more initiatives that had existed in Flanders ten years earlier. And the years after the growth continued. As we will discuss later, it is of utmost importance for Greens to grasp the importance and opportunities of this new wave of citizens' initiatives, not only because they embody a core value of political ecology – autonomy – but also because most of the time they are contributing to a real transition towards a socio-ecological society.

Next to citizens, it is amazing how local governments are redirecting their policies towards a sustainable future. Taking the example of mobility, one can see that in many countries, national governments are still investing in new roads, whereas cities are doing everything they can to make their centres car-free. Looking at Copenhagen, their strong policy on sustainable modes of mobility led to the remarkable situation where, in 2016, more people went by bike than by car to their work for the first time in a long while. Taking another example of the City of Ghent, which successfully implemented in 2016 a very ambitious mobility plan to combat traffic congestion and facilitate a healthier and more viable living environment for all. Such examples prove that radical change is possible. An evaluation report published in May 2019 showed that the use of sustainable modes of transport has noticeably increased since Ghent's mobility plan was introduced. The report cites a 17% drop in car use and an increase in daily public transport use of an average of 6% rising to 25% during the evening rush hour. Bicycle use has increased by more than 50%. Other



*People and local governments are already building the future today.*

cities, such as Milan and Nantes, invested heavily in the development of a local food policy. In the field of energy, we have cities like Helsinki where the

City Council unanimously voted in 2017 for a new city strategy which included the goal of making the city carbon neutral by 2035; the Mayor motivated this by stating that “Helsinki should be a forerunner in finding local solutions for climate action”.

At the same time, we see Green parties becoming more and more successful in a rising number of cities across Europe; we see Greens elected to become part of town and city government’s; and, in some cases, we see Greens elected to mayorships. For instance, after the local elections in France in 2020, big cities such as Marseille and Bordeaux have elected a Green mayor.

As successful documentaries such as *Demain* (2015) show, people and local governments are already building the future today. Before developing hopeful scenarios for the future, we need to look back one more time in order to grasp what a crucial and dangerous situation we have got ourselves into.

## 4. The Great Transformation

### 4.1 The historical lens of Karl Polanyi

We strive for a society that can provide people with security so they can freely develop their lives within the boundaries of the planet. For that, we need to change almost everything, so we do not know today how society will look like tomorrow. An example from nature makes it clear how radical such a transition is: the caterpillar that locks itself into a pupa to change into a different shape and structure. This takes place when ‘imaginal disks’ begin to form and resist the caterpillar’s drive for constant expansion, and restructure the organism to put its energy into creating a butterfly instead. When the pupa opens and the butterfly flies away, the same organism has been transformed into a new way of being.

The Hungarian writer Karl Polanyi describes the previous upheaval of our society with this image. In his book *The Great Transformation*, he analyses the transition of the European feudal agricultural society to the industrialised market society. The arrival of large machines transformed home production in factories that required a lot of capital and labour; their mass production necessitated more export and world trade. A new reality was created that would have been literally unthinkable for a country worker or nobleman a century before. Polanyi emphasised the connection between the economy and social relations: economic systems affect how people relate to each other. They increase or decrease the quality of society. A transformation initially disrupts a society because the old ways of problem



management no longer work while new problems arise. Authors like Charles Dickens remind us of the extreme poverty that arose from the transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Polanyi wants us to understand why a century without major wars (1815-1914) passes into World War I, the economic collapse in the 1930s, the rise of fascism and World War II. In his answer, he points to the English thinkers who developed the laissez-faire theory of market liberalism in response to the disruptive market economy, with the key belief that society has to comply with self-regulating markets. This view, when England was the factory of the world, provided the organising principles of the global economy: the gold standard, free world trade and a competitive labour market.

An important concept of Polanyi is that of *double movement*: because a self-regulating market economy cannot survive - it would disrupt society and destroy nature – ‘counter-movements’ emerge which want to counteract the negative effects. While the self-regulating market leads to ‘improvements’ and growth, the counter-movements defend wellbeing. The introduction of the free-market economy was the result of a conscious government policy, leading to a spontaneous counter-movement, which included the labour movement and other social groups. Such a counter culture can develop itself in two different ways. If the goal is security while sacrificing freedom, it leads to fascism. Alternatively, if the goal is to also keep the demand of freedom, it leads to a democratic socialism which respects non-conformism. Polanyi defines the latter as *“the tendency inherent in every industrial society to transcend the self-regulatory market by deliberately subordinating to a democratic society.”* But the dominant second movement in the 1930s was the rise of fascism. And if we look at certain countries now, the same offer of ‘security as a trade-off for freedom’ is all too familiar.

For Polanyi, it is clear that an individual country cannot simply decide how to reconcile the two movements, as one country must adapt to the rules governing the world economy. His analysis of the rise of fascism revolves around the role of the international money standard that “limits the political options that were available in the different countries.” The gold standard was a huge institutional innovation: it gave an answer to the problem that market liberals met in pursuing ever larger international markets: how can people in different countries with different coins enter into safe and free transactions? <sup>11</sup>

*For Polanyi, it is clear that an individual country cannot simply decide how to reconcile the two movements, as one country must adapt to the rules governing the world economy.*

After the gold standard was accepted in the 1870s, the effects were just the opposite of what was intended. Countries that were not competitive enough and had a distorted trade balance had no other choice but to wait for the wages and public spending in their country to decrease sufficiently

to reduce consumption. This had unbearable consequences for workers and farmers. But small and medium-sized businesses also did not accept this, so whole societies worked together to avoid the impact of the gold standard. Protectionism is a popular counter-movement against hyper-globalisation. This was done by setting import taxes and quota, but also via the conquest of colonies. And when this system full of opposites crashed with the



First World War, the belief in the gold standard remained so strong that politicians did everything they could to re-introduce it. After which the whole drama repeated itself in the 1920s and 1930s: countries that have to choose whether to protect their exchange rate or their citizens. In this impasse, fascism became successful: protecting society against the market by sacrificing human freedom.

You can hardly get around Polanyi's relevance for today's debate, as neoliberals proclaim the same vision that inspired the gold standard. The advent of the global economy has made national borders outdated. If all countries embrace this system and open their economies for free movement of goods and capital, international conflicts will be replaced by fertile competition to produce more goods and services. Of course, the current system differs from that of the gold standard (although authors such as Wolfgang Streeck compare its impact with that of the euro). Currency and exchange rates are now delinked from the gold value. There are international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank to regulate the global system. Nevertheless, there is also the underlying resemblance - namely the belief that if we give individuals and businesses the maximum freedom to pursue their economic self-interest - the global market will ensure that everybody is better off.

Polanyi's fundamental point is that this self-regulation leads to unbearable situations for ordinary people: workers, farmers and small businesses cannot handle the big fluctuations in the system – in which, for example, they lose their income. That leads to protest and social unrest, the disintegration of societies and distractions by politicians who blame scapegoats. For example, right-wing politicians who now defend the neoliberal economy - by which tens of thousands of lorry drivers in Western Europe lose jobs to underpaid East European truckers - proclaim at the same time a populist nationalism that blames foreigners for the neoliberal misery.

In conclusion, we can certainly learn a lot from the situation of the 1920s and 1930s. There was also a globalised economy that pushed free trade and free labour markets beyond democratic control and social embedding. And we are talking about a situation without the ecological and climate threats that now hovering over our heads.

In the analysis of Polanyi, labour, land and money play a special role. He describes them as fictitious commodities, defining commodities as items that are produced for sale on a market. Therefore, they are fictitious because they were not originally produced to be sold on a market. Labour is simply human activity, land is divided nature, and money is linked to government policy. The assumption that these things behave like real commodities has fatal consequences. For Polanyi, this marketisation is morally objectionable and ignores the "inevitable" government interventions. Even assuming that the market is self-regulatory, the state *must* manage the money supply, as well as the fluctuating labour demand (for example, by unemployment benefits and shielding farmers from excessive swings in market prices and crop yields). If we reduce these state interventions too much and disembed the economy, ordinary people pay the price. Workers and their families are hit by unemployment and lack the necessary purchasing power, farmers lose their market because of imports. That's exactly what has happened in the United States of America over the last few decades and from where politicians like Trump have drawn their core populist support.



It is crucial to recall an important point of Polanyi: there is nothing wrong with a market in itself. The market is only part of the broader economy, which in its turn has to be embedded in society. In such a situation, the market economy is not an end in itself, just a means for human purposes. Markets have always existed. What was radically new during the “big transformation” is that these markets became international, most economic activities were driven by profit and the market was assumed as the only efficient economic institution. Democratic policy, however, depends on an economic order based on a mixed economy. The scope and scale of the market has to be regulated; different economic institutions like markets, commons and municipal services and citizen initiatives based on reciprocity have to co-exist to increase the resilience of economic systems.

Returning to Polanyi, one would think that because he wrote the book in 1944, it must end pessimistically. In fact, it's just the opposite: the book is intriguing because of its optimistic end. In 1944, Polanyi saw the opportunity to realise “freedom in a complex society”. Freedom for him is both ‘freedom from hunger and thirst’ as political freedoms and the right to be yourself as a unique individual. In other words, freedom is for him both negative and positive freedom: freedom from coercion and the right to non-conformism, as well as positive freedom based on a set of rules which empower also the disadvantaged segments of society. While Hayek privileges economic freedom over political freedom, Polanyi acknowledges the importance of both forms of freedom. Polanyi is optimistic because he assumes that the cycle of international conflicts can be broken; the key is to undermine the belief that we must make our social lives subordinate to market mechanisms. In this way, the economy can come again under democratic control. He based this on the New Deal policy of US President Roosevelt. Roosevelt allowed the markets to exist but protected people from market forces, for example, by pensions for the elderly who are no longer able to earn an income from the labour market.

Polanyi's writing about relations between countries closely resembles what Streeck writes about Europe (and the European currency union). Without a stifling neoliberal market force, countries can decide freely to cooperate, including through trade agreements that combine intense trade with the protection of societies. And developing countries can choose their own path to improve the well-being of their people.

The lesson of Polanyi for our time is clear: it is precisely by regulating the economy democratically, that there is more freedom which provides us with a necessary certainty: *‘As long as (man) is true to his task of creating more abundant freedom for all, he needs not fear that either power or planning will turn against him and destroy the freedom he is building by their instrumentality. This is the meaning of freedom in a complex society; it gives us all the certainty that we need.’*

The aim of Polanyi is therefore clear: to engage us worldwide in a joint effort to subject the economy to democratic politics and rebuild global politics based on international cooperation, while at the same time, sustaining the new wave of citizens' initiatives and progressive, eco-social local governments.



## 4.2 The avant-garde and the big transformation

Over the last decade, we have seen a flourishing avant-garde in our society that rethinks and revitalizes our society and economy: from community farms to local coins and social entrepreneurs, all these initiatives allow alternatives to become reality – at least at the local scale. They present new answers, such as alternative ownership and usage rights, open cooperatives and time banks.

The crucial question, as put by Austrian thinker Andreas Novy, is how we can think of another society that offers a good life for everyone, worldwide. This utopian horizon needs to be our compass to think about the crucial transformation, whereby we can make the transition from a repair cafe to a social and ecologically sustainable (i.e. local) circular economy, from a food cooperative to a local food system, from a car-sharing project to a zero-carbon city – operating within a net zero-carbon world.

This transformation requires renewed *mental infrastructures* that liberate us from the growth and acceleration imperative, as well from the neoliberal compulsion to compete, thanks to re-imagined *social infrastructures* that enable and recreate a solidarity society and welfare facilities and public services that allow the freedom of each of us. This is compatible with the free development of everyone; and renewed *material infrastructures* for a post-fossil economy that respects the limits of the planet.

Such a sustainability revolution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, following the former transformation, can only be done by leaving behind the basic institutions of the old society - thinking of growth and consumerism. It involves new infrastructures, institutions and regionalisation of the economy. It's not just about greening the economy; the challenge lies in shifting from growing into a bigger caterpillar, to transformational adaptation into a colourful butterfly - a butterfly, whose future appearance we do not know in detail.

# 5. Freedom & Security in the 21<sup>th</sup> Century: the road to a Socio-Ecological Society

Starting from the crossroads of two different currents, the challenge is daunting: how the creation of a socio-ecological society, striving for a good life for all within environmental limits, can become the dominant current; a 'new normal'. As in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this requires a societal project aiming at a new combination of freedom and security. As local and national economies have globalised and the power of nation states declined, we need an innovative type of multi-level governance. In this, the European level will have to play a decisive role. It has, in principle, the scale to regulate the economy; to re-embed it in a



democratic framework and cultural norms. What is lacking, however, is a hopeful vision that empowers citizens to participate in ensuring that governments (including the EU) provide the protective and liberating space within which new notions of freedom and security are co-created in our current times. This would imply remodelling the EU in a new multi-level governance model with much more room for manoeuvre 'from the bottom-up'. Today, networks of city-regions localise political and economic decision making and regionalisation has a huge potential for a foundational economy (Bowman et al. 2014). This opens space for the EU taking on a role to mediate and share, rather than to control and trade, as in the 20th century. It was, for instance, not national governments but cities that were the first to develop new ways of regulation for disruptive digital platforms such as Airbnb and Uber. Berlin and Barcelona are leading the way here, not their national governments.

If we want to change society, beautiful dreams will not suffice. It is a matter of developing a clear change strategy – which can be translated in locally distinct plans of action - that reflect the true nature and scale of today's challenges. One can compare the necessary transformation with a journey to an unknown area. For this travel, you need three things: a travel guide with a map, a compass and a vehicle. With this, you can know what land to cross, see the right direction and move fast enough. If we translate this to the building blocks of our change strategy, the map is the view we have of the world and ourselves, the compass is our ideology (or narrative of the future we want) and the vehicle is our concept of change.

In what follows, we use political ecology (ecologism) as the political compass. This is a contemporary progressive ideology which emerged from the 1968-movement. It inscribes itself in the tradition of Enlightenment but also indicates the need for a new direction. The travel guide is the ecological human worldview that sees human beings as embedded, relational and social. Their relationship with other people and the environment is at centre stage.

The action framework revolves around revolutionary reformism that links Realpolitik and revolution in a productive way. It's not by means of a political revolution that we can implement a pre-designed utopian society. We need to change not only the political system, but have to transform the economic, social and cultural systems as well.

## **5.1 Ecology as a narrative of passionate principles**

A society that finds concepts like ideology and utopia outdated has difficulties imagining a better world. For a long time now, we have lived in such a society without aspirations for the future desires. But a society that is purely based on the preservation of the old becomes inevitably self-oriented - even defensive and reactionary. This is the ideal breeding ground for fear and insecurity. That is the core of our current de-politicised society: there is still party politics, but there are hardly any collective projects for an alternative future.

If we are to become future-proof again, we will have to rediscover ideology and create space for the utopian desire, without ignoring the lessons of history. We know that utopian thinking as blind faith has caused humanity a lot of damage. But the history of ideology



is richer than these dark pages. Because of both sides of the coin, we describe ideology as a story of passionate principles. A story is always written by people and is therefore open to change; the story could also be written differently and each time new versions are possible. A good story also draws our attention, makes sense and gives meaning. Last but not least: there are a variety of stories that can be discussed in public. Principles are beautiful: they incite, in a single word, a debate about the desired social order. That is the power of the French Revolution: to capture an image of the future in three principles, 'freedom, equality and fraternity'. Let's not forget the importance of passion. It may also be the paradox of the Enlightenment: a project that emphasises the importance of reason can only convince people when it touches them in an emotional way. Therefore, a strong principle will only work if it moves us, on a different level next to the reason. Principles in the form of new collective practices (such as repairing broken items we care about in a repair café) that also unite us emotionally can be an alternative to the lust politics that channel our desires unilaterally into accumulation and consumption.

It is maybe the paradox of our time. We thought that we now live without 'big stories' (the end of history) while we actually live under the dominance of the only powerful ideology of our time: neoliberalism. Because this *pensée unique* represents the existing order, it seems almost invisible. Nevertheless, it affects almost all aspects of our lives. If we want to change the world, we need coherent stories of change. To conclude: we must lift the moratorium on ideology.

An ideology never appears out of the blue. It develops in response to major changes in society and the associated conflicts and challenges. Step by step, new ideas and insights develop into a coherent whole. Thus, liberalism and socialism, to put it bluntly, are the answers to the bloody religious wars, where a life didn't count, and the exploitation of workers during the industrial revolution. Both ideologies are part of the progressive tradition of Enlightenment thinking that characterises modernity.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century liberal philosophers developed the foundations of our democracy. They considered how they could realise the freedom of the individual in the context of the political system. What kind of institution can protect life, liberty and property? They developed the idea of a 'social contract'. In such a concept, the citizen, in exchange for protection/safety and security, transfers a certain part of their power and self-determination to the state.

19<sup>th</sup> century socialist thinkers considered the liberal idea of a neutral state that only cares for the rule of law as a lie. What is the value of your freedom of expression if your children suffer from hunger? In order to achieve freedom, there is a need for equality that goes beyond civic rights. First: the labour movement was a key driver for implementing liberal democracy, often against resistance from liberals who feared "the tyranny of the majority" (Mill 1985). Second, social security, innovative models of local welfare regimes and universal social services became the backbone of social citizenship (Marshall 1950). Only social citizenship and the equal freedom for all allow people to become emancipated. Socialists aim to provide security by achieving maximum social equality. However, the way this is realised will, of course, influence the degree of freedom for every citizen - think of the former Soviet Union.



Thus, we come to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when ecologists start to problematise what liberalists and socialists traditionally embrace as the idea that to produce more and more is a good thing. Only when the cake becomes bigger can everyone have a satisfying piece. But ecologists claim that producing more and more on a finite planet also affects the quality of the pie. They introduce the concept of limits versus the blind belief in *productivism*. More material prosperity leads, when crossing certain boundaries, to less social wellbeing and irreversible damage to our living planet.

So, we consider *ecologism* as the third child of the Enlightenment and the key innovator in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is the newest political line of thought of modern times, but criticises certain aspects of it at the same time: it reflects on the dialectic of Enlightenment (Horkheimer/Adorno 2003/1944). It calls for a second modernity because modernity has two faces. Firstly, the positive side is the emancipation of the individual, the “liberation” from nature, the importance of reason and freedom, science and critical thinking, and of universal human rights. It is our civilisational standard with its legal system, democracy, education and health care. However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century also showed us the downside with the darkest point: the Holocaust. Horkheimer and Adorno, founders of the critical theory, described this dark side as the “instrumental reason”: the tendency that does not aim for the individual’s liberation, but demands that each individual adapts to technology and the marketplace. Everything is reduced to an economic approach of things, people become objectified, natural boundaries are denied, and everything is focused on profit maximisation and wealth accumulation. For ecologists, these downsides are the structural consequences of the one-sided realisation of the idea of progress. Ecologists distance themselves from it because it has led to the current ecological crisis whilst making the poor suffer the most. In other words, progress is no longer going forward. If we want to revive the idea of emancipation again, we need to develop a second modernity. What this means becomes clear when we examine the new values that the Green movement introduces.

Basic ideas of ecologism are developed by the ecological movements and thinkers that resist the colonisation of the life world of people. As André Gorz stated precisely, the underlying motive has always been the defence of the “life world”: against expert authority, against quantification and monetary evaluation, against the exchange of autonomy and the ability to self-determination of the individual for trade-dependent client relations. Actions against the development of nuclear power stations, for example, are thus motivated by multiple reasons: there are not only the risks of radioactive material for humans and nature, but its authoritarian structure is also not accepted (nuclear power plants are highly centralised forms of energy production).

The fundamental critique of the growth economy - or, more generally, the criticism of productivism as part of a one-sided progressive idea - leads to the inevitable conclusion that there are *limits* to what humankind and earth can handle. That criticism will later evolve into positive principles, such as the ethics of care. In addition, attention is paid to the importance of *future generations and those who live elsewhere*: we do not have the right to limit their chances of living. This addresses a fundamental shortcoming of the current democratic and economic systems: future generations and all current people are not equally represented. This is linked to the concern about the state of democracy, which does not succeed in reconciling economics and ecology. There is a need for *citizenship*



*participation* in order to strengthen democracy, with more space for the emancipatory development of every citizen.

In short, ecologism stands for the preservation of the earth on which to build a human world where each person can thrive and collectively develop autonomously through various ways of emancipation. Crucial here is the emphasis on connectedness, both with other people and with nature. This emphasis of man as a social being distinguishes ecological thinking from liberal ideology, which takes as its starting point man, who, as an individual, suffices with himself. Being and feeling connected translates into forms of solidarity big and small, in formal structures and informal networks that provide the stimulating certainty needed to develop ourselves. This includes a recognition and dignity for diversity and difference. It is no coincidence that the ecological movement defended the right to vote of migrants from the start.

Thus, these are important principles of ecologism: ecology (understood as nature and environmental protection, recognition of the multiple meaning of nature beyond its usefulness - not every tree is standing there to be cut), autonomy in connection (which provides certainty) and emancipation (the freedom to self-development). Being connected is both a given - humankind is a social animal - and a conscious choice. And we use our freedom to define in a democratic way together how to structure our own boundaries and limits. Putting, for instance, limits on the freedom for cars in a city can be a really liberating policy, making it more secure for bikers and pedestrians.

This coherent set of principles constitutes as ecologism the contemporary context of the Siamese twins that provide the framework for this essay: freedom and security. What links them is the importance of relationships: we can only be free together with and in relation to other people. The same applies to the development of new forms of certainty. So, the new goal of a civilised world from now on includes respecting planetary boundaries, includes the future generations in our considerations and reflects on whether our current democratic model is fit for this challenge. Inextricably linked to this is another view of our world and humankind.

## **5.2 An ecological human and worldview**

If you travel to another country, usually, you take a travel guide with you: the maps and texts help you to sketch a picture of the world you are going to explore, discovering fascinating places and avoiding annoying ones. Similarly, every human being has a worldview: a mental model that allows you to move around the world, adjust your experiences and understand the things that happen. Each society also has a shared worldview, based on a mix of knowledge, traditions and moral beliefs. The worldview of our modern society takes shape around the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of modern science. Before that time, human beings were seen as part of the cosmos with religion as the most important source of insight. Scientists like Isaac Newton acknowledge that nature was created by God, but show that humans can disclose the laws of nature. This introduces a separation between man and nature. Wo/men now looks as an outsider to nature as a machine, an object that s/he can manipulate without shame.



On an economic level, Adam Smith followed in the footsteps of Newton. If humans can understand the laws of nature, then this is also feasible for the rules that determine our society. Smith introduces what we describe by the law of the “invisible hand”: if everyone strives for his or her own self-interest, we are automatically all better off. What he formulated as an economic theory embodies the basis of our modern image of humankind: each of us is driven by self-interest and no one has to worry about it; it is even the best for the whole society. With neoliberalism, this image sharpens even. Every person is now entrepreneur, with a competitive attitude in every domain of life. Having a good time has been replaced by status anxiety - we do not want to perform less than our peers. Competition is the new thing that government needs to promote in each domain through marketisation. What remains is a meagre image of humankind: the starting point and ideal image is the solitary person.

This view is also present in the political philosophy of that time. Thomas Hobbes’ starting point was that of people as atoms that only pursue their self-interest. And for Hobbes, this does not automatically lead to prosperity. On the contrary, people are “like wolves for each other”. Therefore, a strong state is needed that protects people from each other. It is surprising how these ancient ideas still dominate our society. The financial crisis showed how the financial-economic world is bound together by self-interest and greed. Who cannot think of Hobbes when we see politicians calling for a war on terror, politicians putting military in the streets? The point is not only that these views are disturbing, they are just not correct. Both our own observations in our daily lives and scientific research prove this. Let’s start at the beginning of each of us: what do people do when they get a child? Seeing the child like a young free rider who is going to abuse the situation? Will they, as *homo economicus*, calculate how much money that newcomer will cost? Or will they cherish this new life as parents and take care of it? And to broaden the point: who has never done anything unselfish for a relative, friend or neighbour?

The modern image of humankind departs from adult people – let’s say men - who are completely independent. Whether they ever grew up and who gave them the necessary support remains out of sight. Also, inequality and power relations are not covered in the standard picture, which only tells half of the story: *“Without care, children cannot grow up, the sick will not heal, Adam Smith could not write and the elderly cannot live. Through the care of others, we learn what cooperation, empathy, respect, self-discipline and care is. These are fundamental skills in life.”*<sup>12</sup>

Scientific research shows that we are not destined to compete. On the contrary, ample research shows that humans (and other primates) are more likely to cooperate, are empathic and have a basic sense of justice (or more precisely, a gut feeling for situations of being treated unjustly). But as we build our identity through our interaction with other people and the environment, we develop in certain ways and are pushed by dominant forces and signals in our society. So, the task is to build institutions and environments that help us to develop as homo cooperans. This is no naïve proposal: evolutionary biology shows that cooperation is most of the time a more successful strategy.

The ability and the desire for cooperation and altruism belongs to us being human. It is the foundation of a new vision of society; a society that is not based on solitary people in



*Ecologism introduces a new image of the world and humankind, with emphasis on cooperation and connectedness.*

a free market, but on people who work together in *commons*.

In summary, we can state that ecologism introduces a new image of the world and humankind, with emphasis

on cooperation and connectedness. Relationships - with fellow human beings, with our natural environment - determine our quality of life and our opportunities for action. Nobody creates sense and meaning in this world if he or she behaves as an island in the world. With this new travel guide and ecological compass in our hand, we now look different at the social challenges we face.

### **5.3 Revolutionary Reformism**

Thus, we come to the third and final element of our change strategy: a realistic action model that enables us to dream of another world and gives us the chance to realise it. We base ourselves on what André Gorz describes as revolutionary reformism<sup>13</sup>. The two words are each in themselves insufficient. A political revolution that will change everything for good at once - we should not hope for that. And a few reforms of the existing system will not lead to a real structural change. For example, while it's good that people share cars, this alone will not lead us to sustainable accessibility and mobility. This needs strategic cooperation and planning.

*Revolutionary reformism is a chain of far-reaching reforms that complement and strengthen each other and, at the same time, raise political awareness.* In system terms, it is a matter of implementing reforms that are complementary and reinforce each other. This will generate synergy and even positive feedback: virtuous circles. For example, if traffic in a city becomes safer because of policy measures, more people will take the bicycle. This in turn will decrease car traffic, while increasing the number of cyclists encourages more people to join what now feels normal. This will also give increased confidence to the city council to take additional measures to make cycling safer and more comfortable while discouraging cars to drive through the city centre. It is in this way that cities like Groningen and Copenhagen (through decades of measures that reinforce each other) are now real cycling cities.

In order to achieve such a synergy, the moment of introduction is also important: the momentum must not be lost. Because every reform leads to resistance, the capitalist system is very capable of neutralising reforms. In terms of system thinking: a reform brings a system out of balance, and without sufficient strength, the system will pursue the initial equilibrium situation. So, it is important to maintain and increase the gains of the first reforms through new reforms that also strengthen the autonomy of citizens.

If, in different societal domains, measures are taken in the right direction, they can strengthen each other to become a powerful social change. This is certainly not a smooth process. Social change happens with blows and bumps: alongside successful cooperation there is also conflict and crisis. Successful reform is never just an improvement to the existing



system: it enables structural changes by stimulating and provoking other reforms that, in synergy, give rise to real transformation. A reform never stands alone; it is just one step towards the transformative goal.

A structural reform acquires strength in joint practices that make citizens stronger in terms of insight, organisational ability, and so on, so that they are 'eager and capable' to start, support or connect with other reforms. Citizens who, for example, establish a cooperative for renewable energy, soon learn how power relations work. From them, you hear the most unromantic reading of the thresholds and pitfalls while carving a way forward.

While the direction of revolutionary reformism is clear - to a socioecological society - there is no blueprint or final picture available. That stems from our idea of an ideology as an open narrative. The revolutions we aim for are so far reaching that we cannot capture a clear picture of the future societies and economies. At least, not yet. It is like the caterpillar that changes into a butterfly. We can only sketch out paths of transformation based on the positive practices that develop from the current transition situation. We outline three of them here. There may be more.

Firstly, within a certain sector, a multitude of initiatives can lead to radical change. Think of the energy sector and the growth of renewable energy. In Flanders, the energy cooperatives have joined together and set up the federation RESCoop. This is an important step forward, but there is still much work to do. In the Netherlands, there are already more than 110 energy cooperatives. Even stronger, the German *Energiewende* reflects the ambition to change the whole energy system into a sustainable one. Due to a stable regulatory framework, with the government as an active partner, the share of renewable electricity in Germany increased from 3.4% in 1990 to over 25% today. And every month, new citizens' and city-scale initiatives are established. For example, in 2013, following a referendum, Hamburg decided to re-take its power grid, after earlier privatisation. With this example, we come to the next point.

Secondly, we need new multi-level governance models. Complementary to the national and international sectors, there is the local level. Throughout the world, municipalities and especially cities are taking the initiative to work on the transition to a sustainable society. In Europe, there are the well-known examples of Copenhagen or Freiburg. In almost every European country, cities signed the Mayor's convention, which stands for a very ambitious climate policy. Together, these cities represent more than 100 million Europeans. Cities are taking clear leadership on climate neutrality, sustainable mobility and alternative food systems. As these networks become more powerful, you can envision a Europe that is made sustainable from underneath, while the networks gain power in relationship with national governments and the European Commission.

In addition to ambitious local governments, there are local citizens' initiatives. Civil initiatives face the challenge to unite together with existing civil society organisations that want to get involved in a new local and hybrid civil society that can mobilise people. And that's more important than it seems. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nation state was the most important scale of emancipation and acquisition of autonomy, with the unions as a crucial actor of social struggle. Their role is not yet fulfilled. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the



importance of the local government, in addition to the national and European level of government, is growing. So, there is also a need for *city unions* - a new civil society that unites all committed city residents around a joint agenda – complementary to NGO's operating across Europe.

Thirdly, *communities of practice* initiatives are not only local in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In our digital age, they can be open and connected to other initiatives at the same time. An urban agriculture project in Rotterdam could be inspired by what's happening in Toronto. If computer experts together design the Linux operating system so that IBM stops developing its own systems, then we are no longer talking about little experiments in the periphery. And now there are not only open source software systems, but there are also initiatives in the manufacturing sector such as open hardware and open design. Current technologies do not limit the possibility of locally managed micro factories. Fiction? In America, farmers produce their own agricultural tools to bypass multinationals with their expensive patented tools.

Sociologists describe communities of practice as “groups that have an interest or passion in common for what they are doing and who learn together how to do that better.” This is not a loose network, but a community characterised by a certain identity (as everyone pursues the same goal), open dialogue and the creation of specific competencies. These are we-groups that provide identity and pleasure, the strongest engines of engagement.<sup>14</sup>

## 5.4 A city that reinvents itself

To conclude this part, let us do a thought experiment. What could revolutionary reformism mean for a city? For example, in an ecocity, creative citizens establish a new business for sustainable local transport: Cargo Vélo. The company transports packages, big and small, by bicycle throughout the city. As a consequence, there are fewer vans and trucks. In addition, the company works with a centre that guides long-term unemployed to a job. At the same time, other citizens start agriculture projects with local supply chains: city residents buy products directly from farmers from the wider city region, also creating additional jobs for people who struggle to find their place in the labour market. For the food distribution Cargo Vélo is used, so that again fewer trucks have to enter the city. This creates space for the city council to replace cars with new tram lines on some busy roads. Thus, diesel buses are replaced by trams. And those trams get their energy largely from the urban energy cooperative that is building a huge energy park - windmills with solar panels - on the city's edge. This energy park not only supplies renewable electricity to urban residents, but as shareholders, they also receive a dividend each year. Thus, its economic added value remains in the city.

This is just the start of a big story; the beginning of a trajectory of synergy and resilience on different levels. The synergy lies in the fact that the various sustainable initiatives reinforce each other and together provide scale for economic viability. They also provide resilience. Such new initiatives make the city less dependent on global systems such as fossil fuels and global food chains, owned by multinationals and who are subject to speculation. There are also less money flows out of the city region due to the reduced



purchase of fuel and long food supply-chains. Not only that, but the economic profit of the food and energy cooperatives remains with the city's residents and is partly reinvested in the further development of sustainable infrastructures.

This example is not a plea to turn cities into islands. On the contrary, it is about organising the right things on the right scale. Coffee will still come from Africa, trains connect to major settlement areas in the region and cities beyond and especially ideas will flourish on the digital forums worldwide. We can follow an inspiring citizens' initiative for instance in Ecuador, and inspire each other all around the world.

## **5.5 Connected Autonomy as Organising Principle**

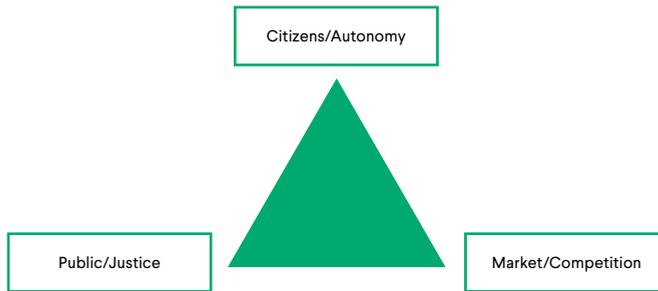
There are always more solutions to societal challenges than we imagine. Fixed patterns often block the way to unexplored paths. And who shouts the loudest seems to have the best proposal. For instance, looking at opinions on how housing should be organised, those tend to lie on a spectrum between two opposing views. On the left, there is the view that the government is the best actor to organise it in a fair way. On the other side, the right argues that only the market can allocate houses in an optimal manner. A lot of commentators interpreted the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as the victory of the right on a more global level. In countries such as the UK, the system of social housing has been dismantled and care homes have been transferred from the public to the private sector.

Discussions like these are trapped in a left-right dichotomy, within which the radical left, without any critical analysis, invariably pushes the government forward as a solution and the right, equally blind, only sees merit in the market approach by private companies. It is as if the citizen – the bearer of democracy – may only watch from the sidelines and is unable to propose solutions to societal needs. Taking the example of housing for elderly people, citizens' initiatives like the Abbeyfield Houses are rarely heard of in the mainstream debate. This initiative was born in 1956 in Britain in response to a growing social problem: an increasing number of elderly people in London's poorer neighbourhoods were no longer able to live independently in a decent way. Today, the British Abbeyfield Society manages 700 homes with 7,000 older residents aided by 10,000 volunteers. It is a concept of collective living together with a volunteer movement which has already taken root in many countries.

This is not to imply that citizens' initiatives are the panacea for all challenges; but they can be an important part of the future if we are willing to widen our gaze. Essentially, we have three basic options to address challenges and to organise society. This broadened view of society can be visualised in the following triangle. The spectrum discussed above is actually only the line at the base of the triangle.

Each corner indicates an extreme of how society can be organised: a fully market-oriented society; a 100 percent state-run society; or one exclusively managed by autonomous citizens. How a given society formulates a response to a social need – such as the nursing homes – can be situated anywhere within this triangle.





The three fundamental ways of organising in society.

Source: Holemans, D, 2016: 140.

With this broadened view, we come to the core of political ecology, as has been pointed out by the philosopher Philippe Van Parijs<sup>15</sup>. This presentation shows the narrowness of the dominant discourse in our society (oscillating between more state or more market), as it only takes place on the horizontal side of the triangle. Once one conceptualises the three corner points, with autonomy above as the vertical dimension, it becomes immediately clear that when the liberal and socialist logics praise the importance of the market or of the state, they not only advocate less state or less market, respectively, but plead also for a smaller autonomous sphere. But there exists a third perspective that emphasises autonomous activities and, thus, less of both state and market involvement. The horizontal 'state bureaucracy – free market' axis is typical of modern industrial society; transitioning from this line up to the top of the triangle is a feature of the current post-industrial society that promotes other forms of participation in social life from the perspective of autonomy, rather than that of money and work.

The autonomy perspective is a key element of political ecologism. As for the other two ways of thinking, it is not desirable, from a Green perspective, to drive society into any single corner of the triangle. Contrary to market fundamentalist liberals, ecologists acknowledge that a new combination of the market, state and autonomy components has to be constructed. At the same time, the ecologists' point of view distinguishes itself clearly from the liberal and socialist approach. For liberals, autonomy is the liberty not to be coerced by state authority – it is a purely negative concept of freedom; for ecologists, autonomy is positive freedom and represents the *joyful potential to shape the world together within environmental limits*. Autonomy is at odds with a unilateral individualisation: the joyful shaping is always done in cooperation with others. Therefore, ecologists speak about *connected autonomy, freedom with solidarity, diversity together with equality*: I can only find fulfilment and build a world to live in through a fruitful connection with others, which also entails the dimension of care, for each other, for the world we live in, and for our living planet. This nurturing and caring perspective is related to the notion of stewardship: our freedom to act and change the world implies, at the same time, feeling responsible for it.

As a source of social innovation, the importance of the autonomous sphere cannot be underestimated; a lot of solutions to societal challenges did not come from the government or from large business, but from creative citizens. The afore-mentioned Abbeyfield Housing is a good example, as are social innovations such as car sharing, organic farming initiatives,



*As a source of social innovation, the importance of the autonomous sphere cannot be underestimated; a lot of solutions to societal challenges did not come from the government or from large business, but from creative citizens.*

and energy co-ops. And who built the first modern wind turbines to produce electricity? It was citizens developing a positive alternative to nuclear plants in countries like Denmark and Ireland.

The triangle shows that political ecology goes beyond environmental protection and mere ecological modernisation. Ecologists want not only to respect the boundaries of the earth's ecosystem; they strive at the same time for a larger co-dependent social sphere where people can deploy their capabilities together, without the interference of market or state. The final goal is a good life for all within environmental limits.

## **5.6 From public-private to public-civil partnerships | The Partner State**

Research shows that most citizens' initiatives rely in one way or another on cooperation with the state. This is not a problem: it is the future. The neoliberal regime of the last thirty years dictated that the best approach to organising anything in society was one based on markets and competition. This has led to a wide array of public-private partnerships, which, most of the time, lead to a government losing its grip on policy areas and citizens paying too much tax for the services delivered. Again, the triangle clearly shows the alternative, future way to develop: public-civil partnerships. With more and more citizens taking initiatives of their own, the challenge for governments is to turn themselves into a partner state, as is already happening in cities like Bologna and Ghent. Here, politicians don't see their political constituency as a territory to manage from above, but as a community of citizens with a lot of experience and creativity. Leaving top-down politics behind, they develop forms of co-creation and co-production. In Ghent, citizens developed, within the frame of a participatory climate policy, the concept of 'living streets'. They decided by themselves to reclaim their streets - to operate without cars for one or two months. The city government took all the measures needed to make it happen in a legal and safe way. If local government had conducted this experiment unilaterally it would have provoked enormous protest. Through public-civil partnerships, an underestimated area of the triangle of societal possibilities, it was explored in a positive way.

*With the revival of the commons, it has become clear that there exists a third fundamental way to organise society.*

With the revival of the commons, it has become clear that there exists a third fundamental way to organise society. Centred on the basic principle of autonomy, it has its own log-

ic, consisting of specific forms of social relations based on reciprocity and cooperation. It is more than probable that such new commons initiatives will form a crucial part of the transformation towards a social-ecological society. While it would be unwise to strive for a pure 'commonism'; just as with communism or neoliberalism, a society based on



only one of the three approaches to organisation is unable to cope with the broad array of severe challenges we face nowadays. Having said that, stimulating and sustaining the commons requires an active state which develops new institutions that allows citizens to engage in transition projects in a secure way, so their autonomy and creativity can flourish.

The indispensable value of the commons movement is that it enhances and adds to the institutional diversity of societies - one of the key features of resilience. At the level of who we are and how we relate, it stimulates the basic human ability to cooperate and take care of ourselves and each other.<sup>16</sup>

## 5.7 The outline of a new economy

The economic model that brought us prosperity in the past can no longer be the path of the future. This model of Take-Make-Use-Waste is no longer viable, since it exceeds the carrying capacity of the earth, destroys livelihoods and generates more inequality.

Take the example of the meat industry in the Benelux. It starts with fossil fuels imported from the Middle East, out of which, in the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam, fertilisers, where, with an enormous input of energy, fertilisers are produced. These are, in turn, transported by ship to Brazil, where they are used to cultivate soya (for which rain forests were cut), which, in turn, returns to Belgium to feed pigs, which farmers try to export to China.

In fact, the life cycle of the icon product of our times - the smartphone - is as crazy. Rare metals are excavated by youngsters in Congo, used in China for the production, and western consumers buy these phones until the new model is launched and a significant amount of the old – and usually still working – phones end up as electronic waste, dumped at the coast of poor African countries. These examples show that it is an illusion that we can have a real sustainable economy by just making our current economy, based on growth and competition, a bit greener. We have to get rid of this *extractive economy* that sucks value out of communities and places. As a matter of fact, the new big digital companies, such as Uber or Airbnb, also belong to this kind of economy. You could say they form a sort of digital mining: digging out or extracting value worldwide for the sake of venture capitalists in Silicon Valley.

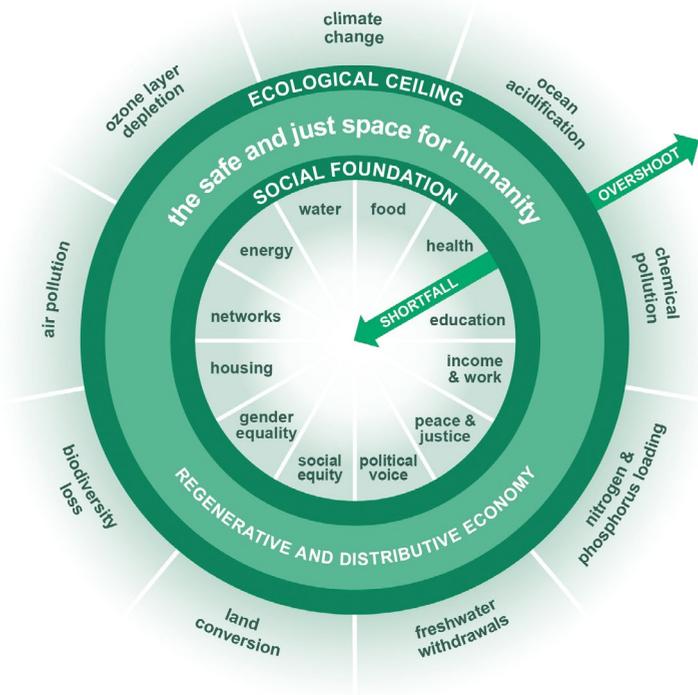
We have to build a socio-ecological economy that not only respects the boundaries of the planet, but also enables every person on earth to live a good life. Fortunately, several thinkers have developed inspiring proposals for such a new economy and the paths on how to get there. In his book *Prosperity without Growth*, Tim Jackson, for instance, argues for a shift away from a material understanding of progress which is aligned only with money or exchange value. Instead of reducing the fulfilment of our needs to instant consumption, we need a broader view of what it means that people can flourish, including the importance of relationships and communities. On a structural level, we need much more investments in infrastructures that enable a sustainable life, such as public transport and a renewable energy system.



As inspiring is Kate Raworth's *Doughnut Economy*. The title refers to a doughnut-shaped diagram that in one image integrates ecological limits and social goals of a socio-ecological economy.

The outer circle of the doughnut represents the limits of Earth's vital systems — the ecological ceiling that the human economy must not exceed. The inner circle stands for the social foundation of what the economy must provide for every person on earth.

In between the two circles lies the safe and just space for humanity, which we can only realise with an economy that is generative and distributive by design. Contrary to an extractive economy, this economy generates much more *goods* than just profit. Think about a farmer that, through his practices, enhances biodiversity and community life. Distributive by design starts with the question: who owns the wealth? The focus is no longer only on the redistribution of the value once produced, but about sharing from the start of the sources of wealth. And this not only includes money, but also about land, companies and the ability to create money. For instance, what about ownership of technology - who



The Doughnut: a twenty-first-century compass. Between its social foundations of human well-being and ecological ceiling of planetary pressure lies the safe and just space for humanity. Source: Raworth, K, 2017: 44.



will own the robots? Current positive examples include citizens-owned energy co-ops and community supported agriculture.

As I argued earlier (Holemans, 2013), this entails that the global economy becomes smaller and urban and regional economies develop themselves in an ecological way into social circular economies<sup>17</sup>. By this, we can change one of the great paradoxes of our economy. We have organised our economy on the basis of centralised production facilities, transporting worldwide what is heavy and carbon-intensive (think about the example of meat production). And the other hand, this system encloses what is light, especially ideas and knowledge. By reversing this logic – sharing ideas globally and producing more locally – we get the basis of a totally new economy. We then talk about *open innovation* and *knowledge sharing* at the global level in order to re-localise production. Companies are already exploring this new future. The Belgian manufacturer of ecological cleaning products Ecover started a project on the island Majorca to see how localised production for localised consumption, based on local materials and waste streams, is possible. The goal is to evolve in a global knowledge partner with a wide network of regional collaborators enabling distributed sustainable manufacturing.<sup>18</sup>

Gorz is one of the first thinkers to point out that the evolution of the means of production leads to capitalism undermining itself. The development of ‘high-tech’ artisans (3D printers) makes it possible to efficiently produce in *micro factories* on a local scale some items that people need. By connecting these micro factories worldwide in networks that share software and design, we do not need the classic production to make profits on the market anymore. We can now jointly determine what and how and for what purpose produce is needed locally. This new approach would reduce the need for transport, marketing and assembly, which would significantly reduce costs. Gorz calls this a ‘concrete utopia’: it builds on existing developments (such as the free open source software, automation that leads to lesser jobs) combined with an unconditional basic income that reflects the utopia of co-operative self-production at the local community level. Of course, this utopia will not be realised, but allow us to envisage a radical other world.

*By reversing this logic – sharing ideas globally and producing more locally – we get the basis of a totally new economy.*

Gorz’s ideas have been further developed by thinkers like Michel Bauwens and Yochai Benkler. Although they use many examples from the knowledge economy, their concepts like *commons-based peer production* provide us with a new form of production that

can enrich our economic model into a more hybrid one. It fits into the radical evolution that our society undergoes as a result of the latest wave of technological innovations. Like the previous innovations - think of steam or electricity - these information and communication technologies are disruptive: they distort social order, make new things possible, and get others down. To see how it works, consider my father’s encyclopaedia.

When I started high school, my father bought the *Standaard Encyclopaedia*, which consisted of twelve books in red leather. The encyclopaedia is a symbol of the post-war welfare state in which the middle class enjoys increasing purchasing power and education. Making an



encyclopaedia is the work of a select group of experts. You have the expensive commercial editions. In addition, there is the university for people who know their way there.

And then, now: a generation later, with my teenagers at home. The heavy encyclopaedia has been replaced by the light-weight iPod and every query is answered wirelessly five seconds later by Wikipedia. This encyclopaedia represents a completely different knowledge and production model, built from different social relationships. It is no longer compiled by a small group of experts, but through a large network of citizens. And they don't contribute for money or an academic title, but from intrinsic motivation. Everyone can contribute to Wikipedia; quality control happens afterwards by people who have the merits for it. This product is made by the contributions of equals or peer-to-peer (p2p).

For Bauwens, Wikipedia is a symbol for the transition to another world. According to him, it will grow into the form of cooperation and production of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And he sees examples in many domains, such as open source software (whose code is public). Also here, the p2p software Linux did not only compete against big companies like IBM. No; in a more fundamental way, it led to the situation where this kind of steering software is no longer a market product. Instead, it operates as a service provider; a platform for designing specific applications. But the source code of Linux remains accessible to everyone: it's an example of the new digital commons. And also in the area of commodity production, Bauwens sees the large vertical companies disappearing in favour of micro factories in networks.

To be sure, this is actually not the dominant trend, as, for instance, the latest UNCTAD report points to increasing market concentration and the return of the rentier. The same goes for the internet as a structure for decentralisation, as we develop further with Bauwens. Reality nowadays is that the internet allows for extreme centralisation (NSA, Silicon Valley, Platform capitalism, big data). So the perspective of Bauwens is a hopeful entry point for strategic intervention, without being naïve about the real danger of a merging of NSA-Silicon Valley; of concentrated political and economic power.

For Bauwens, the power of the Internet lies in the fact that it allows horizontal contact between users volunteering to communicate or interact. And "local" means "global" from now on, as well: local initiatives, such as urban agriculture, can work together in a global network and share knowledge gained... Here, you can scale up and replicate what was previously only possible in small groups. Thanks to the internet, sharing cars or bikes has become a piece of cake, just like reselling second-hand items.

One can see the model of commons based peer production as a building block of a new post-capitalist system. Bauwens outlines this new economic institution that should occupy a larger space in economic policy making, based on two layers. On the base layer, people contribute to certain commons (open source software or collective land, for example). Such commons are mostly connected with associations that have a social goal (a foundation or a non-profit organisation) and organisations that protect and manage the infrastructure of the commons. On the second layer, market players can use the commons to earn money through all kinds of complementary services, such as training, maintenance, customised software customisation, and so on. Whether these companies have to pay for commons use depends on their goals. Classic capitalist companies still have to pay. That's possible



with new forms of licenses that protect the created usage value. Enterprises focused on social goals, also described as ethical companies, can freely use the commons, provided they contribute to the management and expansion of the commons. For example, citizens can join together to establish their own organisations, such as cooperatives, which allows money to be earned for conserving the commons.

In the field of agriculture, successful projects can be found in Germany (Regionalwert AG), the United Kingdom (SA Land Trust), France (Terre de Liens) and Belgium (Terre-en Vue en *The Landmates*). They show how a coalition of environmental and organic farming actors, together with citizens, can develop an alternative production model. The current agricultural and food model makes both citizens and farmers impotent: the freedom of choice of the first group is limited to what is on supermarkets' shelves, and farmers are pawns on the chess board of global food companies – an oligopoly market situation. In the alternative system, customers and sympathisers buy farms together to ensure not only the financing, but also the continuity of the company. Thus, they take agricultural land out of the speculative economy and bring them into a collective property structure. They manage the land as a common good and ensure it is used as agricultural land for organic farming. This resonates with the critique of Polanyi of treating land as a fictitious commodity.

*The Landmates*, a foundation and a cooperative, is a good example of this new economy. The foundation monitors the vision, receives donations and makes available the acquired lands through the cooperative to the farmers. The cooperative acquires financial resources through the issue of shares. It also purchases agricultural land and provides contacts with users and farmers. But it is far more than an alternative financial institution. It is an agricultural model that is sustainable in all its aspects: ecological, social and economic. Ecological means an agro-ecological business with attention paid to a healthy soil; socially means producing for customers in their own region; economic means that a price that allows a fair profitability. In this view, agricultural land is held in common: the farmer shares their responsibility through support from a group of committed citizens, and receives compensation for ecosystem services (for example, biodiversity). The farmer works with shorter supply-chain sales, through subscription systems, self-harvesting, farm sales and farmers markets. In this system, the farmer determines more independently his price, the consumer plays a greater part in a local and sustainable food system. His freedom is no longer limited to the supermarket offer; he is assured of a local offer of sustainable food. The organic farmer pays the cooperative compensation for the land. This must eventually ensure the autonomy of the system.

*The Landmates* are a strong example of this kind of new collaboration model. Instead of accepting a globalised food system, controlled by a few big corporations and global competition, it is a building block at the meso-level of a new and resilient food system. It includes the duality of the outlined model: the foundation that monitors the vision and manages the commons, and the ethical enterprise (co-operative) that provides products, jobs and income from a sustainable perspective.

A world in which such enterprises, together with other innovations, grow into a real alternative system is a possibility, but is certainly not self-evident. Any technological



shock disrupts the established order and offers emancipatory possibilities to create more opportunities for more people. At the same time, the established order tries to master the same technology. The future is undecided and depends on a series of factors, including social struggles and power relations. The emancipation of citizens will depend on the extent to which they get hold of the digital world, as not every p2p system leads to a commons. On the contrary, examples like Facebook, Airbnb, Amazon, Google are hyper-capitalist. While the more than 1 billion members are enjoying themselves, and enjoy the use value they produce themselves (the holiday photo you just posted, working for free for multinationals), there is the small group of shareholders who get rich by exploiting the exchange value (selling your personal information to other companies). And, moreover, democratic principles don't play a part here as the code and the design of Facebook are strictly secret. Isn't it time for a call to action? The government can decide that it is an infrastructure of general interest, or users can organise themselves to take over Facebook.

The example of The Landmates qualifies the focus on the importance of new technologies. If we shouldn't underestimate their impact, it's not only knowledge workers who move stones in the river. The cooperative does not stand or fall with the internet. The internet makes it easy to crowdfund and enables a farmer to communicate with customers for free. And in other domains - think of the locally sustainable circular economy - the internet makes it easier to find information about how to repair some of your broken devices (but does not provide the physical place for this to take place collaboratively). In the end, it is always about the fruitful joining of technological and social innovations. The same goes for the digital platforms like Facebook, Uber or Airbnb. There is no necessity that these venture capital funded, profit-driven platforms dominate the new economy - they are not the only way to make use of digital technologies. In 2014, a new movement was established called Platform Cooperatism. They envision new forms of digital platforms that are part of the generative economy, with the financial and social value circulating among the users. A platform cooperative is a cooperatively-owned, democratically-governed business.<sup>19</sup> When, for instance, in Denver, Uber was introduced, a lot of car drivers lost their job. Instead of accepting a precarious 'job' as an Uber driver, they organised themselves successfully in an alternative digital platform *Union Taxi*.

As the founders of the new movement write in *Ours to Hack and to Own*: "... we are talking about shared governance and shared ownership of the Internet's levers of power - its platforms and protocols. /.../ Platform cooperativism ... requires a different kind of ecosystem - with appropriate forms of finance, law, policy, and culture - to support the development of democratic online enterprises. This means challenging the cooperative movement to meet the opportunities of the platform economy, and challenging the platform economy to overcome its obsession with short-term profit or the few." (Scholz & Schneider 2016:12).

## **5.8 Resilience as part of a new socio-ecological regulation**

It is a strange thing: although European states consider themselves as highly developed, civilised and smart, they were totally unprepared for the Covid-19 crisis. Blinded by neoliberal dogma's, the governments of France and Belgium, for instance, destroyed - in the years before the crisis - strategic stocks of masks. In the same vein, the European



Commission actively put pressure on Member States to privatise parts of their health systems and embrace austerity policies, thereby lowering spending on public services, such as the health sector. Such policies are all based on the belief that private companies and markets are the most efficient way to take care of societal challenges. One year later, however, we know better. In times of crisis, we need strong democracies and governments steering the economy, based on the principle that wellbeing comes before profit. The Covid-19 crisis has fundamentally questioned how society should be organised to ensure good health and wellbeing for all. Faced with a systemic shock, one of the guiding principles for recovery should be resilience. However, resilience in itself is a neutral concept; for instance, extractive capitalism has shown itself to be very resilient. Nevertheless, in the framework of socio-ecological policies, resilience can be used a crucial principle in making progressive policies more reliable and impactful in the long run.

As a starting point, we have realised that Covid-19 is a shock that we did not see coming, although it was, essentially, written in the stars. Many reports warned of it in the years before it struck. Research has linked new viruses to the destruction of natural areas, which, when combined with an economic model that depends on global trade and travel, are just two problematic aspects of today's world system.<sup>20</sup> Adding to this are negligent governments; according to the Belgian virologist, Johan Neyts, this pandemic could have been prevented had governments invested in antivirals ten years ago. The Covid-19 crisis is another strong reason why it is time for a paradigm shift: from a sleepwalking society, focused on profit, competition, and consumption, to a future-oriented one that prioritises investment, cooperation, and wellbeing. This transition is imperative in order to avoid what Naomi Klein describes as the “shock doctrine”<sup>21</sup>. As she has observed, free-market neoliberals are always ready to use disasters to strip the state and further to the benefit of their own interests. This, in turn, makes our societies even more vulnerable to shocks. In the knowledge that shocks still await us in terms of climate, biodiversity, and food supply, the concept of resilience can serve as a guiding principle, if embedded in an emancipatory frame. What defines resilience? A system is resilient if it continues to function after a shock. Moreover, a resilient system avoids shocks as far as possible.

Resilience is about more than simply being robust. It is about socio-ecological systems that are able to re-organise themselves without losing their function and structure. Although it's not often recognised, our global society is a socio-ecological system. As the Covid-19 crisis has shown, all human activity depends on and influences natural systems. In this sense, nature has become an actor. It can no longer be conceived of as a static backdrop or as a resource to exploit indefinitely. As French thinker Bruno Latour makes clear, nature and culture are intertwined and, thus, appreciating society's co-dependent relationship with nature is part of achieving a resilient society.

A resilient system is one that is able to transform itself when circumstances change to continue to provide necessary services. Think, for example, of a river valley: new reservoirs absorb increased rains in the winter to prevent flooding, while in drier summers, the same basins supply water for local food systems. Most importantly, a resilient system is one that anticipates proactively and does not resign itself to reacting to emerging events.



Resilience includes four components: short feedback loops, modularity, diversity, and social capital. The first term refers to how quickly we are confronted with the consequences of our actions. Long and slow feedback loops are a problem for both tackling climate change and the spread of new diseases. In both of these cases, the period between the causal action and the effects is relatively large. Many people rightly wonder why our societies can react decisively in response to the Covid-19 virus when we have failed to do so in the case of the climate crisis. The reality, however, is more complex. While we are reacting quickly to the health emergency, in essence, Covid-19 and the climate are consequences of the same economic system.

For both Covid-19 and climate change, the culprit is the growth-addicted economy that is penetrating deeper and deeper into nature to extract raw materials and to exploit land. Cutting down forests for industrialised agriculture reduces habitats for animals, forcing them to seek food in human settlements. Parallel to the destruction of their ecosystems, bats in Asia and Africa are increasingly coming into contact with people.<sup>22</sup> Bats carry many viruses, to which they themselves are resistant. When bats come under stress through habitat destruction, the viral load in their bodies increases and they become more contagious. In short, an economic system based on expansion and eco-colonialism has been destroying nature for decades. But only now, due to slow feedback loops around the planet, are its harsh effects on health and the climate becoming clear.

Modularity highlights another fundamental problem of our society. A modular system consists of several subsystems that are not overly interconnected so as to be sufficiently autonomous. An economy based on global production chains in the hands of multinationals is precisely the opposite. Many Western countries are no longer even capable of making protective masks. China currently makes about half of the world's masks: that is the opposite of modularity. Modularity implies that large quantities of masks should be produced in different, relatively separate places throughout the world. The US company 3M, known mainly for post-it notes but also as a large producer of masks, has already shown that this is possible. When the economy globalised, 3M did not close down its parent company in the United States but rather built additional factories in China and South Korea. Each factory has its own supply chain, and the parent company also manufactures the components needed for protective masks. And although the three production units prefer to deliver to the regions where they are located, they also operate on the global market.

Autonomous modules also help ensure sufficient stock, a critical weakness of neoliberal economies fixated on cost reduction and profit maximisation. Yesterday's warehouses have been replaced with trucks, planes, and container ships. This buffer-less economy is extremely vulnerable when transport stops or borders close. In the face of the current crisis, it is worth remembering that although countries such as Belgium and France used to have strategic supplies of face masks, they phased them out due to austerity policies. Increasing travel and transport also undermines modularity. If subsystems are too interconnected, a shock can easily travel through the entire system. A system with a high degree of modularity has more autonomous components, and a shock in one subsystem will do less damage to the others.<sup>23</sup> The value of developing more autonomous circular economies, then, shouldn't be underestimated.



The importance of diversity is known from agriculture: a farmer that only grows one crop is vulnerable to pests. The same logic can be applied to the economy: a single approach to wealth production – here, the neoliberal global market-based approach – represents a monoculture with all the risks that entails. More support to ethical enterprises, such as energy cooperatives<sup>24</sup> and self-harvest farms<sup>25</sup>, can make economic diversity possible.

During spring of 2020, many European governments found out what it means to depend on the global market. The Belgian government placed an order for protective masks but was forced to cancel it when suppliers pushed up the price. The Dutch government sent a large supply of masks back to China as the poor quality would have put health workers in danger. In the meantime, in Brussels and in many cities, citizens are launching local initiatives to make high-quality masks. FabLabs are producing plastic face shields, otherwise unavailable in the world market. In many cases, increasing diversity means mobilising flexible production capacity. New machines, such as 3D printers and powerful computers, make this much more achievable today than it was twenty years ago.

The last component - social capital - is often forgotten. It concerns the social networks in our society and resources they can produce. Social capital is now proving enormously important: think of lonely seniors or the homeless. It stands for practical help as well as for values such as solidarity and participation. It is precisely this social capital that has come under tremendous pressure in recent decades and it is now being rediscovered. The number of people that wanted to contribute during this Covid-19 crisis, as well as the range of initiatives, is overwhelming. In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service called for volunteers to help the country's 1.5 million vulnerable people with underlying health problems. Almost immediately, more than half a million people responded positively to the call; they deliver medicines to homes, take patients to medical appointments, or simply pick up the phone and give people a call to make sure they are OK. In Belgium, the Partago cooperative, a citizens' electric car-sharing platform, is working with Food Teams, an initiative that organises groups of citizens to buy healthy food from local farmers. Partago and Food Teams launched a successful crowdfunding campaign that encouraged people to donate a fully charged electric battery to the volunteers who bring local and fresh products, free of charge, to the homes of care providers and aid workers.

Building these dimensions of resilience requires more than just changes at the margins. Global warming is accelerating and biodiversity is in freefall. The Covid-19 crisis serves as a wake-up call that puts an end to the sleepwalking of our so-called smart countries. This requires changes in our countries, in Europe and on a global scale. According to economist Dani Rodrik, a fully globalised economy does not go hand-in-hand with democratic politics and national sovereignty. Four decades of neoliberal globalisation have stripped the nation state of its substance and neglected democratic politics. Rodrik proposes a turnaround: a new focus on democratic politics and sovereignty (the EU can partly take over the role of nations here) to achieve a partial and democratic deglobalisation. Deglobalisation does not have to stand in the way of the exchange of ideas and cooperation. Amid the ruins of war in 1944, the Allies concluded the Bretton Woods agreements to strictly regulate the world economy with a view to rapid reconstruction. Today's multiple crises of Covid-19, climate and biodiversity demand a socio-ecological regulation that can resurrect us from the ruins of neoliberal globalised capitalism. Securing a good life for all within planetary



boundaries is well overdue, and the concept of resilience can be a source of inspiration for establishing this new socio-ecological regulation.

## 6. A Good Life for All

### 6.1 Liberated time

A key aspect of the ecological view of our society is its criticism of productivism. It is impossible to keep the treadmill of increasing production and consumption going; burnout and overconsumption show that 'more' is no longer equal to 'better'. Harder wage labour and paid work to produce even more makes no sense. Due to automation, we produce more with less people, which is increasing structural unemployment. But that does not have to be the case. You can also take a positive view and say that not everyone should need to do paid work full time. There are so many meaningful and rewarding things to do – in the community, in the family, caring for one another or collectively shaping the neighbourhood and the world. Therefore, one can insist on radically reducing the normal time dedicated to wage labour or paid work.

Since we are dealing with system errors, the solution can only consist in a fundamental change (transformation) of the existing system. This means, among other things, a different view on work, beyond the dominance of paid work. 'Work' is not a synonym for a 'job', just as the 'right to a 'job'/'wage' is not the same as the 'right to an income'.

These questions become more relevant as the stable 40/40 job in a factory (40 hours a week for 40 years) is replaced by a labour market that is characterised by flexibility, one-day-contracts and zero-hour-contracts, discrete tasks on digital platforms, all leading to more precarious and insecure forms of work and thus livelihoods. At the same time, digitalisation and robotisation are replacing existing jobs in almost all domains of society. This implies that one of the important progressive proposals - a shorter working week and sharing of paid work (which we will elaborate on later) - should be broadened to issues such as decent work and the security of a decent life independent of one being currently active in the labour market.

In order to develop a really transformative answer, we distinguish with André Gorz three types of work. First of all, what we usually talk about: paid work or wage labour. We need to earn our living and therefore work for economic reasons. To be sure, this kind of work can be enriching and meaningful. Second, there is domestic labour and self-employment.

*These three types of work highlight that, from an ecologists' perspective, sharing work is not only necessary for compensating the jobs lost due to automation.*

This includes care work that allows us to live our lives, such as preparing food, bringing-up children, taking care of the sick and older



people, and so on. Women still take the biggest part of this, and much of this work is unpaid. The third form of work are autonomous activities. We perform them freely, as an end in itself. These are the activities we experience as enriching, sources of meaning and happiness: playing music, volunteering, self-manufacturing or repairing, and so on. These activities are also 'work'. They require effort and specific knowledge, as well as enough time. The same activity can be stressful and oppressive or gratifying, depending on whether you are stressed by a lack of time or can do it at your leisure, co-operating with others and sharing tasks on a voluntary basis.

These three types of work highlight that, from an ecologists' perspective, sharing work is not only necessary for compensating the jobs lost due to automation. By choosing radically to be paid for less hours *and* developing autonomous activities, we can ascribe meaning to the decline in hours of wage labour, such as due to technological developments. In this view, the progressive reduction of working hours could also be a prerequisite for the redistribution of wage labour among those who want to work, and a fairer redistribution of unpaid work in the private sphere so that women can acquire more autonomous time. Only then can we stop the growing division in society, both in terms of wealth, income and with a shrinking share of people with a good job and a growing number of people with precarious and temporary jobs.

This vision is in line with the triangle: the autonomous activities are of course at the top. The crucial concept in this regard is *liberated time*. To understand that, we examine our contemporary society. For families and those with a secure job and decent income it tends to follow a six-week rhythm. For example, after the year-end holidays, we go back to work full of courage, until we can relax with a skiing or hiking holiday in early Spring. Then after another six weeks at work (or school), we look forward to another break around Easter. Then another six weeks before a break at the end of May and then a summer holiday. The second half of the year is no different. This so called rat race of 'busy at work' is compensated and replicated in our so-called free time. Imagine a conversation with colleagues, indicating that you do not know the latest restaurant, never go on a city trip, etc. In this world view, which ascribes important value to our leisure choices, you're just a loser...

## **6.2 Robots creating our value**

Due to structural unemployment, coupled with the disappearance of jobs because of robotisation, work sharing in itself will not be enough to deliver a decent income to everyone. Automation creates a separation between the socially generated wealth and what people can gain from wage labour (as well as the income tax revenues that governments receive). It is one reason for the rise of a rentier-economy, based on private intellectual property rights and other concentrated rents (eg. real estate). Imagine a country where factories only run on robots: it can produce a lot of wealth, while no worker earns a wage. Of course, this extreme situation will never occur, but it makes the challenge clear.

The solution, therefore, in what could provide the basis of the 'security package of the 21<sup>st</sup> century', is a combination of work sharing and a Universal Basic Income. If the economy can no longer guarantee everyone a decent job, the challenge lies in stimulating work



outside of the capitalist economy that involves every person. Through automation, wage labour can no longer be the most important part of everyone's life - if this would be a thing we would wish for (of course, paid work stays important and should be fulfilling and give workers autonomy in the job). It is therefore important to support people in developing autonomous activities.

*The solution, therefore, in what could provide the basis of the 'security package of the 21<sup>st</sup> century', is a combination of work sharing and a Universal Basic Income.*

This can lead to a different construction of identity less based on wage labour and consumption. People are then part of a society based, more than today, on their autonomous activities than on consumption or work-related activities. We are talking about places and initiatives where people develop the ability to take responsibility for their own lives and our global as well as local environ-

ment. More time means more creativity and innovative ideas. This gives birth to a new version of emancipation which we describe as the third-order emancipation. It's about citizens who grew up in a time without the crushing connections of family, village or parish. They appreciate their *freedom*, but they feel and understand that there will be no bright future without joint actions aimed at new types of *certainty*. They realise that the consumer society will not provide this future, while faith in governments and the European Union is small.

A new goal could be about enriching our lives with activities that don't necessarily fit into the capitalist model of profit and growth; about cultivating our environment instead of filling it with more and more stuff. You can also call it the development of new cultural dreams. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the car was my freedom. Perhaps the bike will be a 21<sup>st</sup> century symbol of freedom - including the cycling kitchen, where you enjoy delicious soup from the nearby vegetable garden and learn to repair your bike. It may sound soft, but that was also car sharing ten years ago.

Of course, a paid job remains an important part of the lives of most people. Valuable jobs give people, in addition to income, satisfaction and meaningful social contacts. In short, it is about finding a good balance between the three forms of work. In the current situation, the autonomous activities still have some way to catch up. There is a strong socioeconomic gain possible, especially with initiatives that involve sharing goods.

### **6.3 Working differently for a better world**

People with higher incomes generally have a bigger ecological footprint. Imagine: after a stressful working day, you're in the supermarket with no energy left for conscious choices. So you take that ready-to-eat meal with ingredients of which you do not know the origin. And guess what: you're not alone. On the one hand, we see a lot of advertisements for superb kitchens, while on the other hand, the store shelves with microwave meals only increase. The same dilemma goes for transport: we want to take the bicycle, but if the car is on our door, an easy solution is tempting. And although there is an express train from



Brussels to Barcelona, the plane is more successful. As long as one type of work, paid work, dominates our life, ecologically-sensitive work for caring, the community and the environment, as well as eco-conscious consumption, remains secondary. This leads to social fragmentation and increased ecological footprint due to consumerism.

How many hours we work is clearly related to our environmental impact. An analysis in thirty OECD countries shows the connection between longer working days and higher environmental impact. Countries where people work longer hours have higher emissions and pollution levels. Where the annual number of hours of wage labour declines by ten percent (half a day a week), the CO<sub>2</sub> footprint decreases by fifteen percent. On the other hand, if we work more hours for a wage, we also produce more goods and services. They must then be promoted, sold and consumed, making the economic engine run faster, with a higher consumption of energy and raw materials as a result, and more waste and greenhouse gases.<sup>26</sup>

The solution is to go beyond consumerism by introducing *a new exchange between time and money*. The slogan 'money doesn't make you happy' has been scientifically substantiated. From a certain income level, the quality of life no longer rises. Countries like Costa Rica and Uruguay realise a high quality of life with a much lower average income (and associated environmental degradation) than in many Western European states. In addition to increasing energy and resource-efficiency, we must reduce the number of hours of wage labour by converting productivity growth in time rather than rents and money. During welfare capitalism, productivity growth resulted in higher profits and higher wages. During neoliberalism, productivity growth has mainly increased the salaries of the top-earner and rents of the wealthy. Soaring inequality was the result.

From this perspective, we advocate the 30-hour (paid) working week as the new normal, as promoted by feminist movements like Femma. The average female working week of today serves as a starting point: women rather work part-time so they can combine their job with the various care tasks. Femma emphasises that only a shorter paid work week allows a better combination of the roles in our lives: paid labour, volunteer work, care within and outside the family and self-development. It allows the paid work to be redistributed in such a way that as many people as possible work for a wage or self-employed and no one is overworked.

In our proposal, this radical reduction of working hours would not keep the same monthly wage. However, this need not impact people on low and modest incomes. Redistribution systems must ensure that social inequality decreases and everyone has a worthy income to live well. An important building block is the Universal Basic Income (UBI) as part of the new security package.



## 6.4 Security: more than a basic income

Many of the proponents of universal basic income (UBI) see it as the solution to all social problems. Opponents often contest their affordability as their main counter argument. Both groups are mistaken: the basic income is not a proposal to boost the current welfare state of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century social contract that we still need to develop. The UBI differs in three ways from in-work social assistance (e.g. the living wage) that we know it today. It is strictly individual, detached from other income and unconditional (it frees us from the demand of being available to the labour market). For Philippe Van Parijs, the basic argument for a basic income is not solidarity, but justice: it is a fair distribution of the wealth we have built up as a society throughout generations.

The UBI reinforces both freedom and security. It increases personal autonomy to choose freely which activities they want to do. For people with insecure or low income, a UBI means a safer feeling in uncertain times. It weaves protection and social innovation into a new form of social protection. In addition, a UBI answers the criticism Polanyi has on the commodification of labour: it is not just that people are completely dependent on the labour market of their livelihood. A UBI empowers people to negotiate in the labour market. Additionally, a UBI allows new start-up activities without making so much money out of them. Last but not least, a UBI disconnects income from a job. This is important in the light of the automation that threatens to make a lot of jobs unnecessary.

Replacing social security completely by a (high) UBI, as neoliberals suggest, is a bad idea: it would give up the social power relationships, built after decades of social struggle. You can be critical about unions, but they act as a guarantee for the social rights of employees. The basic income makes you dream... Imagine receiving 2000 euro every month in your bank account. In June 2016, the Swiss voted on it in a referendum, with a fifth of the votes in favour. Such a high amount is, in reality, unpayable. Two important questions arise. Firstly, is such a high amount necessary to ensure a good life for all? Secondly, does a simple amount of money connect with the goal of increasing people's capabilities? The answer is connected with what forms of support we provide in the lives of citizens. Let us take two examples.

Firstly, let's suppose we introduce a UBI of a 1000 euro per month tomorrow. The government claims that they can therefore invest less in certain sectors such as education. That may sound plausible, but a look at Great Britain shows us to what a neoliberal policy can lead to even without UBI. In the days when young David Cameron went to university, access to higher education was still free. In 1998, a subscription fee was introduced, which gradually rose to more than £9000. Who is the best off? The student who did not have to pay a registration fee, or the student who has to spend his whole UBI on his studies, while the government makes life more expensive in every domain? In short: when an UBI is introduced while public services are being reduced and basic services become more expensive, you could lose more than you gain. In fact, your UBI will serve as a way to pay off your study loan for years. That's something that the banks will find great. And this is the reason why we should be very cautious about neoliberal proposals for a UBI that will only result in more inequality and fragmentation.



How much should a monthly basic income be? History teaches us that the most difficult step of a social or fiscal measure is the introduction of the principle. Once introduced, you can gradually increase the amount. That is a plea for a seemingly low amount – but overall, it is a huge sum, since every adult would be entitled to some. To be clear, we propose a UBI of 500 euros per month for a country like Belgium, while maintaining social security (additional sickness and unemployment benefits, etc.). This we expand into a future-oriented security package with two additional building blocks. These are necessary, because an amount of money does not say much about crucial emancipatory possibilities such as education or health care.

In our knowledge society, education is the engine or threshold for emancipation. With a UBI of 500 euros a month, you can pay your registration fee and your courses in Belgium as a student. But if the introduction goes together with the commodification of education, then UBI empowers you very little. And education is much more than university. Research emphasises the crucial importance of good childcare, especially for children from disadvantaged groups. A society that wants to guarantee its members the greatest chance of self-development offers the assurance of emancipatory and free education and childcare.

The final addition to guarantee is affordable access to quality healthcare, with free basic care. Without this provision, a very existential form of uncertainty returns: the idea that society will not care for you when you become ill. No unnecessary luxury in times when governments obsessed with austerity are targeting social security especially.

Why this amount of 500 euros per month for a country like Belgium? It covers around a quarter of a low to average income. This amount compensates for the wage loss that arises from the transition to a 30-hour working week, with the lowest incomes being sure to advance. In France, studies have shown that a similar UBI can lead to a clear improvement in the lowest incomes in the country, without additional costs and maintaining the most important social services.

The latter is very important. You don't help people in poverty with money alone. If you raise their current living wage significantly but reduce social protection, many would be worse off. This is because it is also about psychological assistance, dealing with addiction issues, debt mediation, training to find a job, cultural participation, and more.

The UBI could consist of both a national and a European element. This also fits with the construction of a future-oriented social security system that transcends the nation-state. The first element could be the European dividend. This would provide every resident of the European Union with a monthly income of 200 euros. This amount may vary according to the purchasing power of the various countries - in Belgium, for example, 250 euros a month and in Romania, 150 a month. There are legitimate reasons for this dividend. The first relates to the euro zone. From the start, economists have stated that a monetary union without fiscal solidarity is unstable. The dividend also increases the life chances of people living in poorer, peripheral parts of Europe. This will reduce the economic reasons for migrating to the richer parts. Finally, the European Union currently lacks the necessary legitimacy with its population. If the Europe Union wants to support a caring Europe, then social policy is needed. This European dividend would support national social security



systems. If a country pays a living wage of 800 euros, then the 200 euros UBI would be financed from Europe (it's not on top of it).

The second element - in this case, for an amount of 250 euros - is funded nationally. That remains a considerable amount, but it is feasible, as it is part of existing social benefits, co-financed by higher incomes (by changing the tax system).

## **6.5 Robots instead of jobs?**

You can read both utopian messages and predictions of doom about robotisation. For example, robots could take over half of our jobs. This prospect is a strong argument for both a shorter work week and an UBI. If robots take over the work, we still produce wealth but we can no longer redistribute it through paid work. As jobs disappear, it is useful to divide the remaining jobs across as many people as possible.

But is this extreme scenario realistic? Automation waves have certainly destroyed jobs in the past - just think of the automotive industry. However, by evolving from a production to a service society, many new jobs were also created. In most industrialised countries, relatively few people earn their bread in producing cars, but most can still buy a car. This example shows, however, that automation can disturb the labour market by reducing the availability of certain types of jobs. Since the 1970s, we have seen a sharp decline in the number of decent jobs for low-skilled people. It is not surprising that many of them consider themselves the losers of globalisation and recognise themselves as no longer represented by traditional political parties. To stay with the above example, car sharing is growing rapidly, which brings about changes and possibilities. What if, for example, more and more people do not buy a car and spend the money saved in this way in the local economy, such as to maintain their garden or have their house painted? This small example shows that the evolution of a more collaborative economy does not have to benefit only highly skilled people, especially if we shift the tax burden on labour to capital and environmental taxes.

But to be sure, digitisation and robotisation will make jobs disappear. At the same time, there is a lot of work to do to make our society future-proof. Could robots make houses energy efficient by isolating roofs and facades? Could they come to place photovoltaic panels on our roofs? The same goes for disassembling or refurbishing stuff in the circular economy that we are aiming for. And will we ever go to the local farmers market to make a nice chat with a robot? Human contact is also an undeniable factor in commercial actions.

Instead of looking at the possible effects of robotisation, we better turn things upside down. The shift to a socio-ecological society offers a lot of opportunities to create new jobs, including for low-skilled and technically skilled people. At the same time, much more attention is needed for the quality of jobs and for the maintenance of decent work. This deals with what follows as another important part of a security package, as it was already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and must remain in the future.



## 6.6 Insecure jobs: flexibility and digitalisation

In the post-war period of economic growth and strong regulation, western societies succeeded in providing most workers with secure jobs, working full-time for one employer with predictable hours, wages and benefits. This has changed radically since the 1970s. Workers themselves are more eager to change for a new, exciting job, even when they have to leave behind a stable position. At the same time, governments have, in varying degrees, deregulated the labour market, allowing much more flexibility for employers. At the same time, globalisation has also increased competition with international production chains; together with new information and communication technologies, companies can now, more than ever, move production lines from one country to another and outsource more tasks worldwide.

While for some types of workers this has created new opportunities, at the same time, a growing number of people are now working in precarious jobs in Europe, similar to the longstanding situation across much of the rest of the world. More and more people in Europe now have temporary jobs, zero-hours contracts or badly paid jobs, so Europe now also sadly has an increasing number of working poor (people not able to live in a decent way with one job).

It is in this context that automation not only creates new possibilities but also threatens to create a lot more precarious and insecure jobs. As a lucid observer of the unions' states: *"Insecure work has become a way of life for too many people. Abuse of agency contracts has become a business model that thrives shareholders profits, while the gig and platform economy brings new technology to the age old problem of bad employers seeking to avoid their responsibilities to and rights for the workers."*

New technologies alter, in a radical manner, the way labour is organised and regulated. The new growing class of digital workers are less and less employed by a company in a full time and stable position. More and more companies don't look for workers but for *clickworkers*, which means workers compete on the internet on a worldwide basis for (small) assignments. This reduces the reach of regulations on working hours, minimum wages, sick leave, pensions, etc. It is one of the drivers eroding the middle class. This is also connected with the fact that due to digitalisation and automation, we see the emergence of global companies striving for monopoly positions and achieving huge turn-overs with relatively few employees. Some of these (Uber, Airbnb) deliberately negate national regulation and use all means to avoid paying taxes and thereby eroding the financial basis of national social security systems. This evolution leads in turn to a growing mistrust by the population of its own government.

This brings us back to the beginning of this essay with the example of the Deliveroo workers – or are they the new digital slaves? Each year, more and more consumers make use of digital platforms like Uber, Clickworker and Taskrabbit while the amount of people trying to make a living out them also raises fast. But compare an Uber driver with a cab driver as employee of a regular company: he has to use his own car, pay his own insurance, has no guarantee for work, doesn't know his 'colleagues' or have any knowledge of possible clients. He's an example of the transition of a solidary workforce to a solitary digital la-



*The concepts of social-ecological transformation and industrial revolution allow us to capture the radical societal challenges we are heading for.*

bourer. Jobs in many sectors are (or could be) broken down into small tasks and assigned to the lowest bidder, who then will be seen as self-employed with few rights and even less security or stability.

This brings us back to a core element of this essay: the Polanyi perspectives on *Great Transformations*. Disruptive technologies not only change the way we produce things, but also lead to radical changes in the labour market, the availability and the organisation of work and *question the existing regime of our national welfare states with a social security system built on full employment in stable and localised jobs*.

The concepts of social-ecological transformation and industrial revolution allow us to capture the radical societal challenges we are heading for. We will have to adapt our economy, our labour market and welfare state to the changing and dynamic world economy.

An industrial revolution allows market forces - using new technologies but also power relationships related to new modes of production - to free themselves from existing regulations and disrupt the fundamental social ties. This first disrupting movement always triggers a second movement: people and organisations wanting to protect the social fabric, giving counter weight to the market forces, developing new ways to regulate them. The task is now again to develop a democratic answer that can prevail. For this, we have to create new forms of security by developing new, strong forms of democratic regulation, with the aim of re-embedding the new industrial economy in a democratic society.

*How can we create a democratic answer to these challenges?* What new forms of regulation can embed the new economy? It is clear that the European Union is the scale at which most of the new regulation has to be developed, in dialogue with national governments. We need new policies and regulation of the labour market, fiscal policy and innovative social security. This is also connected with the importance of caring work and new forms of autonomous work (or, in other words: decommodification and less consumerism). We have already developed some of these building blocks: a shorter working week, a universal basic income, quality education for all citizens and affordable health care. We should now ensure the protection and well-being of people working in the gig and platform economy, as well as in other, already extremely deregulated sectors.

After an initial period of being overwhelmed by extremely rapid changes, Uber only offered its first services in 2010, and scholars, unions and progressive politicians are now analysing its effects and building elements of an adequate policy response. The challenge here is not to combat but to master these technological developments and work towards a sustainable society with decent jobs. What does a regulatory framework look like that is able to guarantee basic social rights to platform workers? In a recent article, researchers listed major challenges faced by platform workers as: "...low rates of pay, lack of work and a race to the bottom in the case of low-skilled virtual work." How can workers fight for their rights when employers (or digital platforms) can simply choose not to offer them any tasks or hours next week?



In December 2016, a network of European and North American unions, labour confederations and worker organisations came together and issued a call for transnational cooperation between workers, workers organisations, platform clients, platform operators and regulators to ensure fair working conditions and worker participation in governance of the growing world of digital labour platforms. In their so-called ‘Frankfurt Declaration on Platform-Based Work’, they stated that, “*Business, workers, and regulators have a common interest in ensuring that the benefits of digitalisation are shared broadly and equitably – and worker participation in the governance of work is a historically proven mechanism for doing so.*” Half a year later, a ‘Manifest to Reform the Gig Economy’ was published by scholars. The authors correctly stated that the debate on the platform economy is intimately connected with the issue of creating quality jobs. Much of the competitive advantage of new platform (app) players derive from the fact that they are not willing to comply with labour and social security regulations (e.g. underpaying, no minimum wage etc.).<sup>27</sup>

As we are in a transition period, we cannot yet produce an exhaustive new regulatory framework. But different studies and declarations all point to the same points of concern that have to be dealt with.<sup>28</sup> We see six important issues, as follows:

- 1. Transparency of platforms.** How can we accept as a democracy that companies, presenting themselves as ‘just a digital platform’, work in full secrecy? If the *data on digital workers* would be shared with labour inspectorates, workers and trade unions, this could allow the enforcement of labour laws. And if companies as Airbnb are obliged to be transparent, governments could ensure that they are paying the right amount of tax.
- 2.** The question of some sort of **minimum wage policy**. Can we accept that people accept tasks from a digital platform for any sort of amount? Doesn’t this lead to a race to the bottom, with people competing for some tasks with workers from all over the world, working for less than one euro an hour, without any social security?
- 3. Clarify the employment status of platform-based workers** and let regulators adapt the regulatory framework pertaining to workers’ rights. Are platform workers in an employment relationship with the digital platform? If this is not the case do they form a third form (next to self-employed?). How can we give them significantly **more power to negotiate** the conditions of service with clients?
- 4. Ensure that platform-based workers have access to social protection** regardless of employment status. This should include unemployment insurance, health insurance, pension and compensation in the event of work-related illness or injury. What happens, for instance, when a student, working for Deliveroo, has a serious traffic accident on their bike and it is disabled for the rest of their life?
- 5. The distribution of the risk of a lack of available work.** What if, for instance, after months of high activity, Uber doesn’t offer a job anymore to certain drivers? A possibility could be to require these digital platforms to offer an insurance option. This question of insecurity of work also relates to developments in other sectors, such as so-called zero hour contracts (ZHC), with workers having a contract and thus an obligation to go to work, if and only if, the employer gives them work.
- 6.** Workers must be given an opportunity to **defend their interests**, have the right to organise and negotiate collective agreements with platform operators and/or clients (if possible, in collaboration with the trade unions).



This list is of course not exhaustive, but already contains the components of a new social contract for the digital era, along with other sectors subject to extreme deregulation. For instance, in 2016, New Zealand banned ZHC's and, at the same, extended paid parental leave and introduced tougher sanctions for employers who breach minimum employment standards.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, the European Union has developed a 'European Agenda for the collaborative economy'. In June 2017, the European Parliament adopted a resolution demanding that an EU regulatory framework is developed, guaranteeing a high degree of consumer protections while, at the same time, insisting on tax compliance and workers' rights. The resolution underlines the paramount importance of safeguarding workers' rights in the collaborative services: '*First and foremost, the right of workers to organise, the right of collective bargaining and action, in line with national law and practice*'. It called on the Commission to fill regulatory gaps in the area of employment and social security. Although a resolution is far from a binding regulation, it is an important first step, but the text of the resolution still rests on the premise that enhanced competition leads to a better society, thus neglecting the fact that stimulating cooperation could be a far better option. This is the goal of the new *Platform Cooperativism Movement* (e.g. stimulating cab drivers to set up their own digital platform, organised as a cooperative).

## **6.7 A new security package for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Real security can only arise from the great process of transformation into a socio-ecological society. Robots will not perform this big change for us. This can only be the result of a conscious political project actively engaging many people. People who live in uncertainty may just choose not to participate. Therefore, we have identified a new structural framework that provides people with freedom and security. The 30-hour working week relieves people of excessive workloads. The UBI could replace the complicated systems of time credit and care leave, which are often conditional. This would be a fairer system because it is also available to people who are not active in the labour market. Thus, it creates autonomous time for everyone, opening up the possibilities for self-development and community-led initiatives. Therefore, it provides space to create different futures, together with others, while reducing the degree to which every initiative needs to be financially profitable.

*The outlook presented here fits in with the concept of revolutionary reformism: different system changes that reinforce and accelerate each other.*

The outlook presented here fits in with the concept of revolutionary reformism: different system changes that reinforce and accelerate each other. If we feel better at work, and we can combine our job without stress with family life, and still have the space and time to partic-

ipate in civic initiatives together. Because such activities provide fun and make sense, they make our identity less dependent on production and consumption. If sharing initiatives allow us to do more with less purchasing power, an existence comes in sight with a better quality of life, richer social life and smaller ecological footprint.



## 7. Conclusion: Europe, the new box of freedom and security

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Is a new period of freedom and security wishful thinking, a fascinating possibility or a feasible utopia that could orient Green politics? Are citizens busy building a new era? Is it not totally naive or reckless to depend on citizens, ourselves, now that governments and big companies have failed to deliver a sustainable future?

To put it frankly: there is no other choice. Impressive hopeful societal changes come from civic engagement. The Berlin Wall didn't fall after long discussions between diplomats or politicians. The welfare state was established after social movements were active over many decades. Of course, politics does matter and was necessary to reunite Germany and to introduce laws and institutions that made social security a reality for all citizens. It is time for a third period. In the first, post-war visionary governments realised the biggest increase in social equality ever in modern capitalist market economies. They created a mountain of security and freedom. During the second period (again, over three decades), governments promised that a market society would lead to a better society for everybody. This neoliberal dream ended as a nightmare for many with the biggest financial-economic crisis since the 1930's and rising insecurity. Since then, we have maintained a throw-away economy by rebuilding massive debts and continuing business as usual: whether it's the government, companies or families. Both periods were characterised by the denial of ecological limits, which has brought us to the limit of climate disruption.

It is clear that if progressive political narratives don't resonate anymore with the population, conservatives will use any means to make their regressive stories popular. This is utterly clear for the European Union and a lot of its Member States. Therefore, left-progressive politicians still have to keep up with speaking about freedom, while also explicitly linking it with security. The key lesson from the 1930s, which inspired "Fascism – never again", is that no real freedom is built on the quicksand of insecurity, unsafety and uncertainty.

We need a new vision in politics, where the government considers itself as a partner of citizens and its associations and takes seriously the concerns of every citizen. A democratic state of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that steers a mixed economy, regulates markets properly and gives incentives to alternative economic institutions, like the commons and cooperatives. This is not a plea against the market – which is older than democracy – but against market fundamentalism and the abandoning of an economic constitution of a mixed economy which limits the market logic to where it is useful and necessary. And only there.

*We need a new vision in politics, where the government considers itself as a partner of citizens and its associations and takes seriously the concerns of every citizen.*

We have described Europe as a house without a roof. Nobody wants to live in such a place. The European Union perhaps has one last opportunity to win back the minds and the hearts of



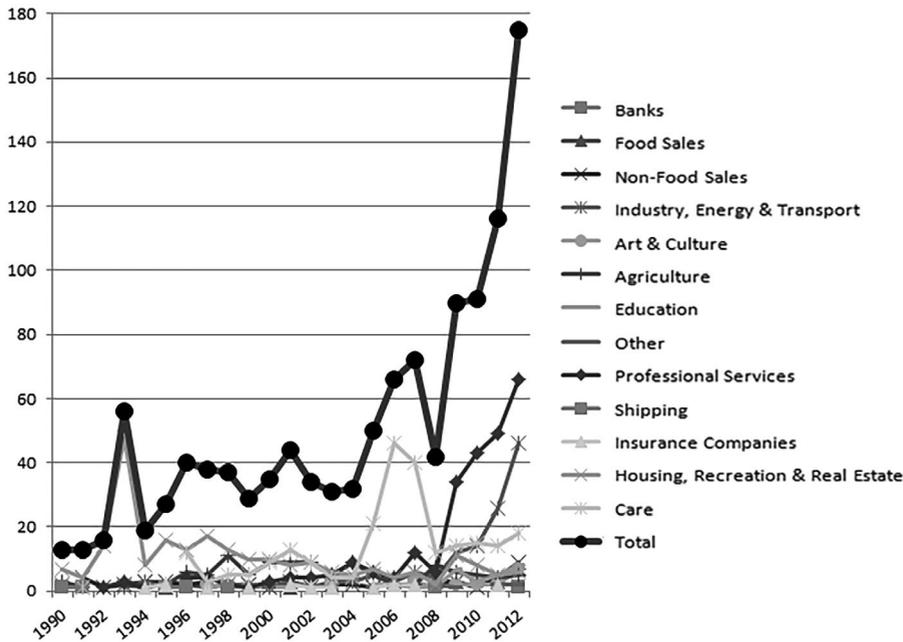
the people. We need a hopeful scenario of a Europe that strengthens citizens' rights instead of serving big businesses so often (e.g. the Dieselgate scandal, Monsanto and Glyphosate...). We can and must be critical of the European Union. It is a fact that the EU is, by its treaties, 'market' and not 'society' based. This also means that from a legal point of view, there is space to change the treaties to politicise the EU. Instead of a market-oriented Union, we can make it oriented towards a good life for all. Besides, we should not forget that the EU – in contrast with, for instance, the WTO or International Labour Organisation – is the only integrated international organisation: it can deal with several policy domains at the same time. So, you can develop coherence between these policy fields – think, for instance, about policies that combine social justice and climate policy. With such a comprehensive agenda, the EU also has the competencies to regulate the market, including multinationals that, in monetary terms, are bigger than certain EU Member States. This also goes for the fiscal policy. Information from Luxleaks, Panama Papers, etc. show that big companies not only fuel the race to the bottom between EU Member states for lowering their corporate income tax, but it puts them also into competition for not-so-legal tax avoidance schemes and encourages the use of tax havens. Only the European Union can foster fiscal cooperation instead of competition and make a fist against big companies. For example, the European Commission ruled in 2016 that Apple has to pay Ireland unpaid taxes of up to 13 billion euros. As Oxfam writes in a recent paper, *"...corporate tax rates need to be set at a level that is fair, progressive and contributes to the collective good. This should include consideration of how to ensure that all countries are able to deliver their commitments under the SDGs, reduce their dependency on regressive taxation, and effectively set public spending – thereby helping to close the inequality gap."*<sup>30</sup>

In the last year, the European Commission has understood that technocratic reforms won't suffice. The presentation by the Commission in 2017 of its proposal for a European Pillar of Social Rights and Work-Life Balance was a positive shift. It contains twenty principles that better balances employment and social rights, including on wages, minimum income, housing and care. It included a new social scoreboard to indicate the relative progress of different Member States. However, it lacked proposals (and thus public money) for new instruments, such as on a minimum wage, and the consultation was limited to people with paid work.<sup>31</sup> This proposal is still far from a new kind of Treaty of Maastricht that introduces binding norms on the social level (next to the 'euro convergence criteria'). Imagine a Treaty that, next to the obligation of a maximum state debt-to-GDP ratio of 60%, introduces a minimum wage of 60% of the average national wage for all workers. Imagine that it puts, next to the fixed maximum of 3% government budget deficit, a maximum national poverty rate of maximum 3%. These 'social convergence criteria' would win the hearts of the European demos. Meanwhile, four years after the presentation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Commission is finally working on a concrete Action Plan to implement it. As an example of a slow but progressive insight, the new goal is to use the EU Social Pillar as a key element for ensuring a fair and inclusive climate transition. But it still remains to be seen how ambitious the Commission really is in building a social roof for all European inhabitants.

It is also clear that the EU institutions don't notice the growing counter-current of active citizens and progressive cities. Slowly but surely, there is a new range of autonomous activities that together form a transformational movement towards a socio-ecological



society. It is important to note that we are not only talking about small or isolated projects. Take, for instance, the 20 majestic wind turbines at the coastline of Copenhagen. This project was started by a group of habitants of the city who developed the idea and went with it to their Minister of Energy. Instead of refusing or taking it over, the government decided to start a co-creation process. Civil servants give technical and judicial advice. Half of the shares were owned by a citizens' co-op, after completion, thousands of families every year receive a financial dividend. Similarly, following the Energiewende in Germany, half of the renewable energy installations are owned by citizens and their co-ops. Even in smaller towns, governments support the local population in setting up renewable energy projects. This adds up to really big business. So, citizens and local governments really can make a difference, and build together the counter current.



Evolution of the number of new cooperatives per sector from 1990 to 2012.

Source: De Moor T, 2013: 11.

We can put this growing counter current into a historical perspective. Professor Tine De Moor speaks of a third wave of citizens' initiatives or commons, after the first in the Middle Ages and the second during the Industrial Revolution. This is no small comparison. But research in the Netherlands shows an impressive growth of citizen initiatives in very diverse domains since 2004, which clearly exposes a neo-liberal policy that is cutting public services.<sup>32</sup>

A first exploratory research in Flanders and Brussels shows a significant increase in citizens' initiatives across the agriculture, housing and energy sectors, with a significant increase since 2009; coincidentally, when the economic crisis had the most impact. The following graph shows a continued increase in citizens' initiatives. It could be the start of



a new mountain of freedom and security, especially if we set this rise next to the similar growth of initiatives in other European countries.

But naivety is out of the question. Even though there are a lot of new initiatives and their number is increasing in an amazing way, they remain fragmented and, even in the same city, connect too little with each other. The same goes for cities: some are members of a lot of networks, but often these are more focused on knowledge exchange than on mutualising their strengths to fight for a sustainable future.

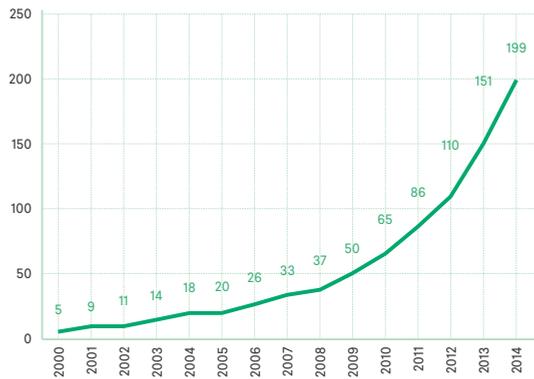
A powerful change model, revolutionary reformism, requires the construction of new networks, associations and coalitions that are capable of building power. Power is not a dirty word; it is about the ability to change to world. We don't need new institutions gaining power over people; the goal is to empower people. These new emancipatory structures should develop new forms of regulation and cooperation, not least in the field of economic production. These synergistic collaborations should enable, for instance, the (r)evolution from a few fab-labs in a city to real fab-cities worldwide; from repair cafes to regional circular economies.

The good news is that the prototypes of this new model of change already are developing. For example, consider the initiative Fab City, a new urban model for self-sufficient cities. This project, initiated by institutes in Spain and the US, involves cities such as Barcelona, Kerala and Shenzhen. Fab City aims to empower citizens with micro factories in every neighborhood, which allows for drastically reducing energy consumption and the transportation of materials and goods. By 2054, the goal is to develop locally productive and globally connected self-sufficient cities. Hence, cities produce everything they consume; with a global repository of open source designs for city solutions.

We could add more examples to this list of hopeful prototypes for a new politics. Consider, for example, how the Covid-19 crisis, with many people now working from home, travelling less and rediscovering the importance of local facilities, has boosted initiatives in the field of short-chain agriculture and food communities: garden gardens, community supported agriculture, food cooperatives, and so on... In many cities, local governments are supporting these initiatives in many ways. It shows that citizens are rediscovering that the 'freedom of choice' between different products of the same agro-business on the shelves of supermarkets is fundamentally different from the real freedom that allows to choose for and reinforce system change. That citizens need both freedom and security is, for instance, also clearly understood by the network of Fearless Cities. They are standing up worldwide to defend human rights, democracy and the common good. It is a clear answer to the populist politicians that use fear as their trademark. At the Fearless Cities conference in Barcelona, hundreds of city councils and activists came together to discuss the fruitful interaction between local policies and activism.

The European Union, if it wants to become an empowering institution, fostering its political community, should develop new innovative instruments focused at the local level. Would it, just to give two examples, not be great if the European Union first complemented Erasmus, the student-exchange program, with a program of transformation grants. This would allow young 'civic entrepreneurs' to develop transformative projects in their community,





Cumulative evolution of the number of new citizens' initiatives in Flanders/  
Brussels, 2000-2014. Source: Noy F. & Holemans D, 2016:80

or develop the experience abroad in already existing projects. And second, instead of subsidising big banks through its monetary policy, the EU could support the establishment of city incubator centers for new economic institutions, such as commons and open cooperatives.

To be sure, nobody can predict the global impact of the growing tissue of citizens' initiatives and progressive cities. We don't have a guarantee for success, as this is the core of human freedom. The future is unpredictable, but this should never stop us from taking the future into our own hands.



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# Notes

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17. A circular economy in itself is neutral towards social goals and the quest for a better life. This perspective should not be mistaken for a naive argument for 'everything local'. The smart way is to think in different scales: there will still be global trade, high tech companies developing, for instance, satellite technology will still work in a global market.
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# Description of partner organisations



## Green European Foundation (GEF)

The Green European Foundation is a European level political foundation. It is linked to, but independent of, other European Green actors such as the European Green Party and the Green Group in the European Parliament. Modelled on many successful national green political foundations, GEF works to encourage European citizens to participate in European political discussions and to ultimately forge a stronger, more participative European democracy. The primary source of GEF's funding is the European Parliament. GEF strives to mainstream discussions on European policies and politics both within and beyond the Green political family. The foundation acts as a laboratory for new ideas, offers cross-border political education and a platform for cooperation and exchange at the European level. [www.gef.eu](http://www.gef.eu), [www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu](http://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu)



## Oikos Denktank

Oikos is a Flemish think tank that strives for social-ecological change by contributing to public debate from an ecological perspective. Oikos focuses on long term challenges that are discussed too little in the social debate, but which are crucial for the future of our society and coming generations. Oikos wants to provide an inspiring framework for positive practices. In Oikos' seminars, lectures, publications and opinion pieces, the different dimensions of this aspiration to change are deliberated: the underlying ethics, the analysis of the current situation and the development of alternatives, together with concrete strategies to get there. [www.oikos.be](http://www.oikos.be)



## Grüne Bildungswerkstatt (GBW)

The Austrian Green Foundation (GBW) works in four areas: education, media, event organisation and archives. Through its work, the GBW supports Green and Green-related people and organisations with the goal of stimulating a “learning to learn” process for a radically changing world. This process is inspired by a reflection on controversial positions, linking substantive issues with creative methodological approaches, as well as imparting skills and abilities that are important for shaping the future. As a national organisation, GBW works in close contact with the regional Green Foundations of Austria. Since early 2020, the Austrian Green Foundation is called FREDA - Die Akademie. <https://freda.at/>



## Ökopolisz Alapítvány / Ecopolis Foundation Hungary

Ecopolis was founded by the Hungarian Green political party LMP (Politics Can be Different) in 2010. The Foundation is an autonomous and independent legal entity



whose mission is to function as a background institution for its parent party, LMP. The aim of Ecopolis is to explore the eco-political ideas and approaches of the party, in dialogue with important public figures who share the party's views. Furthermore, the organisation aims to generate an open society, increase the number of party sympathisers and enlarge the party's potential voter base, while promoting the existence of a social and economic structure based on civil participation and the principles of sustainability and justice.

<http://okopoliszalapitvany.hu/hu>



### **Green House Think Tank**

The Green House think tank was founded in 2011. Its primary aim is to advance education and undertake research in the politics and economics of ecological sustainability. It does so primarily by publishing reports on relevant topics, and also by holding events, running a website including shorter pieces on topical subjects, intervening in media debates and maintaining a supporters' network.

<http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/>



### **Institute for Political Ecology (IPE)**

The Institute for Political Ecology is a research and educational organisation in Zagreb (Croatia) which aspires to shape alternative development models and innovative democratic solutions for political and economic transformations of society. IPE conducts transdisciplinary research and educational programmes in collaboration with local and international organisations and institutions. Based on this, IPE ensures an expert analysis and a platform for discussion for social movements, political and economic actors which represent an ecologically sustainable, fair and democratic society of Croatia and beyond. <http://ipe.hr/>



### **Green Foundation Ireland**

The Green Foundation Ireland was formally established in 2011 as a forum for research and influencing public opinion. It seeks to identify additional means of engaging the public in environment discourse.

<https://www.greenfoundationireland.ie/>



### **Green Institute Greece**

Green Institute, Greece is a non-governmental, not-for-profit scientific Foundation, active since March 2011. It aims at the study, analysis and dissemination of all aspects of ecological thinking and political ecology. The Institute was created after an initiative undertaken by the Green Political Party "Oikologoi Prasinoi" (Ecologists Greens) of Greece. Although they are affiliated to the Green Party, they do preserve an independent character. They work to promote research and documentation on environment, society, economy and politics from the perspective of political ecology.

<http://www.greeninstitute.gr/>











STUDY & DEBATE

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