

POLITICS AND SURVIVAL

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Preface

Most of the writing of this essay was undertaken in 2013-15. The outcomes of the United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Paris in December 2015 do not diminish the relevance of the issues raised here.

By no means is this a completed work; rather, it maps out a terrain of issues for further study. It's a mud map, in other words, a sketch done with a broad brush. In an age of specialists, this is a risky undertaking. The devil is in the detail, as we all know. Yet the subject, politics and survival, demands nothing less than a multidisciplinary approach. The human world that has emerged in the last two and a half centuries, what we call 'the modern world', has transformed every aspect of human life. Now that many of us are worried about where the modern world is taking us, a myopic or narrow vision won't do. We have to grasp that trajectory, in all its aspects, to know how to stop it, if that's what we want to do.

This is an unpublished paper and has not been subjected to peer review. My aim in presenting it here is to show readers of my published papers a bit more about 'where I am coming from'.

Introduction

Homo sapiens can no longer, we are warned, take it for granted that it lives on a planet that will support living things, including human beings, for many more centuries, or perhaps even many more decades. The doomsayers who warn us of this are scientists and people who reflect on the findings of science, on its implications for humanity. They say that in these early years of the twenty-first century we are at the beginning of our 'last century', the beginning of a 'long emergency', and at the dawn of a 'coming famine' or an 'age of consequences' ranging from 'severe to catastrophic'. War, disease and famine, those old companions of humankind, are returning to our side once more, or so we are told. It is strange to hear such prophecies from people who played a large part in bringing us the modern world, with its machines and technologies, medicines and food, organisations and governments and, for a long time, its belief in the possibility of endless progress towards a better life for all humanity. So strange, perhaps, that few people seem to believe them.

It has been a quarter of a century since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published its first assessment report on climate change in 1990. Little has been done to address the issue or other environmental issues. Global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. Cars continue to dominate transport in the cities of the world, natural resources are depleted at ever faster rates, the rubbish tips of the world continue to grow. Soils, water, the air and the oceans continue to be polluted and degraded. In the suburbs of Australian cities, one still hears the sound of lawnmowers and other gardening tools running on fossil fuels and people think that composting food scraps is 'dirty'. Dog- and cat-lovers abound. Schools are forced to teach children about 'ecological sustainability', while the parents of these children drop them off at school in four-wheel drives. And that ain't half of it, as the saying goes. Nowhere does there seem to be a sense of alarm, of emergency, of impending calamity; it's

business as usual, the political agenda remaining as ‘jobs, investment, growth’. The ship sails on.

This essay does not attempt to assess the findings of science—like most people, I am not qualified to do so; we simply have to accept what the scientists say—or to reiterate its warnings in a more convincing manner. Instead, it asks and tries to answer a number of questions: What if the doomwatch scientists are correct but our way of life diminishes our ability to communicate to one another that they are and, even if general awareness was raised, diminishes our ability to act to avert the oncoming catastrophe? Are we collectively on a train to hell but unable either to see the dangers ahead or to apply the brakes? Are we living in a way that allows us to detect and respond adequately to possible threats to our very survival; any threats, not just climate change? If the worst comes to the worst, will new forms of authoritarianism be the only way to manage the ensuing crises or will democracy, perhaps in some new or extended forms, offer the best tools for survival? Is there anything that ‘ordinary people’ can or should do? It is particularly pertinent to ask such questions in a country like Australia which has per capita greenhouse gas emissions among the highest in the world (Garnaut 2008, p. 153) and ‘has experienced the largest documented decline in biodiversity of any continent over the past 200 years’ (ABS 2010, p. 7).

There are many ways to approach such questions, all with something of value to contribute to the answers. One could focus on the climate science deniers, the big money behind them, and their influence on governments. One could look at the mass media and their role, actual and potential, in communication in contemporary societies. One could examine issues of governance in the local, national and global arenas, exploring why governments to date have been largely impervious to the ruckus emanating from the scientific community. One could look at science itself and the bad name it has acquired for itself in the course of the twentieth century. Science has become highly specialised, militarised, bureaucratised, commercialised, mediatised. There are people who refuse to vaccinate their children because they do not trust scientists. There are historians and theorists who see science as ‘socially constructed’ and, in an extreme view, as having no more capacity to predict physical events than Persian astrology or Zen Buddhism.¹ I have looked elsewhere for answers, for what I suspect is another key part of the answers. We all know (from science) that sound cannot travel through a vacuum. In my hypothesis, the absence of thriving public spheres constitutes a vacuum through which the warnings of scientists cannot travel. A public sphere—which I define more fully later—is created when people come together to share their understandings of what is going on in the world, and if they perceive any problems, to discuss ways of resolving those problems. A concern with the tenuous state of the public sphere, especially the political public sphere, has been evident in social and political theory for decades. It is a concern now heightened by the emergence of a range of issues—climate change, food security and so on—with which governments and the mass media seem unwilling or unable to grapple in any serious manner. In one sense, therefore, turning to the public sphere for answers is an act of desperation; it’s where you go when every other door is shut in your face. On other grounds,

¹ As Bayly puts it. See, for a brief overview of this issue in a global historical context, Bayly 2004, pp. 312-20.

though, it seems a good hunch. What Christopher Lasch observed in the U.S.A. can be extrapolated to other societies (1996, pp. 11-12):

... although Americans are now drowning in information, thanks to newspapers and television and other media, surveys regularly report a steady decline in their knowledge of public affairs. In the 'age of information' the American people are notoriously ill informed. The explanation of this seeming paradox is obvious, though seldom offered: Having been effectively excluded from public debate on the grounds of their incompetence, most Americans no longer have any use for the information inflicted on them in such large amounts. They have become almost as incompetent as their critics have always claimed—a reminder that it is debate itself, and debate alone, that gives rise to the desire for usable information. In the absence of democratic exchange, most people have no incentive to master the knowledge that would make them capable citizens.

Anyone who has tried to learn a language (that's all of us) will appreciate the point: learning requires an active disposition, not just a passive one. A language cannot be learnt by just reading and listening; we have to learn to speak it and write it as well. Similarly, in other areas of life, we have more chance of understanding the world when we have the opportunity to be actors in it as well as spectators, writers as well as readers, speakers as well as listeners.

In one view of the future, perhaps the dominant view, the adverse effects of climate change, population growth, loss of biodiversity and resource depletion will be mitigated by the application of science and technology in new industries and by the actions of governments and private corporations working in the general interest. In this view, economic growth can continue, albeit in new directions and with new ways of doing things, as can existing relations of power. There is no need, in this view, for members of the general public to be mobilised, to be drawn into participation in the political process. Readers with such a view will find many of the ideas in this essay unpalatable, unrealistic and unnecessary. Perhaps such a view will prove to be correct. Perhaps not; perhaps better 'science communication techniques' will not succeed in alerting governments, business and the wider public to the dangers ahead; perhaps nothing short of a 'paradigm shift' in our way of life will be required to steer us clear.

In the view presented here, the emerging crises of the twenty-first century are not something about which 'ordinary people', tiny fish in a huge swarm, can or should do little or nothing. Indeed, various titles were considered for this work, among them 'Foundations of the Republic in a Time of Ecological Crisis' or 'The Possibility of a Democratic Politics to face Climate Change' or 'Politics for the Powerless' or 'The Prospects for Democracy in a Runaway World' or perhaps even, simply, 'The Chance to Be Heard'. If this aspect of the work could be captured in one sentence, that sentence might be the following question: If 'the problems of the world', climate change, the 'coming famine' and ecological collapse among them, today seem beyond the comprehension and control of 'ordinary people', what chance is there for 'ordinary people' to come to some understanding of the world in which they live and be able to collectively exercise some control over that world for their 'collective good', indeed survival?

Such a question seems singularly out of place in a world where decisions about important issues affecting us all are typically made by 'experts' and 'specialists' working for

governments and large private corporations. Yet twenty-five years after the threat of global warming was announced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it is clear that the secret decision-making of governments and private corporations has failed to address the problem. That failure should have been expected, as surely one of the lessons from the horrors of the twentieth century is that we cannot afford to leave the decisions affecting our lives to ‘experts’, charismatic leaders or the powers that be. The history of the two world wars, of the rise of totalitarianism, of the advent of the nuclear age and of the onward march of self-destructive human activities is as much the history of failed political movements, of people who failed to take political action, as it is of political movements that succeeded and managed to strut the historical stage.² There is an ‘if only’ side to history, the history of the losers, what they did and especially did not do, without whose defeat ‘things might have been otherwise’. The price the losers pay seems to grow higher with each successive failure and the ‘little people’ with their little voices cannot afford to lose this time round. There will be no New World³ to which refugees can emigrate and there is no Planet B⁴. Either the little people enter the public world, the stage of politics, or their fate, for better or worse, will be decided by others. In contemporary democratic theory, people have a right to stay out of politics. That right is not being questioned here. There is a price to be paid, however, for being apolitical. To be apolitical is to allow oneself to be a leaf in the wind, pleasant enough perhaps, until the wind becomes a hurricane.

If political elites are failing to act, then the people must push them to act or act instead, exploring what we mean by ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ as we go. Yet the room for manoeuvre seems strictly limited. If you ask most people in Australia if they live in a ‘free country’, they are likely to answer ‘yes’. If you ask them if they feel they understand or are able to address in some meaningful way the ‘problems of the world’, they are likely to answer ‘no’. Our actual experience of ‘freedom’, ‘politics’, a ‘public sphere’ and ‘democracy’, all venerable concepts that are supposed to describe essential elements or aspirations of the ‘Western way of life’, appears to be wanting.

What needs to be built is a republic in which ‘ordinary people’—a problematic term that will be discussed—can play a part in politics. Today, however, many of us are fully absorbed in earning a living, raising a family, paying off a house or pursuing private pleasures. The sphere of what passes for necessity these days has grown out of all proportion to other spheres of life, that sphere in particular where people come together to deliberate on public affairs and matters of state, the political public sphere. In the political theory of republicanism, which has much to offer us in our current predicament, the public sphere is a

² The rise of Hitler to power in Germany in the 1930s, for example, is as much a story of the failures of the social-democrats and communists in that country as it is of the triumph of Nazism. For the international context, see Hobsbawm 1995, p. 37, where he lists the milestones leading up to the Second World War: the actions of Germany, Italy and Japan *and* the failure of other powers to try to stop them before it was too late.

³ After the Second World War, many refugees were able to emigrate to places like America (North and South) and Oceania (Australasia), collectively referred to as the New World as opposed to the Old World of Europe, Asia and Africa. The New World was ‘new’ only in a colonial context; for Europeans it was new but people had lived there for many thousands of years.

⁴ Every plan should have a Plan B yet, as some environmental campaign slogans have put it, should climate change render the planet uninhabitable, there is no Planet B.

sphere of freedom, a sphere in which people are able to realise collective power through collective deliberation. Only a restoration of the balance, or the creation of a balance, between necessity and freedom, the private and the public spheres, the imperatives of survival and the practice of politics, can lay the groundwork for lasting solutions to the problems of our times. One essential prerequisite for surviving this century is also one of the prerequisites for democratic politics: drastically reducing the hold over us of the sphere of necessity. In a nutshell, the argument goes as follows. If the waste economy—this term will be defined—has a future, then *Homo sapiens* does not, at least not a great one, the scientists tell us. Unfortunately, we depend on the waste economy for our day-to-day survival; it provides many of us with jobs. This dependence has today become extreme. All the costs of living: house prices, the need to own a car, the need to pay for everything, including things such as child care, aged care and everything else the family once did, and all the costs of consumerism, paying for things we think we need but usually do not; all these costs add up to one thing, we can't live without a job. Cash nexus today exist in place of social relations of the past. The road to a more ecologically viable future runs through drastic reductions in the cost of living, starting with house prices. Only then will people be able to escape from the waste economy. Drastic reductions in the sphere of necessity, or what passes for necessity these days, are a prerequisite for survival in the coming decades. The cooperative movement, long hidden in the shadows cast by the two great contenders for our allegiance, capitalism and socialism, holds great promise in this regard, in showing us how to lead a simpler life. Release from the sphere of necessity has also always been the basis for being able to participate in politics. We need 'the people' to be as much involved as 'the state' in addressing the challenges of the future, partly because the state today shows every sign of not being up to the task and partly because the idea of freedom needs to be renegotiated in the public interest. Partly also because only through participation in politics will we be able to develop the means of communication to alert ourselves to the dangers ahead and to work out what to do about them. If all that sounds cryptic, you'll understand why I had to write the essay.

This study has various limitations of which I am aware—readers will no doubt find others. Firstly, in examining some of the literature that appears to have a bearing on my concerns⁵, I have not addressed the overall pros and cons of any particular author's works, though I have not hesitated to criticise some authors on this or that point, probably unfairly in the light of their complete works. There is no single -ism or work today (the present work included) that can map out a path for us through the coming century, or that provides us with a comprehensive theory of how contemporary societies are going to be able to adjust themselves to survive the twenty-first century. One thing does seem clear: if liberalism, conservatism, socialism, Marxism and fascism, in all their variations, took or take industrial society as a given, especially its presumption that nature is simply an inexhaustible raw material available for our profligate use, we can no longer afford to do so. In seeking to answer the questions it sets for itself, this essay suggests some of the issues that such a more comprehensive theory has to address, drawing on social and political theory from various

⁵ A literature survey has not been attempted. Flinders 2012 provides a good starting point for such a survey, as his work *Defending politics* canvasses the views of key authors.

sources; the reader should not expect an outline or a sketch of what such a theory might look like in its entirety. Readers will find nonetheless that the ideas expressed in this essay tend towards the view expressed by Christopher Lasch (1996, p. 113):

A public philosophy for the twenty-first century will have to give more weight to the community than to the right of private decision. It will have to emphasize responsibilities rather than rights. It will have to find a better expression of the community than the welfare state. It will have to limit the scope of the market and the power of corporations without replacing them with a centralized state bureaucracy.

To quote an author approvingly or disapprovingly does not mean necessarily that one agrees or disagrees with everything else that author says. At times I have criticised authors with whom I agree most of the time. In other places I have praised authors with whom I disagree most of the time. None have been done justice. That is not an admission of weakness in my argument. Social and political theorists spend a lot of time trying to understand and criticise one another, often at the expense of focusing on the issues of the day. On the other hand, there are many other writers (journalists, for instance) who seek to be 'relevant' to everyday concerns but who make no attempt to study or apply theoretical perspectives that do have a bearing on the issues they are addressing. I hope I have succeeded in being both relevant and theoretically plausible.

Secondly, in the usual Eurocentric manner of the English-speaking world, this essay focuses on the societies of 'the West', as vague as that term is. Thanks, however, to Christopher Bayly's *The birth of the modern world*, on which I have relied heavily, and other works, I have extended the analysis to other parts of the world wherever I could. Only one in five university students in Australia studies a foreign language and of all the books available in translation around the world, only six per cent are translations into English from another language.⁶ We remain as arrogant and as insular as ever. I have done what I can, within the bounds of my insularity.

Thirdly, in this essay I have tried to use everyday language as much as possible, avoiding jargon, especially the kind that claims to favour 'objective' or 'neutral' words rather than 'emotional' ones. Some readers, enamoured of what is called in philosophy 'logical positivism', will interpret this as confessing to a lack of objectivity and impartiality, and hence a lack of credibility as a work of 'social science' or 'political science'. Such a claim is highly contestable; I make no such confession. The debate about the differences between describing and prescribing a state of affairs, between facts and values, and between objectivity and subjectivity in those fields of modern intellectual endeavour that are variously called 'sociology', 'politics', 'social and political theory', the 'social sciences' or the 'political sciences' and so on has been raging for more than a century.⁷ My own view is that nobody is able to appropriate, for their own special discipline, elements of a language such as

⁶ These figures are from Linda Jaivin 2013, 'Found in translation: in praise of a plural world', *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 52, p. 26.

⁷ The debate is often described in terms of quantitative versus qualitative research, empiricist versus interpretative methodologies, or positivism versus antipositivism, the latter embodied in different ways in phenomenology, hermeneutics and the Frankfurt School, to name just a few of its manifestations. The debate focuses on the relations between fact and interpretation, the particular and the general, the empirical and the theoretical, the objective and the subjective.

English, French or Chinese, or any other widely shared language, assigning to words or phrases a score on a scale from 'neutral' to 'value-laden'. Take, for instance, the difference between being concerned, on the one hand, with 'intergenerational equity' and, on the other hand, being concerned to avoid 'stealing from future generations'. Is the former a more dispassionate way of describing an issue than the latter? I think not. One could be forgiven for seeing the former as some kind of technical concern or option, reserved for 'expert' decision, that could be included in an analysis without any moral imperative to do so, whereas the latter clearly asserts a moral imperative, indeed the existence of a crime if the issue is not addressed. In other words, the former is morally indifferent to the issue, the latter morally committed to its resolution; both expressions nonetheless take a moral stance: one judges resolution of the issue to be optional and the preserve of experts, the other judges resolution of the issue to be essential. That both expressions carry moral connotations is a function of their being a part of a language that is shared in common with other people who share that language and associated culture. Professionals in a particular discipline, whether in the natural or social sciences, may attempt to expunge these common meanings from the words they use, but in vain; the shared nature of language makes this impossible, unless they see themselves as simply talking amongst themselves in an idiosyncratic code. All languages are 'literary' or 'cultural' rather than 'scientific' and it must be accepted that scientific works, insofar as they use a language that has a concomitant everyday use, can be interpreted as literature, as narratives, as moral and political discourses, as (implicitly or explicitly) prescriptions for what ought to be, whether they like it or not. As Roland Barthes told us, a language has an autonomy and a sovereignty of its own; it cannot be used as a slave, doing whatever we wish it to do. The idea (once?) prevalent in science that language is merely an instrument for expressing the contents of the scientific message is an aberration of history, which ignores the theory of language embodied in the study of rhetoric, a study pursued in the West for over two thousand years. There is no neutral state of an everyday language, no innocent part of an everyday language, which can be picked out as a superior, 'scientific' way of expressing research findings.⁸ Choosing the dullest, most boring words in the lexicon does not necessarily help to bring us closer to the truth. Any form of writing tells a story, in other words. Disciplines such as the history and philosophy of science and the sociology of knowledge have shown us not only that there is the story of science but that science has been telling us, and itself, stories as well.⁹ This does not make science any less credible, or less powerful, in the sense of its ability to predict events (in the case at least of the natural sciences); it just means that there is more to convincing others of the worth of one's views

⁸ See Roland Barthes 1986, *The rustle of language*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, pp. 3-11, especially 'From science to literature'.

⁹ Readers will recall the notion of 'paradigm' at the core of analyses such as Thomas Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions*, which was based on the work of Gaston Bachelard. A paradigm in natural science or social science is a story to the extent that it embodies a worldview—or rhetorical elements, or assumptions about what sounds 'reasonable' or 'plausible'—in the same way that literature does, whether implicitly or explicitly. The work of Mary Hesse pursues similar themes. Hobsbawm 1995, chapter 18 on the natural sciences, gives some compelling examples of this. Images of chaos and catastrophe in scientific theories since the 1960s—the possibility of meteorites crashing into Earth, for example—coincided with the epoch of the threat of nuclear war; scientists prior to this epoch could not have imagined such scenarios, Hobsbawm argues, p. 550.

than allowed for by those who adhere to a narrow (and contested) conception of what scientific method entails.

In making these points, I am not thereby siding with that variation of the ‘interpretivist’ approach to the study of politics which contends that the world is socially or discursively constructed and does not exist ‘out there’ independent of such constructions.¹⁰ There is value in such an approach, hence my comments above, but I am not applying it in this essay. In fact, I have not tried to apply any particular methodology or theoretical perspective, not exclusively at least. Fancy labels aside, I have tried to explain how we have arrived at a point A in history when, to survive the century, we need to be at a point B. I then suggest a pathway from point A to point B. If you scratch the surface of any study of human affairs, I think you’ll find just such an approach either explicit or implicit in that study. Theories that do not embody moral, political and other assumptions do not exist.

Finally, I prefer my answers to the questions I have posed, not because I can demonstrate that they carry more weight in reality than answers put forward by others, but because I believe, as a working assumption, that people are never simply victims of history. People usually in some way or other participate in their own oppression or help bring about their own misfortune or suffering. Finding out how this occurs is part of the key to empowering people to move beyond the circumstances in which they find themselves; it is not necessarily about ‘blaming the victim’. To give a relatively uncontroversial example, many of us feel we are ‘pressured for time’ and are finding it difficult to strike a ‘work / life balance’. Often, there is an element of choice in that. Are we working longer hours, for instance, because we have to or because we want a bigger house, or a new car, or another car, or to travel, or to send our kids to private schools?¹¹ The question in this essay in this regard is: are we simply victims of environmental decay brought upon us by others or are there aspects of our way of life that are playing a role in bringing that decay upon ourselves?

FREEDOM AND NECESSITY

A century ago Max Weber speculated on the possibility that people in the modern world would become enmeshed in a kind of ‘mechanized ossification, embellished with a sort of rigidly compelled sense of self-importance’. He commented briefly in the final pages of his famous work *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* that the concern for material goods had become a ‘steel-hard casing’¹² that constrained people’s lives, and their vision. ‘Narrow specialists without mind, pleasure-seekers without heart’, yet with such a sense of self-importance, with such conceit, people living in ‘the powerful cosmos of the modern economic order’ believe they have ‘climbed to a level of humanity never before attained’.¹³ Weber’s view, Stephen Kalberg tells us, was that ‘... an inescapable network of pragmatic

¹⁰ See Curthoys and Docker 2006 for a very readable overview of the issues raised here. Though their subject matter is the discipline of history, much of what they say can be applied to the social sciences and the natural sciences.

¹¹ See Goodin et al. 2008 on discretionary time and how time pressures are experienced differently in different societies.

¹² Or, in the translation by Talcott Parsons, an ‘iron cage’.

¹³ Quotes are from Weber 2001 (1920), pp. 123-4.

necessities overwhelms the individual. People ... are coerced to adapt to the impersonal laws of the market in order to survive'.¹⁴

Weber's fears appear to have been realised. The cloak of necessity still weighs heavily upon our shoulders, and more heavily than a hundred years ago. Look at house sizes, for a graphic example. Compare the size of houses that Australians in the early 2000s think they need with house sizes in Australia in the early 1900s. The 'necessities' of life have expanded beyond anything Weber would have seen in his time and how really necessary they are is highly questionable. 'Mortgage slaves' caught up in the great property swindle that is the speculative housing market; car-dependent populations hooked on car-based mobility, driving from one ugly road-dominated cityscape to another; populations that are obese due to over-eating and too much time spent sitting in cars and in front of television and computers; populations that do not have time for their children because of work pressures: these are just some of the casualties of the 'affluent society' that has developed since Weber's day. The conduct of our daily lives is defined by the pursuit of material gain, a pursuit unconnected to any higher cultural values of a spiritual or philosophical nature, so we are unable to see where we are going, let alone imagine any alternative path. We live a fast-paced life, going nowhere. Well, until scientists started telling us we are headed somewhere, and it's not a pretty place.

When in Europe in the 1920s whole populations, including working class people *en masse* for the first time, embraced capitalist consumer culture in significant new ways, notions of what constituted the necessities of life became very elastic. Vagaries of style and fashion took hold—what was 'necessary' one year was not the next—and the scope of what one needed to find fulfilment in life expanded continuously. New forms of advertising, marketing and entertainment created alluring images of 'lifestyles' to which all could aspire, helped along by the ready availability of credit. Freedom became, and remains today, not freedom from the need to consume, but the freedom to choose from an endless array of goods, services and 'experiences' (leisure travel, new entertainment and communications technologies), all of which, needless to say, cost money. Whereas in the past in Europe poorer people might have rioted because they did not have enough to eat, today we witness rioters stealing expensive electronic goods, burning cars or smashing shop windows. Such is the extent to which consumerist notions of the good life have taken hold and define 'who we are'; those for whom a 'fulfilled' life as a consumer is out of reach feel marginalised, resentful, less free and less part of society.

The dream worlds conjured up by consumer society, however, conceal the sources of the goods packaged so brightly and temptingly for the consumer. The iron law of capitalism, to buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest, often means that the goods presented to us are made in sweatshops, or made under conditions that produce environmental degradation, or prop up petty fiefdoms or oppressive dictatorships, or divert resources from projects that are more needed locally than industries catering for the markets in other countries. This kind of economy can be seen as 'successful' only in apolitical or amoral terms; all that matters is that profits are made and the 'needs' of the global consumer are satisfied.

¹⁴ Kalberg, in his introduction to Weber 2001, p. xlvii.

In the long development of this aspect of the modern world, not everyone agreed with this vision of the good life. In Europe, North America and Japan, the cooperative movement in particular embodied, and in some, albeit limited, cases still does, an important counter-culture, emphasising ideas of a 'moral economy' and distinctions between 'true' and 'false' needs, with a desire to eschew luxury, waste and any 'freedom of choice' for consumers based on the exploitation and unfreedom of others. The principles of the cooperative of the Equitable Pioneers of Rochdale, England, a cooperative founded in 1844 which went on to become the most influential cooperative in European and North American history, are quite different from the principles (if they can be called that) of consumer society. In a history of the cooperative movement in Europe and North America from 1840 to the 1990s, Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda argue that the movement waned from the mid-twentieth century for a variety of reasons, among them the rise and allure of capitalist consumer culture, and the fact that many members came to see their interests better served through trade unions, the welfare state and consumer advocacy.¹⁵

Today we often find that trade unions are concerned only with wages and conditions, with keeping jobs (and hence investment and economic growth) and not with the ecological, social, political or longer-term economic costs that attend many job-creating activities. In a world facing resource depletion, ecological catastrophe, social and economic disruption and political instability, this focus of trade unions becomes problematic. To the extent that the welfare state, for its part, is funded from the growth of the waste economy and the consumer society, it too becomes problematic. And to the extent that consumer advocacy attempts only to create more informed and politically active consumers, while leaving the production and distribution of goods solely in the hands of capitalist enterprises, it can be seen as always one step behind these enterprises, reactive rather than proactive, much in the same way that computer software security systems are always one step behind the hackers. It is time then to look again, to take a long hard look, at cooperatives, their history, successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, and how their ideas might be adapted to contemporary circumstances.

To question our views on the necessities of life is also to question our views on the nature of freedom. To question our way of life is seen to be questioning basic 'freedoms' and 'human rights': the freedom of the 'free market', which allows private investment, for private profit, without any reference at all to the welfare of the community as a whole; the freedom of the mobility that cars afford, regardless of the degradation of cities that they cause; the freedom to buy products at the lowest price, regardless of the exploitation of workers or environmental degradation that allows such low prices; the freedom to live anywhere in a country (for example, to move from country to city or to move from city to coastal town in retirement or to live in bushfire-prone areas). To question such freedoms is to be seen to be questioning '...

¹⁵ Furlough, E & Strikwerda, C 1999, 'Economics, consumer culture, and gender: an introduction to the politics of consumer cooperation', in E Furlough & C Strikwerda (eds), *Consumers against capitalism? Consumer cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840–1990*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, USA. Other reasons were hostile political regimes, the effects of the Great Depression, in which many of the credit institutions which supported cooperative endeavours went bankrupt, and the failure of many cooperatives to gain control of production and distribution.

the right of every individual to use her or his freedom of choice to decide what the bliss she or he wants ought to be like and to select or design her or his own track which may (or may not, as it happens) lead to it' (Bauman 1999, p. 157).

Arguments about freedom came to occupy a central place in Western political thought only from the 1500s. Prior to then, the primary concern had been the achievement of either 'virtue' or 'order'. Among the 'early modern and modern' political thinkers who focused on freedom, not all saw it as something belonging to individuals or belonging exclusively to individuals. Rousseau, Hegel and Green treated freedom as a product of sociability. The 'classical republicans'—Machiavelli for one—saw freedom as something serving the needs of the state rather than individuals. J. S. Mill saw both individual liberty and 'civil and social liberty', the latter being the power that can be legitimately—in some circumstances—exercised by society over the individual.¹⁶ Today, when the extent of individual freedom has become highly questionable, it is time to look again at different ideas of freedom. I take a look in this essay at the ideas of a few twentieth century or contemporary republicans. We could look elsewhere as well; I make no claim to having covered the field.

The explicit or implicit assumption behind all of the ideas about freedom expressed in Western political thought in the last few centuries is that, in considering the nature and limits of freedom, the human world, or human nature, seen as a world in itself, a world apart from Nature, or a world dominant over Nature, need be the only reference point. All civilisations, in all times and in all places, other than in Western civilisation in the modern age, the renowned anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss tells us, held quite a different view (1985, pp. 282-4):

... the conception that ... [the rights of humanity stop whenever and wherever their exercise imperils the existence of another species] was that of the Roman jurists, who were permeated with Stoic influences, and who defined natural law as the aggregate of general relationships established by nature among all animate beings for their mutual preservation. This concept is also that of the great Eastern civilizations inspired by Hinduism and Buddhism; as well as of the so-called under-developed countries, including the humblest groups among them, the illiterate societies studied by anthropologists. As different as these societies may be from one another, they agree on making man a recipient of creation and not its master. By means of wise customs that we would be wrong to treat as mere superstitions, they limit man's consumption of other living species and impose on him a moral respect for them, in conjunction with very strict rules to assure their preservation.

For Lévi-Strauss, the only sound basis on which to found a conception of 'human rights' is to first and foremost acknowledge that human beings are biological creatures, members of one biological species among others, whose 'rights', '... for the simple reason that the disappearance of any species leaves us with an irreparable void in the system of creation' (1985, p. 282), can never be at the expense of the elimination of other species. I am not qualified to comment on the accuracy of the historical comparisons he makes¹⁷ but whether they are correct or not he has provided us with a foundation stone for a new (or revived)

¹⁶ Other examples and details can be found in Morrow 1998, on whom I have relied for this paragraph.

¹⁷ John Gray 2002, *Straw dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta Books, London, p. 17, appears to concur, in a more general way: 'For much of their history and all of prehistory, humans did not see themselves as being any different from the other animals among which they lived'.

ethics or morality. Scientists today can provide us with detailed analyses of the effects of species loss and tell us if and when species are likely to become extinct. We thus have the means to incorporate the new (or old) ethics that Lévi-Strauss proposes into our way of life.

Freedom and necessity, the two are intertwined, interdependent. I examine in this essay both of these aspects of our lives, and possible alternatives. First though, we must ask what survival—the sphere of necessity—is all about today. How do we get along, earn a living and construct our views of what is part of the necessities of life and what is not? I have chosen to talk about the sphere of necessity first for a reason. We are heading off ‘in search of politics’ in this essay, in search of the means by which people can collectively discuss and confront the challenges they face this century. If people are hungry, they can hardly be expected to participate in politics, except as rioters. If people are satiated, all their physical needs met, yet plagued by insecurity and fear (of losing their jobs, for instance), they are more likely to retreat into a private world rather than venture out into a public world where they risk losing what they have.

SURVIVAL

Like most words, the word ‘survival’ has different meanings in different contexts. It can mean surviving famine, war, disease or natural disasters or simply ‘earning a living’; it can mean surviving oppression, discrimination, prejudice, neglect or betrayal or simply pulling oneself out of the doldrums after things fall apart. There is individual survival and survival of a society or a way of life; there is, at a more fundamental level, the survival of species, of living things generally.

For many of us who live in parts of the world that have escaped, for several decades now, famine, war, epidemics of disease or widespread natural disasters, survival is about earning money to feed, clothe, house, educate and generally sustain in good health and humour one’s self and family. Where we live in cities or towns rather than the country, the vicissitudes of Nature, especially when it comes to the growing of food, tend to appear as somebody else’s problem. The prospect of famine or war seems remote, though flows of refugees from regions of the world affected by these disturb us. We do not view our way of life as one that is likely to experience catastrophic failure any time soon, though our lives may be affected by economic or political crises from time to time.

Yet stability has not been a characteristic of the modern world, the world that began to emerge everywhere across the globe from the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The scale and rapidity of population movements from the country to the city have been unprecedented in human history and continue unabated. Living in the city has brought with it new dependencies and a reliance on having a job or the support of the welfare state. Functions which were once the preserve of the extended family, child care and aged care for example, now have to be purchased either directly from income earned by having a job or indirectly

¹⁸ For this view, the view that the birth of the modern world was a global phenomenon from the start, rather than the view that the modern world first emerged in the West, from where it spread to the East, I am relying on C. A. Bayly 2004, *The birth of the modern world 1780–1914: global connections and comparisons*.

through the payment of taxes for the maintenance of the welfare state, as individuals find themselves more and more alone and lacking social support networks. Such networks were once provided, for example, by neighbourhoods in which people knew one another, churches that people attended, or labour movements in which people felt they had to participate to improve their conditions of life. The home has also become less and less a site of production, of food and other goods, as the spheres of work and home have separated, work becoming the sphere of production, home the sphere of consumption. 'Needs' have been redefined in 'consumer culture'. As dependence on having a job has increased, holding down a job has become ever more difficult, as the available jobs now move around the world at the whim of 'the market' or 'the global economy'. Communities form and disintegrate as mines close, as farming areas are taken over by other industries and city development, and as industries move elsewhere to more profitable locations at short notice. Things fall apart. Emigrations and immigrations, to and from locales, cities, regions, nations, occur on a vast scale. Living among strangers has become the new 'normal'. As individuals find wealth and the delights of consumer society, they also find themselves feeling lonely, emotionally dissatisfied and insecure. No area of life seems to have escaped profound change. In some parts of the world, a hallmark of the modern world is said to be the rise of 'individual freedom'. Yet exactly how much room for manoeuvre, how much freedom, do we have in determining the conditions that affect our lives? That is the question I wish to address first.

The country and the city

In 1750, 80 per cent of the people in the world were peasants, that is, farmers who cultivated small plots of land largely with their own family labour or, more broadly, landless labourers who worked on the lands of peasants or the local ruling groups for wages or a portion of the crop. Even after the massive growth of industrial cities in the nineteenth century, most people on Earth in 1900 were peasants (Bayly 2004, pp. 27–28 & p. 398). Rapid declines in the agricultural population of many countries occurred in the second half of the twentieth century (Hobsbawm 1995, pp. 289–293). By 2010, the agricultural population of the world comprised only 38 per cent of the total world population. Only one-quarter of the world's countries in 2010 had an agricultural population that made up more than 50 per cent of their total population and, in one-third of countries, the agricultural population comprised less than ten per cent of their total population.¹⁹ Not that many countries were able to feed themselves with only a fraction of the agricultural population they had in the past. Of the world's countries in 2007, only one-quarter produced more of the world's food than they consumed.²⁰ The situation now is one of global interdependence in food production and consumption, or perhaps more starkly, dependence of many parts of the world on food production in other

¹⁹ Calculated using *FAO Statistical Yearbook 2010*, Table A.1, a table which includes 183 of the world's 190 or more countries. Agricultural population is defined by the FAO as all persons depending for their livelihood on agriculture, hunting, fishing and forestry. It comprises all persons economically active in agriculture as well as their non-working dependants. The agricultural population is not necessarily limited to the rural population. The total population is defined by the FAO as usually referring to the present-in-area (de facto) population which includes all persons physically present within the present geographical boundaries of countries at the mid-point of the reference period.

²⁰ Calculated using *FAO Statistical Yearbook 2010*, Table F.4, a table which includes 175 of the world's 190 or more countries. 2007 was the latest year for which data were available.

countries. Table 1 shows the relatively few countries whose food production exceeds consumption. How long some of these countries can remain on this list is in doubt. Land degradation is an issue in Russia, Canada, the United States and Australia. Loss of primary productivity is an issue in Canada, Indonesia, Brazil and Australia.²¹ The full extent of the precariousness of the world's food supplies is a subject that others have tackled.²² Of particular relevance to the questions posed in this essay are the transformations that have occurred in the relations between country- and city-dwellers.

As the agricultural population has declined, the cities have grown. In 1780, there were fewer than one hundred cities in the world with more than 100,000 inhabitants. In 1900, there were seventeen cities with more than a million inhabitants. By the end of 2008, for the first time in human history, more people lived in cities than in the country, many in cities with a population of more than 5 million (Golub 2011).

²¹ Cribb 2010, p. 53. 'Land degradation is the loss of the ability of land to produce food, either temporarily or permanently, or to maintain its natural landscape function' (Cribb 2010, p. 52). 'Loss of primary productivity', as used by Cribb, appears to mean the loss of productivity of land that is still suitable for the production of food and not yet so degraded that it is unsuitable for food production.

²² See, for instance, Cribb 2010.

Table 1 Countries which produce more of the world's food than they consume

COUNTRIES	Share in world food production, 2007 (%)	Share in world food consumption, 2007 (%)
USA	15.57	6.29
Brazil	5.82	3.24
Indonesia	3.39	3.07
Russian Federation	3.05	2.60
Argentina	2.83	0.64
France	2.37	1.17
Canada	2.10	0.63
Germany	1.89	1.58
Thailand	1.41	0.91
Ukraine	1.27	0.81
Poland	1.11	0.71
Malaysia	1.09	0.41
Spain	1.08	0.77
Myanmar	0.99	0.65
Australia	0.93	0.37
Kazakhstan	0.61	0.29
Hungary	0.37	0.19
Denmark	0.35	0.10
Belarus	0.33	0.17
Paraguay	0.32	0.09
Czech Republic	0.29	0.18
Serbia	0.25	0.15
Austria	0.21	0.17
Cambodia	0.20	0.17
Ecuador	0.19	0.17
Sweden	0.19	0.15
New Zealand	0.15	0.07
Finland	0.15	0.09
Bolivia	0.14	0.11
Uruguay	0.12	0.05
Lithuania	0.12	0.06
Slovakia	0.11	0.09
Ireland	0.11	0.09
Croatia	0.10	0.07
Turkmenistan	0.09	0.07
Lao PDR	0.09	0.07
Latvia	0.06	0.04
Estonia	0.04	0.02
Guyana	0.02	0.01

Source: Gary Shapcott, derived from Table F.4, *FAO Statistical Yearbook 2010*, with the countries listed here ranked in order of their contribution to world food production. Several countries in Table F.4 which could be included in this list have been left out because rounding makes their contribution difficult to see or their contribution is relatively small.

During the process of urbanisation that occurred over the last two centuries, some city-dwellers retained strong links with people in the countryside, from whom they obtained food and marriage partners or, in times of distress or warfare, refuge and sustenance (Bayly 2004, p. 186 & p. 188). In Greece, in the wake of the 'global financial crisis' that erupted in 2008, perhaps more than a million people appear to have left the city and returned to villages where they still had family ties (Bell 2012). In China today, too, it appears possible for some to go back to their villages in the country if things do not work out for them in the city. For many city-dwellers around the world, however, the country has become distant, both physically and culturally; the link has been severed, there is no going back.

Planning regimes or 'market forces' in many cities have expelled agriculture from within the urban perimeter and city sprawl has swallowed up a significant proportion of the world's best farmland, forcing farmers out onto more marginal land (Cribb 2010, pp. 57–9). Farther still from the cities, beyond even the settled farming land, are remnants of those native peoples who were expelled from their lands in the worldwide deluge of colonisation and dispossession that took hold in the nineteenth century. Where these peoples continue to practise the hunting, gathering or herding that sustained them prior to their expropriation and expulsion, it occurs in locations even more remote from the cities than the settled agricultural activities of the colonisers. City-dwellers, now largely incorporated into the international capitalist economy, obtain their food from everywhere in the world. They have little or no contact with or knowledge of by whom or under what conditions their food is produced; a purely cash nexus binds food producers and consumers, with long chains of food processing and transport connecting the two.

Culturally, in the long battle between 'city values' and 'country values', the city currently has the upper hand when it comes to defining what constitutes 'the good life'.²³ The distance between city and country is deeply cultural as much as physical. As Raymond Williams put it (1973, p. 235):

[In the twentieth century] City experience was now becoming so widespread, and writers, disproportionately, were so deeply involved in it, that there seemed little reality in any other mode of life; all sources of perception seemed to begin and end in the city, and if there was anything beyond it, it was also beyond life.

The emergence in the last two centuries of a global urban culture has meant that city-dwellers around the world often have more in common with one another than they do with people living in rural areas, whether closer to home or abroad. With the possibility, however, of serious future disruptions to global food supplies, the loss of connection with primary food production and producers might come back to haunt city-dwellers. Escape from 'the idiocy of rural life', as Marx put it²⁴, clearly has its attractions. It might also, however, be a trap.

²³ For a more detailed and nuanced discussion of the country-city divide in Western culture, see Williams 1973; in an international historical context, see Bayly 2004, pp. 194–198; in the Australian context, see Brett 2011.

²⁴ 'The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life' (Marx & Engels 1967, p. 84). Compare this with the more sympathetic view of rural life expressed in Chapter 27 of *Capital*, 'Expropriation of the agricultural population from the land'. On the ambiguity in Marx's writings on this question, see Williams 1973, pp. 302–4.

The survival trap

Not engaged in agricultural production themselves, and having little or no direct social connection with people who are farming or otherwise living off the land, city-dwellers need a job that provides them with money to buy food. Other necessities also need to be purchased: housing, transport, clothing, education, health care, energy (fuel, electricity), water and communications (telephone, radio, postal services, internet, television). Taxes have to be paid to governments. Sport and cultural events cost money to attend. Where ‘consumer society’ prevails, there is enormous social pressure to spend money on things that one does not really need, and the definition of ‘needs’ as opposed to ‘superfluous wants’ becomes blurred. People living on the land face these costs as well, and when their principal activities do not enable them to meet the costs of living, they depend on an additional job or welfare payments from government to get by.

The biggest cost facing households is often the purchase of housing. In Australia, for instance, in the 70-year period from 1880 to the mid-1950s, there was negligible real growth in house prices. Since then, both house prices and rents have exhibited an upward trend, notwithstanding ‘boom and bust’ cycles of varying depth and duration.²⁵ Under these circumstances, it can take many decades to pay off a home, making permanent full-time employment a necessity.

Transport is another significant cost. Whereas up to the middle of the twentieth century transport in cities was largely mass transit (train, bus or coach, tram, ferry), with walking, horse-riding or cycling also viable options, from the 1950s car dependence has become the norm. The cost of car ownership is often the second biggest cost to households, after housing.

The increasing cost of living is borne by households of decreasing size. In many parts of the world, urbanisation has been accompanied by changes in family structures, in particular, the breaking down of the large extended families of the past into smaller units (Bayly 2004, p. 188). In rural areas too, parents have seen their children depart for the city rather than take over the family farm or stay to work nearby, where opportunities are perceived to be more limited than in the city. It is in the cities though that the tendency to smaller household units is more marked. The number of single-person households in cities continues to increase at a remarkable rate, in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark particularly, but also in Japan, Germany, France, the UK, Australia, Canada, the USA, China, India and Brazil (Klinenberg 2012).²⁶ When decreasing household size is accompanied by the loss of supporting social networks, which is not always necessarily the case, the pressure to obtain and retain an income to meet the costs of living rises considerably. Household self-support in the event of unemployment, accident, illness or old age becomes problematic; the support of the welfare state becomes essential. The extended family in pre-modern times afforded a certain self-

²⁵ Nigel Stapledon, ‘A history of housing prices and rents in Australia 1880–2007’, paper presented to a conference of the Economic History Society of Australia and New Zealand, Melbourne, 14 February 2008 (available from the EHSANZ website under ‘related links’). See also Stapledon 2012.

²⁶ Lone-person households comprised 23 per cent of Australian households in 2012–13, with 2.1 million people, or 9 per cent of the Australian population (in private dwellings) living alone. There were more women than men living alone, 1.1 million women compared with 1 million men (ABS 4442.0, *Family characteristics and transitions, Australia, 2012–13*, available at <www.abs.gov.au>).

sufficiency (precarious though it might have been, depending on one's place in the feudal hierarchy) in producing the necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter, artefacts—workshop or farm and home were combined), in the care of children and the elderly, and in providing support in times of emergency. For the modern family, the costs of living, many of which were once not costs at all but services or functions provided free within the extended family, must now be met by either having income from a job or being a recipient of welfare payments.²⁷

While the costs of living are entrenched and growing, the prospects of holding down a job are becoming more uncertain. Having a secure 'job for life' is a thing of the past. Skills and competencies that are valued in the labour market today are redundant tomorrow. Wages and conditions once seen as 'entitlements' are now 'costs impeding productivity and competitiveness'. Loyalty to one's employer or employees and workplace camaraderie seem like old-fashioned values as workplaces form then dissolve at ever-decreasing intervals in one's career, the very notion of a career itself becoming outmoded. 'Investment and growth', we constantly hear and many of us believe, 'are necessary to provide jobs'. In the global economy, however, there is ample evidence that the opposite is true. In *The global trap*, Martin and Schumann describe the factors increasing the precariousness of employment, transnational corporations playing off employees and governments in one country against those in another being prominent among such factors. People cannot earn a living outside the labour market yet businesses are constantly trying to reduce costs by reducing the need for labour or by producing goods in the cheapest labour market and selling them to consumers with the most money, for example, producing goods in factories in China for consumption in the rich countries of the West. Banks, insurance companies, superannuation and investment funds, all of which hold the savings of workers, constantly pressure the companies they invest in to increase 'productivity', which often entails job-cutting. In this way our retirement funds can contribute to our early and involuntary retirement from the workforce.

Therein lies the survival trap or, more precisely, the death trap into which contemporary societies have fallen. The international capitalist economy undermines the ecological foundations on which it is based and on which the survival of human life on the planet is based. Yet participation in it is for many people today the only way they can earn a living. The more precarious earning a living becomes and the more the cost of living rises, the more fearful people become of environmentalists who seek to reduce growth, block development, block investment and rein in the economic forces which provide jobs or, at least, hold out the promise of doing so. In her assessment of the situation, Hannah Arendt, widely regarded as one of the most significant political thinkers of the twentieth century, put it this way: 'Under modern conditions, not destruction but conservation spells ruin because the very durability of conserved objects is the greatest impediment to the turnover process, whose constant gain in speed is the only constancy left wherever it has taken hold' (1958, p. 253).

²⁷ For a depiction of changes in the family in the modern period, see Habermas 1962, pp. 154-9 and 162-3. See also Hill, who states that in Britain in the seventeenth century, 'Large numbers of households still preserved a precarious independence by agriculture or domestic handicrafts, or by a combination of both' (1961, p. 208).

A perfect illustration of Arendt's point, in my view, is the 'mining boom' in Australia in the early 2000s. On a scale and at a speed never before seen in this country's history, coal, iron ore, gas and other mineral resources were extracted at rates that would see them depleted in just a few decades (Cleary 2011). The scale and speed of this relentless process of depreciation of 'natural capital' was matched only by the scale on which and speed with which many of the products manufactured using these minerals ended up on the rubbish tips of the world. To be sure, some products will constitute a lasting legacy for generations to come: buildings that will become icons, mass transit systems, dams and other infrastructure. Even this 'built capital', however, is not immune to the tendency to 'redevelop', as the perennial presence of construction cranes hanging like vultures over the cities of the world testifies. In another view though, the dominant view, to try to slow down the mining boom, to conserve the resources, would be to 'lose an opportunity', 'to forego jobs' and to stand in the way of 'progress'. The idea of progress, a hallmark of the modern world, might have taken a battering in the twentieth century²⁸, but it still lives on, carrying considerable cultural and political weight, as we shall see in a section to follow.

For Arendt, the modern age, in both its capitalist and communist versions, has created societies of jobholders, people concerned only with 'making a living' and who, consequently, are no better than 'labourers' caught up in an endless cycle of producing and consuming the necessities of life. These are not societies concerned with the creation of artefacts that will last for generations or indeed with leaving anything for future generations. On the contrary, they are societies in which nothing is produced that is not meant to be consumed or destroyed and recreated within a relatively short timeframe. The capitalism of Adam Smith and the communism of Karl Marx are alike, Arendt argues, in that both have elevated 'labour', the labour required for securing the necessities of life, to a position in the hierarchy of human activities above activities such as politics and the fabrication of a world of artefacts that exhibit permanence, stability and durability.²⁹ Moreover, Marx's utopia, to be achieved by a revolution, of 'emancipation from labour' can lead only, in the absence of higher ideals, to a life of leisure in which rampant consumption leads to a 'waste economy' where things are devoured and discarded shortly after they are produced. Realisation of the communist dream would exacerbate tendencies that we already see in contemporary capitalist societies, namely, much of consumption is not of the necessities of life at all but of superfluous things whose production and consumption magnify the process of 'wearing down' of nature with its concomitant danger of a 'catastrophic end'.³⁰

²⁸ See Curthoys and Docker 2006, p. 91.

²⁹ When Arendt says this I think of the Florence of the Medicis compared with the city-building of today; a city built to last compared with the cities of today built to last only until money can be made out of tearing them down and building again. An example she herself gives is the reconstruction of Germany after the Second World War: 'The German example shows very clearly that under modern conditions the expropriation of people, the destruction of objects, and the devastation of cities will turn out to be a radical stimulant for a process, not of mere recovery, but of quicker and more efficient accumulation of wealth—if only the country is modern enough to respond in terms of the production process' (1958, p. 252).

³⁰ *The human condition*, 1958, pp.130-5. It is noteworthy that this book was published in 1958, four years before the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, the latter a book widely credited with helping launch the 'environment movement' of the subsequent decades. The relevance of Arendt's work is perhaps less

Arendt's analysis—for all its faults and limitations, for this is an author with many critics—sheds a glimmer of light on why conservation, rather than the destruction of nature, appears to many in contemporary societies, both capitalist and communist, as a threat to their survival. The turnover process, however destructive of nature it might be, is in their view the foundation of the accumulation of wealth and a process that 'creates jobs'. If people lose their jobs they have nothing to fall back on except 'welfare' and 'government handouts', or if these are not available, poverty and misery. The ability of governments to fund welfare payments is itself based on a 'thriving economy', that is, on the cycles of production and consumption that are so damaging to nature. Conservation appears as 'backward' and economic growth as 'progress'. This is why the social movement that we call the ecology, environment or green movement struggles to find support among the majority of employed people. Lives dominated by the fear of losing one's job, the need to pay off a home mortgage and to support a family are lives caught up in the survival trap.

Arendt uses the term 'the waste economy', a term I shall use throughout this essay. The durability and quality of goods, and caution in the use of non-renewable resources, are of no concern in the waste economy. Nature figures in it merely as raw material for use in production. So too do people. Anyone who wants to define the waste economy more quantitatively can start in their local rubbish tip, investigating the origin of the products there, who produced them and under what conditions, who distributed and sold them, who consumed them, the timeframe in which all this occurred and the resources consumed. Or for a fuller, more theoretical account, one can refer to Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted lives* where he says, sardonically, that 'Modern survival—the survival of the modern form of life—depends on the dexterity and proficiency of garbage removal. Rubbish collectors are the unsung heroes of modernity' (2004, pp. 27-8). Wasted lives, wasted resources, nature laid waste: that is the waste economy that is so central to our lives and indeed our ideas of human progress.

Redefining necessity: the cost of living

If *Homo sapiens* is to survive in any great numbers, in the population numbers that it is expected to reach in the coming decades, then the waste economy, in whatever form it takes (capitalist, communist or other), has to come to an abrupt end. It cannot be replaced by any form of society that over-uses non-renewable resources. If the scientists warning us of imminent global catastrophe are correct, these conclusions seem inescapable and could mean the end of economic growth, of much investment and of many jobs, rather than a smooth transition to 'green' jobs and renewed growth based on a new 'green' economy. There are many ideas about how a low growth or contracting economy would work.³¹ From the perspective of this essay, a key aspect (though only one of many aspects) of the problem, in the so-called developed world at least, is not so much that new jobs will have to be found but rather that many people have become so dependent on having a job in the waste economy in the first place, or on having a full-time rather than a part-time job, or on having a job for forty

recognised, no doubt due to the fact that it is difficult to read and understand, and the reader, myself included, is forced to run to academic interpreters for help in making sense of it.

³¹ To examine these, a good starting point is the *State of the World* series published by The Worldwatch Institute. For a discussion of how jobs might be maintained in a zero-growth or contracting economy, see for example Custers 2009, Williams 1985, pp. 255-60 and the extensive work undertaken by Robert Costanza.

years of their lives rather than twenty. In societies in which most people have moved off the land, or abandoned close ties with farming communities, in which the majority of the population live in households comprising at most only a few people and in neighbourhoods that have lost the family and other supportive social ties characterising villages of the past, in which housing has become part of a speculative investment market, in which transport has become dominated by the motor car, and in which the commodification of culture has triumphed, the cost of living has become unsustainable because it is based on jobs that are unsustainable. If the cost of living can be reduced, some of the pressure to find new jobs when the old jobs are closed down will disappear. This does not mean the end of work, there will still be plenty of that to do, though not necessarily work as defined in the way it is now in the current labour market. It means the end of patterns of production and consumption, particularly in the areas of housing, transport and food, that make people depend on work *in the waste economy* for their survival.

The housing market in Australia since the 1950s is a salient case in point. The cost of owning or renting a house in Australia is based on ‘what the market will bear’. In the speculative market that has resulted, the price of a house has no relation to its quality. There is a dearth of quantitative data on the subject but one could confidently expect a census of Australian housing to reveal that many or most houses lack energy efficiency, are poorly designed and sited in terms either of privacy or opportunities for social interaction with neighbours, are prone to termite attack, are adversely affected by pollution and noise from road traffic and aircraft, are full of toxic materials and have hidden structural defects.³² Homes are hot in summer and cold in winter without high energy inputs for cooling or heating, and contain asbestos or materials that emit formaldehydes, volatile organic compounds and other chemicals that contribute to ‘sick building syndrome’. A home buyer does not receive any life expectancy tables for different parts of the house or any depreciation schedules. Or the names of the individuals (as opposed to companies) responsible for its design, construction and certification that it is fit for occupancy. Or indeed, since independent government certifiers were replaced by private certifiers who can be chosen by builders and developers themselves, any guarantee whatsoever that the home has been constructed in accordance with Australian standards. Buyers of units or apartments often suffer the additional burden of having to live under body corporate legislation that in many ways has been written for the benefit of developers, with all kinds of scams made possible by this legislation. Houses in Australia are also too big and too complex, this contributing to their high cost of construction and maintenance. The requirement in most jurisdictions for motor vehicles belonging to occupants to be housed on a property adds considerably to the cost and often severely constrains design choices—this is part of the massive public subsidy we give to the global car industry. Even in new housing developments, little or no attention is paid to clustering houses in ways that allow for secure and private gardening plots, or efficient use of renewable energy technologies (such as solar arrays), or ways in which neighbourhood designs could be made more suitable for children or the elderly.

³² Easthope, Randolph and Judd (2012), in a study of units (otherwise known as flats or apartments) in strata management or body corporate schemes in the state of New South Wales in Australia, found that in buildings built since 2000, 85 per cent of respondents in their survey complained of building defects.

In short, it is very much a situation of ‘buyer beware’ and house prices reflecting demand. With serious problems common across much of the housing stock, however, there is little choice for buyers in terms of the quality available. Housing policy in Australia has failed to deliver quality housing and is impeding the necessary reconstruction of much of the existing housing stock. Owners with huge mortgages can scarcely afford to have asbestos removed or to pay for expensive renovations to improve energy efficiency, for example, let alone in some cases even basic maintenance. Or they don’t bother to fix problems because they are interested only in the speculative value of their house rather than its actual quality. This is a case of policy failure not market failure. The aim of the ‘free market’ in housing is not to deliver quality housing; it is, as in other sectors of the economy, to deliver profits to its participants. In this respect, that is, in its own terms, it has been a runaway success. Banks, developers, real estate agents, speculators and investors have all made fortunes out of the housing market. At the expense, of course, of younger and future generations and of the standard of housing in Australia, the cost of the latter to be borne by present and future generations in terms of energy costs, health costs and opportunity costs so far as child care, aged care, city farming and renewable energy generation, for example, are concerned. Runaway house prices exact a heavy social and economic toll in other respects as well: in putting upward pressure on wages, in reducing the amount of investment in other sectors of the economy, in driving up retail prices (as rents increase), and in increasing social inequality. Single persons, renters, low income households, the aged, first home buyers, persons who are divorced and single-income households are particularly disadvantaged by house price bubbles, as are small businesses. The speculative housing market (and the property market in general: land, housing, commercial property) is a culturally accepted political arrangement that channels huge sums of money to undemocratic institutions (banks, developers, etc) that invest this money in ways beyond public control and, in turn, through their contribution to ‘jobs, growth and investment’, exert inordinate influence on government. Banks are big investors in the fossil fuel (coal, oil, gas) industries and who knows what else. Every person making home loan repayments to the banks, contributing to bank profits, is contributing to these investments.

The ‘supply and demand’ and other arguments one finds in economic analyses purporting to explain house price bubbles are just smoke and mirrors hiding the political framework that supports the speculative housing market: self regulation of the banks, self regulation of the building industry, tax policy (in relation to capital gains and negative gearing, for instance) and government revenue raising based on property values (rates and stamp duty, for instance), to name just a few of the pillars of this framework. Economics is here, as it is on other issues, philosophy dressed up as observation of the facts, blind religious faith dressed up as practical and reasonable analysis, and a political programme dressed up as a description of the supposed laws of society or ‘the economy’ as if they were laws of nature. The question is not whether supply and demand determines house prices but what fools would tolerate policy settings that allow supply and demand to determine house prices.

Individual home buyers, for their part, to the extent that they are forced to pay prices and rents at speculative values, are in turn forced to applaud ‘jobs, growth and investment’

because a steady income derived from participation in the waste economy is what allows them to pay speculative house prices—a vicious circle if ever there was one.

An essential and priority measure in any transition to a green economy is therefore to take speculation out of the housing market. All housing, not just welfare housing; this is not just a housing ‘affordability’ issue. Government measures will do this most effectively, especially tighter regulation of the banks and revised tax policy in relation to capital gains and negative gearing. Property valuations should not be the preserve of the banks. Perhaps one strategy could be to have house prices fixed by independent government valuers with reduced values for houses with poor energy efficiency, high levels of toxicity, excessive resource use, short life expectancy, poor safety and so on. Neighbourhood designs could be factored into the pricing regime: houses in neighbourhoods that facilitate safe and pleasant walking, cycling and public transport use and have low reliance on cars should have higher values; as should houses with walking access to city farms, houses with designs that preserve the privacy of individual houses while providing, for example, secure areas for children in the neighbourhood to play together.³³ And so on. The details would have to be worked out and some level of cultural acceptance obtained for them, in the same way that it has become accepted in Australia (albeit foolishly) that housing designs should make provision for on-site parking of cars.³⁴ There are many other options for government policies to take speculation out of the housing market; the work of devising, debating and evaluating them needs to begin urgently. They would have to include new kinds of regulation of the lending practices of banks, and review and reform of the cost structures, training practices, employment patterns and regulation of the building industry and of the way various levels of government levy taxes, rates and charges on land and housing. A study of housing policy in Germany would be a good start.

There are numerous examples of non-government organisations that are trying to take housing out of the speculative market, the Mietshäuser Syndikat in Germany being a particularly important model.³⁵ The ‘community land trust’ model, developed in the US and the UK, also deserves attention,³⁶ as does the ‘Nightingale model’ of housing development which leaves out the developer and the real estate agent.

Massive reductions in car dependence would also have to be a priority measure. Reduced car dependence means people do not have to own a car to make the trips they need to make. It

³³ In this respect we in Australia have much to learn from the past and from other cultures; from the cloisters, quadrangles and begijnhof of Europe, the siheyuan of China, the naalukettu of India and the peristyle of ancient Greece and Rome, for instance.

³⁴ This policy has led to the phenomenon of parents driving over their own children in the driveway of their home. Each year in Australia, several children are killed in this manner and dozens seriously injured—see Australian Government 2012, *Child pedestrian safety*.

³⁵ See Martin Denoun and Geoffroy Valadon, ‘Habitat coopératif, verrou contre la spéculation’, *Le monde diplomatique*, Décembre 2012, p. 16. This article did not appear in the English edition. The Syndikat website provides information in German only, which I do not speak, but I was able to obtain from them an English translation of a conference paper which is very helpful.

³⁶ See, for instance, Land Conservancy of British Columbia 2010, *A review of farmland trusts: communities supporting farmland, farming and farmers*, available at <www.conservancy.bc.ca>. See also the extensive work by Louise Crabtree in Australia.

means parents can take their children around safely, pleasantly and conveniently without having to own a car. It means young and old, males and females, can go out day or night to work, to do the shopping or whatever, without having to own a car. It means our cities have to be redesigned to make it possible to do these things on foot, on bicycles, in pedal-powered vehicles or in low-powered electric vehicles (able to go no faster than 40 km/h, not 140 or 240) that are able to carry multiple persons and goods.

There are many, many reasons to get rid of the motor car, and its variants such as motorbikes and scooters: noise, pollution, gridlock, road deaths and injury, destruction of public spaces, the huge amount of land devoted to car travel and parking³⁷ and other massive public subsidies (road funding, hospitals, police), the way cars obstruct the movement of pedestrians, cyclists and mass transit; the list goes on and on and applies to electric cars as much as cars running on fossil fuels. Here we focus our attention on the fact that car dependence, the situation where our cities give many people little choice but to use a car to get around, is a significant household cost, both directly and indirectly via the taxes and charges that need to be paid to governments to meet the infrastructure, hospital, policing and other public costs involved in supporting car travel. The loss of our ability to be out and about on foot for the many purposes of our daily lives has destroyed not only the liveability and vitality of our cities³⁸ but also our ability to reduce our participation in the waste economy. The car itself is perhaps one of the foremost symbols of the waste economy. It performs transport tasks that can be accomplished by other means with far lower public subsidies and far lower social, economic, environmental and health costs.

A new pact between country and city will be essential. City-dwellers can provide farmers and indigenous communities on the land with guaranteed markets and fair prices (even though similar goods might be available from other sources at lower prices), with free or cheap labour, with capital and scientific advice, with political support in the city, with accommodation for their children going to school in the city, or with help in their old age. In return, city-dwellers might reasonably expect rural-dwellers to provide them with food and other needed goods at an agreed price even when a higher price for rural produce can be obtained in the global market, to not sell their land to property developers or mining companies, to practice ecologically sustainable agriculture, or to provide them with refuge in times of war or other crises. Such agreements might need to be made legally binding on both parties. At a national level, state intervention or forms of collective ownership (such as cooperatives) might be an essential part of the mix of arrangements necessary. Parties to such agreements need not be in the same country; it is not unusual for cooperatives, for example, to support sustainable agriculture in other countries. Coop Kobe in Japan, the largest consumer coop in the world, with over 1.2 million members, imports bananas from a worker-owned plantation in the Philippines which grows organic bananas.³⁹ Since 2000, several

³⁷ According to Mimi Sheller and John Urry, in an essay on the many consequences for social life of the motor car (2000, p. 746), 'About one-quarter of the land in London and nearly one-half of that in LA is devoted to car-only environments'.

³⁸ See Jane Jacobs 1961, the International Transport Forum 2011 and Jan Gehl 2010.

³⁹ See Ruth Grubel, 'The consumer co-op in Japan: building democratic alternatives to state-led capitalism' in Furlough & Strikwerda 1999, p. 316.

groups in the United States, Canada and Europe have been organising to provide a direct market for Mayan coffee cooperatives in the Chiapas Highlands of Mexico, adopting *fair* trade arrangements in defiance of the ruinous ‘free trade’ provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which discriminate against cooperatives in favour of transnational corporations.⁴⁰ Despite their ‘free trade’ rhetoric, global corporations, with their ability to control whole supply chains and patterns of demand (through advertising), are able to monopolise markets and drastically limit the freedom of choice of consumers. As a kind of ‘globalisation from below’, attempts by supporters of cooperatives to challenge such monopolies are not therefore necessarily antithetical to ‘free markets’; nor are they necessarily inconsistent with the kinds of agricultural nationalism (‘buy Australian’) or agricultural regionalism (‘buy local’) that are often seen as essential components of food security and sustainable agriculture.⁴¹

All the above measures are proposed here as ways of gaining more control over the cost of living. A fuller account of an alternative way of life, beyond the scope of this paper, would focus as well on manufacturing, financial institutions, employment patterns and so on.

Taking speculation out of the housing market, reducing car dependence, creating new relations of interdependence between urban and rural communities, both indigenous and colonial, and adopting housing and neighbourhood designs that make possible community-based solutions to energy and food production and to meeting needs such as child care and aged care, would go a long way to restoring some of the self-sufficiency that characterised pre-modern communities. It is precisely this self-sufficiency that has been destroyed by the modern economy and the welfare state. To say this is not to idealise the Middle Ages or to suggest that the conditions of life at that time can be recreated, that we can or should return to a way of life based on crafts and subsistence agriculture. It might not be possible to bring back the extended family living in the same neighbourhood but it might be possible to create neighbourhood networks that serve similar functions. Moving large numbers of people out of the cities and into the countryside is also problematic but we can protect and support existing agriculture, bring more food production into the cities and create a new pact between country and city. In any case, the past is not our only model. The so-called developed countries have much to learn from the so-called developing countries in this respect. On a recent visit to Fiji, a group of small islands in the Pacific Ocean, I observed school children happily walking several kilometres from school to home. In Australia this is unheard of; children are rushed

⁴⁰ See Williams 2007, pp. 134–5. According to Williams (p. 16), US law severely restricts the combining of cooperative enterprises that cover the whole chain of production, processing, distribution and sales under a single corporate charter, defining such combining as unfair trade and actionable under anti-trust laws. These restrictions do not apply to the standard corporation, since it is possible for them to gather various kinds of unrelated companies under a single conglomerate umbrella. By contrast, under Spanish law, the Mondragón group can operate in every sector of the economy under the same cooperative corporate charter (p. 33).

⁴¹ The issues are many and complex and it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore them in any depth. See Alana Mann 2014, *Global activism in food politics: power shift*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, for a recent overview. Transporting food across the globe, made possible by under-priced fossil fuels, can be seen as unsustainable. On the other hand, climate change and other factors are bringing uncertainty to the viability of agriculture in any given nation or region over the medium to long term. International trade in food is therefore likely to be an essential component of food security, indeed a lifeline, for those affected by the collapse or inadequacy of agriculture in their countries or regions.

from school in four-wheel drives to their afternoon ‘developmental’ activities. Many people in Fiji—and hundreds of millions of people who live on islands to the north and east of Australia—live in villages or on farms, live without cars and without much of the consumerist paraphernalia and hectic way of life considered ‘essential’ in places like Australia. Life in places like Fiji is not without its problems, issues and challenges. Nonetheless, the way of life in such places offers some insights into how we might survive this century; they don’t have our carbon footprint for a start. Such insights would supplement not replace our experience with the techniques of industrial production, and with science and technology, all of which will have to be part of our survival kit for the twenty-first century.

Thus in redefining the realm of necessity we need to look at models from ‘poorer’ countries. We’ll need to drop our condescending attitude that people still living on the land, still living in villages, are somehow at an inferior or backward stage of development. The word ‘still’ says it all. Such presumptions and prejudices about human evolution and progress will be severely tested this century. Let’s see, for instance, who best survives ‘the coming famine’, if and when it arrives.

My ideas here can be interpreted as a variation on the idea of a ‘basic income’ for all, though they are unlike this idea in that they have more to do with restoring and preserving ‘social capital’⁴², or rather, bonds of sociality, reciprocity and mutual obligation, than with guaranteeing individuals a minimum monetary income. Zygmunt Bauman, in arguing ‘the case for a basic income’, identifies its intellectual lineage (1999, pp. 180-1):

It was Thomas Paine who first advanced the idea ... Two centuries after Thomas Paine the idea of detaching essential livelihood from employment has been broached time and again all over Europe: in France by Jacques Duboin in the 1930s and later by his followers; in Belgium by the Charles-Fourier Circle in the 1980s; in recent years, by the Greens in Germany, in Holland and Spain, and in Ireland by no less an authority than the National Conference of Bishops. The idea crops up again and again under different names and in slightly different renditions. For instance, Yoland Bresson and René Passet write of ‘revenu d’existence’, Philippe Van Parijs of ‘universal allocation’, Jean-Marc Ferry of ‘citizenship income’, Jean-Paul Maréchal of ‘the second cheque’ ...

Importantly, Bauman also sees in the idea of a ‘basic income’ a way to free people from feeling insecure, uncertain and unsafe in a world in which globalisation has made the position of many in the labour market, and hence in society, precarious. Only people freed from fear are likely to be the historical agents of an alternative, oppositional practice of democracy which emphasises letting go of established reference points and a continuous collective process of re-establishing new ones.⁴³

Cities for people, not cars; houses as homes, not investments; links with food producers and new forms of community and cooperation: these will be a bedrock of *cultural* wealth on which we can all build our lives and are ideas that should be considered as part and parcel of

⁴² We live in a time when it has been declared that ‘there is no such thing as society’, leading some to smuggle the concept of society back clothed as ‘capital’, which the dominant neo-liberal discourse has no trouble recognising and to which it assigns supreme value.

⁴³ See Bauman 1999, pp. 182, 84-6.

any blueprint for an alternative society. Australia before the Second World War had this kind of cultural wealth, to a greater extent than today at least.

Redefining necessity: models from the cooperative movement

Furlough and Strikwerda⁴⁴ found that in Britain in 1920, approximately 35 per cent of the population belonged to a cooperative; in Germany in 1921, the figure was over 20 per cent. In terms of numbers of members and the proportion of retail trade under their control, the influence of cooperatives declined in Europe after this period. Still, they retain a significant presence worldwide. In the 1990s in Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden, consumer cooperatives have ‘... continued to be the preferred places to shop for about a fifth of the population’. ‘Farmers’ cooperatives flourish all across the globe from Canada, France, and Israel to India and Japan’. Credit unions in the United States and Germany have retained strong membership numbers. The ‘... cooperative movement in Denmark is a successful economic and social movement that retained 17 per cent of all retail trade, 25 per cent of the food sales, and one-third of the food and beverage market in the 1980s’. In Japan in the 1980s, ‘... cooperatives, by one estimate, accounted for one-third of retail food trade’. In Italy and in Spain, cooperative ventures pursue a variety of ends.

Throughout its history, the means and ends pursued by the cooperative movement have varied considerably, Furlough and Strikwerda further point out. While Lassalle, Marx and Kautsky in the nineteenth century had viewed the cooperative movement as ‘reformist’ and a diversion from revolutionary socialist ideals, in 1910 the Congress of the Second International ‘... affirmed that consumer cooperation was a weapon of the working class in its struggle to achieve political and economic power’. Others viewed the cooperative movement as a ‘middle way’ between capitalism and socialism (this view was particularly influential in Sweden). Still others saw cooperation as a means of self-help for the poor, enabling them to ‘adjust’ to capitalist society and thus not need state aid, trade unions or revolutionary activity to remedy their situation. There was a Catholic cooperation movement, which still has a significant presence in Italy and Spain today. In some parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Slovenia for instance), cooperatives were viewed in nationalist terms, as a means to achieve national economic independence from the Empire.

The International Cooperative Alliance, founded in 1895, still exists. The United Nations International Year of Cooperatives, 2012, sparked worldwide interest in the topic. Birchall and Ketilson (2009) argue that in the global financial crisis which began in 2008, cooperatives displayed a remarkable resilience, standing them in good stead as a model of stable business enterprise. Yet on the question of whether cooperatives can or should be anything more than just a ‘sector’ within a capitalist or communist society, whether they can be an *alternative* to both of these, *replacing* them as the dominant model, opinion is as

⁴⁴ This and the next paragraph are sourced from their introduction to Furlough, E & Strikwerda, C (eds) 1999: pages 19, 26, 36, 15-17, 11 and 13. There are many other examples described in other sources. Some see the Mondragón cooperative in Spain as a particularly important model. The website of the International Cooperative Alliance highlights what it sees as important cooperative achievements. The *ABS Year Book Australia 2012* listed a range of membership, employment and economic activity statistics for various countries (pp. 63–64). Williams 2007 focuses on some major coops in Europe (including Mondragón), Asia and South America and their development since the 1990s.

divided as it ever was. In fact, for most of its history, the cooperative movement itself has insisted on its political neutrality, with adherents often seeing their goals as 'economic' or 'social' rather than 'political'. In Australia, 'Co-operatives themselves have rarely argued their case or sought to educate their members and the wider public of the virtues of a co-operation' (Lyons 2001, p. 11).⁴⁵ This apolitical stance has been a source of dismay for those observers who have seen in cooperatives the prospect of a major contribution to radical transformation of the modern way of life, yet who see cooperative members themselves hindering this potential through their failure to 'take sides' and work openly towards the explicitly political goal of realising this potential.⁴⁶

Cooperatives have rarely sought to replace the state as such though, sure enough, anarchists have been among their advocates⁴⁷ along with people from every other political tendency. The principles of self-help and independence from state support have been more the norm, focusing on areas of life where this can be achieved and leaving to the state areas such as health, education and defence where it cannot. States have responded to cooperative movements in different ways: complaining about their tax-exempt status, belittling their capacity to develop economies of scale through large-scale organisation and centralisation (as this conflicts with the democratic principles of cooperatives), decrying their anti-competitive practices and dependence on government regulation or, conversely, their 'unfair' competition against businesses favoured by government (small shopkeepers, large profit-oriented corporations), their usefulness in times of scarcity but not in times of plenty, and so on. In Germany and Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, the period of the rise of fascism, fear of cooperatives as a site of working class mobilisation led Mussolini and Hitler to bring them firmly under state control. In Russia the Bolsheviks distrusted the voluntary, decentralised cooperative movement and Stalin eventually 'nationalised' them in the 1930s.⁴⁸ The neoliberal state in Europe today tolerates cooperatives to the extent that they are useful in mopping up some of the damage (unemployment and social exclusion in particular) caused by the ravages of the global market economy. In this context, the fact that the 'social economy' has taken a small proportion of economic activity out of the 'free market' (in France perhaps as much as ten per cent) is not therefore under current circumstances considered a threat to the global economic order (Motchane 2000).

Were cooperatives to gain a significant share of economic activity, subverting the 'free market' by reducing the 'freedom' of those wishing to sell products from parts of the world where labour costs are lowest, working conditions are least regulated and where negative environmental and social outcomes are relegated to the status of 'externalities'⁴⁹, one would

⁴⁵ Failing thereby to adhere to one of the key goals of cooperatives, the education of their members.

⁴⁶ See, for a contemporary example, Jean-Loup Motchane in the July 2000 issue of *Le Monde diplomatique*, pp. 4–5. In France and elsewhere in Europe, millions of citizens are members of mutuals, cooperatives and associations but the vast domain of their activities remains invisible, marginalised and sometimes just a bandaid for the damage wrought by the dominant liberal economy, complains Motchane, because of the reluctance of these citizens to propose their activities as a political alternative to the dominant liberal economy.

⁴⁷ Motchane 2000 includes Proudhon in a list of early theorists of the 'social economy'.

⁴⁸ Here I am relying again on Furlough & Strikwerda 1999.

⁴⁹ A term used in economics to describe anything outside the usual concerns of the discipline and often applied to issues such as human health, environmental outcomes, political stability and so on.

expect cooperatives to rapidly become enemies of the neoliberal state. Reconstitution of the state, transforming it from one that is obsessed with an ‘economy’ divorced from its social and environmental context to one concerned with the totality of human well-being in all its dimensions (social, cultural, environmental and so on), would thus need to be a core preoccupation of the cooperative movement to protect its capacity for expansion and indeed survival. In turn, the cooperative movement itself would become a core constituency for such a transformed state, defending it, engaging with it in a continuous process, though hopefully more transparently and accountably than established interests currently engage with government.

We need to be especially clear on this point: any political party which comes to power on a platform of keeping coal, oil and gas in the ground, of chasing off transnational investment, of pursuing a zero growth or contracting economy, and of winding down consumer society will not last long (or be elected in the first place) unless it is based on a constituency that supports it, the kind of constituency I have outlined above. Another important point needs to be made as well: the aim of the cooperative movement must not be to simply get the ‘right’ government elected so that the state can then ‘solve all the problems’ and the cooperatives can retire from active involvement in problem-solving activity. To the maximum extent possible, the cooperatives should seek to solve problems themselves, avoiding the dangers and pitfalls of centralised state decision-making, chief among them the weakening (through irrelevance) of democratic processes in civil society itself.

Furlough and Strikwerda concluded that ‘... the successful cases of consumer cooperation demonstrate that cooperation has had to respond continually to competitive pressures within capitalist societies and, frequently, to be allied with other social movements to remain viable and resist opposition’. In Denmark, where the major growth of cooperation took place among farmers, ‘... it was sustained by a strong network of local newspapers linked to the farmers political party’.⁵⁰ In Japan, members of the Seikatsu Club found they had to enter government to achieve their goals.⁵¹ However much the cooperative movement may wish to define itself as ‘politically neutral’, the fact is that, both in its history and current forms, it has always been and remains a profoundly political enterprise.

To the extent that cooperatives today have a ‘whole of life’ perspective rather than a narrow focus on profit-making, that they reinvigorate the notion of a ‘moral economy’, minimising the scope of the ‘necessities of life’ to those that are ecologically sustainable or produced under conditions of fairness and justice, that they bring together the country and the city, harness the power of voluntary association rather than that of the state, and maintain vibrant

⁵⁰ Furlough & Strikwerda 1999, p. 42 and p. 36. For more detail on Denmark, see Niels Finn Christiansen, ‘Between farmers and workers: consumer cooperation in Denmark, 1850–1940’ in Furlough & Strikwerda 1999, pp. 221–239.

⁵¹ Members of the Seikatsu Club, mainly housewives, became concerned about the health and environmental effects of synthetic detergents and wanted local governments to switch to pure soap in schools, government offices, etc. Frustrated with the resistance by bureaucrats in these government offices, club members decided to run for local city council positions themselves. By 1995, 109 of them had been elected to public office. For more details, see Ruth Grubel, ‘The consumer co-op in Japan: building democratic alternatives to state-led capitalism’ in Furlough & Strikwerda 1999, pp. 303–330.

democratic structures, they strike me as being of fundamental importance in the remaking of our way of life. Cooperatives can provide ‘jobs of our own’, as Race Mathews (2009) puts it, highlighting the success of the Mondragon employee-owned cooperatives in Spain.⁵² They deserve a long hard look and a reassessment of their potential as alternatives to the market and the state. I think we can say with E. P. Thompson⁵³ that:

Those who see, in the failure [in the nineteenth century in Britain] of these experiments [in cooperation], only a proof of their folly may perhaps be too confident that ‘history’ has shown them to be a dead end.

In cultivating the ‘art of association’, the cooperative movement in its internal workings has also always provided a training ground for political activity, much in the same way that discussion in the literary societies in Western Europe in the eighteenth century was a ‘precursor of the public sphere operative in the political domain’ (Habermas 1992, p. 29). The Women’s Cooperative Guild in England, for example, founded in 1883, enabled working-class women to find their voices and make political and social claims both within the cooperative movement and the wider polity.⁵⁴

A prerequisite for participation in public affairs is spare time, time to attend meetings, to pursue an education, to practise the arts of dialogue, rhetoric and argument. Such time has typically been the privilege of the wealthy, wealthy males in particular. If people are to have time to participate in politics, the tasks of growing food, of looking after children, the sick or the elderly, of home maintenance and so on cannot be, at least not completely, the tasks of isolated individuals, couples or small families. If cooperatives can enable people to secure a livelihood without submitting to the definition of work imposed by the labour market, if what are considered to be the necessities of life can be minimised, and the tasks required to provide those necessities can be shared by mutually supportive members of cooperatives, giving everyone some spare time, there is a chance a reinvigorated public sphere could emerge. But what does an effective public sphere today need to look like? What kind of politics do we need today?

POLITICS

What is politics? One often sees it distinguished from ‘the economy’ and ‘society’. It is often associated with the machinations of the state, the legislative arm of government in particular. The concept of ‘power’ is often tied to it, as in the expression ‘to exercise political power’. Others see the activity of politics taking place in one of the manifestations of ‘the public sphere’, where this sphere becomes one in which state authority is publicly monitored and influenced by the people over whom state authority is exercised. In such a sphere, ‘the people’ aim to have a say in the decisions of government and their ability to do so is

⁵² Mathews praises Mondragon for its impressive record of economic growth. It is unclear how much of this could be described as ‘green’ growth, especially since much of the writing on Mondragon remains untranslated into English. From my perspective, what deserves attention is the fact that the Mondragon cooperatives are concerned with production not just consumption, are employee-owned and democratically controlled, and thus go beyond the focus of much of the cooperative movement on consumer cooperation and placing household savings in credit unions, mutuals and the like.

⁵³ Thompson 1968, p. 885, on Owenism.

⁵⁴ See Furlough & Strikwerda 1999, pp. 42–52.

considered as the foundation stone of democracy. The nature of politics, its most effective means and its proper ends, has in fact always been and continues to be the subject of ongoing dispute.⁵⁵ Here we focus on a few issues in politics of relevance to our concerns.

The idea of progress

How has the waste economy come to be seen as progress, development, and the very epitome of modernity? In the English language, the word ‘progress’ acquired its modern meanings in the last decades of the eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth century. Some of the other words that either came for the first time into common English use or acquired new meanings in this period were ‘industry’, ‘democracy’, ‘class’, ‘art’, ‘culture’, ‘scientist’ and ‘bureaucracy’ (Williams 1961, pp. 13–17). The American and French revolutions, industrialisation, the rise of the European nation-states, the decline of the authority of religion and monarchy and the rise of science and reason as the arbiters of truth, and the triumphant march of European and North American imperialism through most parts of the world: many Europeans viewed all or some of these, depending on their predilections, as an extraordinary European achievement that left the old order for dead; progress in short.

Marx too believed in the idea of progress. Capitalism was a higher stage of human development than feudalism, and communism would build on the achievements of capitalism to create an even higher stage. Marx’s famous lines in *The communist manifesto*, published in 1848, have an optimistic ending (Marx & Engels 1967, p. 83):

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Not everyone in Marx’s time saw the passing of the old order as a lifting of a veil of religious and political illusions, leaving man finally with ‘sober senses’ to face and drag himself out of his predicament, with the help of scientific socialism.

In England, a long tradition of social criticism⁵⁶, stretching from the late eighteenth century to today, saw in the destabilising influences of capitalism more loss than gain: loss of community, loss of the independence that comes from ownership of property, whether communally or privately owned, and loss of a sense of common purpose. In the nineteenth century, there were conservatives and radicals, socialists and Christians who in their different ways saw the workings of a communal society as a superior alternative to the individualism of the modern world. The writings of Edmund Burke, William Cobbett, A. W. Pugin, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris, though they might have idealised the Middle Ages, still strike a chord today. Hilaire Belloc, in *The servile state* published in 1927, lamented the expropriation of the peasantry, a process that began with the seizure of ecclesiastical and

⁵⁵ See, for example, Marsh & Stoker 2010 and Morrow 1998.

⁵⁶ This paragraph, from here to the quote from Eliot, relies upon Raymond Williams 1961, *Culture and society 1780–1950*, though the emphases and summary are mine. All quotations I have used are cited in Williams: Belloc p. 188, Tawney p. 215 and p. 217, Eliot pp. 225–6.

monastic lands during the Reformation, for its denial of the opportunity for everyone to be ‘economically free through the possession of capital and land’. For the historian R. H. Tawney, in *The acquisitive society* published in 1921, ‘The natural consequence of the abdication of authorities which had stood, however imperfectly, for a common purpose in social organization, was the gradual disappearance in social thought of the idea of purpose itself’. Of industrialism he had this to say:

When a Cabinet Minister declares that the greatness of this country depends upon the volume of its exports, so that France, which exports comparatively little, and Elizabethan England, which exported next to nothing, are presumably to be pitied as altogether inferior civilizations, that is Industrialism. It is the confusion of one minor department of life with the whole of life. ... When the Press clamours that the one thing needed to make this island an Arcadia is productivity, and more productivity, and yet more productivity, that is Industrialism. It is the confusion of means with ends.

That is a statement that would ring true in Britain or Australia today, as would the warning sounded by T. S. Eliot in 1939 in *The idea of a Christian society*:

We are being made aware that the organization of society on the principle of private profit, as well as public destruction, is leading both to the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism, and to the exhaustion of natural resources, and that a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly. ... Was our society, which had always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?

Notwithstanding voices such as these in England and elsewhere, the dominant tendency in the modern age has not been to describe the ‘important things in life’ in terms such as ‘ensuring that the people of the world are fed, clothed and sheltered’ or ‘taking only as much from Nature as is needed and leaving the rest for future generations’ or ‘respecting and fearing Nature and ensuring that the balance and life-sustaining capacity of Nature are not disturbed’. Whereas for the Greeks in classical antiquity it was a life devoted to the matters of the *polis*, for the Romans in classical antiquity a life devoted to the *res publica*, and for the Western world in the Middle Ages the ‘salvation of the soul’, in the modern age what has mattered most has been the ‘accumulation of wealth’, ‘productivity’, ‘economic growth without limits’ and the pursuit of ‘individual happiness’. Prior to the modern age, the essence of virtue was to acquire only a certain level of life’s necessities and then move on to ‘higher things’. For our society, there is no such thing as ‘enough’ of the necessities of life, the sphere of necessity having become bloated and deformed.

To this day, the key statistical measure of progress remains Gross Domestic Product (GDP), recent initiatives to develop a wider range of measures notwithstanding.⁵⁷ The destruction of

⁵⁷ An outline of some such initiatives can be found in *Measures of Australia’s Progress* (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). It remains to be seen whether new measures will merely supplement, rather than replace, GDP as the primary measure of progress. See also the extensive work on ‘ecological economics’ by Robert Costanza. One often observes in alternative measures of progress the use of terms such as ‘natural capital’ and ‘social capital’. This seems to be part of an attempt within the discipline of economics to expand one of its key concepts, the notion of capital, to include facets of the world that it has previously considered as ‘externalities’. Do these terms serve to reemphasise the centrality of capital, of capital-ism, in the modern world? Do these

nature in city development, for example, or the reconstruction of cities destroyed by nature, are recorded in GDP as progress (Zencey 2009). Costanza and others concur: 'From the perspective of GDP, more crime, sickness, war, pollution, fires, storms, and pestilence are all potentially good things because they can increase marketed activity in the economy'.⁵⁸

Forests are logged until there are no forests left, fishing goes on until there are no more fish in the sea, oil is used until no more oil can be found, coal and iron ore are mined at a rate that assumes they will not be needed in the centuries to come, if any thought is given to this issue at all; it all creates jobs and adds to GDP. Such 'progress' is hailed as the hallmark of 'advanced' industrial society, the 'developed' economies; those parts of the world not yet participating in the feeding frenzy are labelled as 'emerging' or 'developing' economies or lower in the scale of progress, 'third world' rather than 'first' or 'second' world.

Work by the Global Footprint Network, established by William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel following their development in the 1990s of the concept of 'ecological footprint', demonstrates that 'if everyone consumed at the levels of the average citizen of Bangladesh or Sierra Leone, we would still be well within the Earth's capacity to support us in the long term. By contrast, if all humans adopted a U.S. living standard, we would need four planets' (Cribb 2010, p. 162). Such considerations carry no weight in the dominant idea of progress and this is a kind of blindness, a set of blinkers that prevents us from seeing the dangers ahead. There is nothing unusual about this process; all ways of seeing the world are selective in what they highlight and what they leave less visible, in what they bring to the foreground and what they assign to a blurry background.⁵⁹ Few Australians would know the names of the flora and fauna made extinct on this island continent since European occupation in 1788.⁶⁰ Similarly, the aboriginal inhabitants were invisible to the newcomers; it was convenient for the European occupiers to see the continent as 'terra nullius', a land without people, open for colonisation.⁶¹ In race-ism (which is what 'racism' is), individual attributes, individual personalities, disappear under blanket designations such as 'the Arabs', 'the Jews', 'the Asians', 'the blacks', 'the whites'. Few would know, or most would rather forget, that more Australians were killed in road crashes in Australia in the twentieth century than in all

terms imply that nature and society deserve recognition only in terms of their use-value in the formation of capital, however redefined?

⁵⁸ Robert Costanza, with Gar Alperovitz, Herman Daly, Joshua Farley, Carol Franco, Tim Jackson, Ida Kubiszewski, Juliet Schor and Peter Victor, 'Building a sustainable and desirable economy-in-society-in-nature', in Worldwatch Institute 2013, p. 129.

⁵⁹ Dryzek 2013 presents a typology of 'discourses' in relation to the 'politics of the earth'. Different discourses recognise or construct different 'basic entities' to the exclusion of others (for example, a discourse might recognise 'markets' but not 'ecosystems' or vice versa), have different ideas about what is natural in the relationships between entities (for example, if the entity is 'individuals', some might say competition between individuals is natural, whereas others might say cooperation is), recognise different players or 'agents' as key players, and utilise different key metaphors and other rhetorical devices. Bauman (1999, p. 148) puts it succinctly: 'Theory, as it were, is a way of seeing as much as of averting the eyes; it focuses the sight on some aspects of reality by blurring the rest'.

⁶⁰ See Mike Archer and Bob Beale 2004, *Going native*. Pet cats and dogs have personalised names; the wildlife they eat, harass, kill or maim is invisible, unnamed, unknown.

⁶¹ A process not unique to this part of the world. See David Day 2005, *Conquest* and Bayly 2004 for examples of this process worldwide.

the wars in which Australia was involved in that century⁶²; in ‘car culture’, such things are sad things that ‘happen to other people’; in government policy-making, such things are ‘externalities’, unless they can be quantified in dollar terms.⁶³ The role of women in history has often been ignored, made invisible, by historical accounts and social and political analyses, or the achievements of women are often presented as a backdrop to their main story, which is their personal appearance or sexual attractiveness. What is absent from a story or a view of the world is just as important as what is present in conveying to us its meaning and, unfortunately sometimes, in delivering to us its negative consequences for our lives or the lives of others.

The blindness of what is conventionally called ‘neoliberalism’, a blind faith in the ‘market economy’, also sets capitalism itself on a path to self-destruction, not in the way that Marx hoped, with a transition to communism, but in a way that takes all of us down with it, precipitously and without warning; no warning from neoliberalism itself that is. In a history of the twentieth century, Eric Hobsbawm argues that as capitalism has eroded old values and social relationships, many of which it has found convenient, if not essential, for its own development, it has in fact set itself on a course of ‘sawing off at least one of the branches on which it sat’ (1995, p. 16). He lists the Protestant ethic⁶⁴, the abstention from immediate gratification, the ethic of hard work, and family duty and trust as among the values that have served capitalism well. As these ‘melt into air’, in Marx’s famous phrase, along with the bounty of natural resources and the biosphere on which all life depends, something which Marx himself never foresaw, capitalism undermines both itself and the tree of life on which it rests. If humanity is to have a future, Hobsbawm concludes, the capitalism of the late twentieth century can have none (1995, p. 570).⁶⁵

If we accept this conclusion, the question we must then ask is what kind of capitalism or what kind of socialism, if not forms of these that currently exist or have existed, holds any promise of a future for humanity? Or will some altogether different way of life be required? These are questions that can only be resolved collectively, in the practice of politics. Yet here again, in the practice of politics, we are in trouble, big trouble.

Decline of the public sphere

According to many prominent writers on the issue, an effective role for the public sphere in the exercise of political power is something that we have lost. For Arendt in her work *The human condition*, societies in the modern age have lost the experience of politics, which, as Arendt describes it, is the founding and preserving of political bodies that constitute a realm, the public realm, where people can be ‘seen and heard’ trying to find the right words at the right moment, trying to persuade others to agree on a particular course of action, trying to

⁶² In the twentieth century, more than 165,000 people died in road crashes in Australia (Australian Government 2010). The Australian War Memorial records just under 103,000 deaths as a result of service with Australian units in all the wars in which Australia was involved in the twentieth century (see <www.awm.gov.au>).

⁶³ Hence the attempt to put a dollar figure to the ‘cost of road crashes’.

⁶⁴ Recalling, no doubt, Max Weber’s *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*.

⁶⁵ This is a loose paraphrase of Hobsbawm’s text but consistent, I believe, with the gist of his argument.

engage in deeds worthy of remembrance.⁶⁶ We see other books titled *The fall of public man* (Sennett 1977), *The last intellectuals* (Jacoby 1989), *In search of politics* (Bauman 1999) and *The revolt of the elites and the betrayal of democracy* (Lasch 1996). Dan Hind's *The return of the public* is a hoped-for return of a 'public in eclipse'. In *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, Jürgen Habermas (1962) traces the emergence in France, Germany and Britain (the latter in particular) in the eighteenth century of what he terms a 'bourgeois public sphere', a politically effective sphere that in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was subsequently transformed to the point where it could be said to have disintegrated and to be no longer politically relevant. Today in these countries, he argues (p. 176): 'The process of the politically relevant exercise and equilibration of power now takes place directly between the private bureaucracies, special-interest associations, parties, and public administration. The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute its acclamation'.⁶⁷ Such a conclusion can be extrapolated to countries (like Australia) which have adopted similar political systems. Clive Hamilton's *Scorcher: the dirty politics of climate change* provides a case study of the influence of this 'circuit of power' in the development of Australian government policy on energy and climate change.

Insofar as a state becomes a closed circle, a secret society whose deliberations are opaque to the people it governs, it can lose a critical edge in both internal and world affairs. According to the historian Christopher Bayly, '... there is no doubt that the proliferation of associations and societies of self-organisation gave Western societies [in the eighteenth century] a considerable staying power and solidity, for both internal cohesion and external aggression. ... The public sphere created a wedge of expert opinion which could criticize or lampoon the doings of the state, or kings and nobles, with deadly accuracy, contributing to the efficiency and dynamism of political institutions' (2004, p. 74). In other words, when there is not an active public sphere, a state functions in a bubble, deprived of the eyes and ears of the many and hearing only the voices of the few. The private bureaucracies and special-interest associations that have direct access to the political parties and to the offices of public administration tend to be vested interests more concerned with maintaining business-as-usual than with meeting the global challenges of survival now facing humanity. Within the circuit of power, only the mantra of 'jobs, investment, growth' can be heard and governments ignore all else, despite lip-service to the contrary.

Even if national states do take potential global threats seriously, their room for manoeuvre is constrained by the activities of the global financial markets, of transnational corporations and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation. These entities exercise enormous global power but their decisions are made

⁶⁶ In the terminology used in *The human condition*, she argues that both capitalism and communism glorify 'labour', which embodies the ideals of the 'animal laborans' at the expense of the other two activities that constitute the 'vita activa', namely, 'work', which embodies the ideals of 'homo faber' and 'action', which is the 'political activity par excellence'.

⁶⁷ 'Acclamation' meaning a 'mood of conformity', 'good will' or an 'uncommitted friendly disposition' (Habermas 1962, p. 195) of the public towards policies or personalities presented in the publicity generated by those in the 'circuit of power', without the public being given the opportunity to critically discuss the issues involved with persons in the circuit of power.

without reference to any public or state affected by them. Indeed, the decisions of all large 'private' corporations, such as banks, superannuation funds, manufacturers, mining companies, retailers, property developers, agribusinesses, be they national or international in the range of their activities, have an enormous effect on what happens in a country, yet their directors are not elected by the public nor are their decision-making processes transparent or made to be accountable to any public.

Bureaucrats in government offices or private corporations slavishly follow orders, implementing policies that have been the subject of little or no public debate or scrutiny either within or without the bureaucracy. Even in so-called democratic political systems, governments have degenerated into secret societies, functioning in an Oort cloud of lobbyists, senior bureaucrats, journalists and politicians, a 'political class' far removed from the populations in whose name they make decisions. There is little or no debate within government bureaucracies; one's position in the hierarchy, rather than the force of the better argument, determines the fate of one's ideas. Nor do governments make any attempt to submit their policies to the critical scrutiny of a 'reasoning public'. Public opinion management, through the various mass media, is instead the order of the day. Not that it would be easy to find a critical public, eager to participate in politics. Large numbers of citizens have withdrawn from politics altogether, preferring to inhabit a private world of work, consumption and narcissism, embracing, in short, a culture of civic irresponsibility.

These two factors combined, the closed circle in which national states make their decisions and their subordination to supranational entities which themselves exercise power in remote indifference to any national state or public, could account for the peculiar lack of responsiveness of contemporary governments to the threats of the twenty-first century. The resulting sense of powerlessness of politically active citizenry, where they exist, and the narrow scope for manoeuvre of national states that do find their way to addressing (or are forced by international or domestic pressure to focus on) emerging global problems, pose great dangers for democracy.

Civil society, for its part, seems predisposed to passivity and irresponsibility. Employers think only of their profits, employees think only of keeping their jobs. Neither considers whether the work they do is necessary, of benefit to society or of benefit to future generations. In fact, much of the work in our society—in the waste economy—is unnecessary, wasteful of natural resources, destructive of the natural world which supports us all, of little or no benefit to society and is work whose effect in many instances is to rob future generations of opportunities to live in a better world. All that matters is the pursuit of personal financial gain to be enjoyed, outside work, in the pursuit of personal pleasure. Yet the time spent at work leaves little time for family and friends, for one's children or the elderly, let alone any time for participation in public affairs. In the pre-industrial era, it used to be poverty, debt to feudal lords and the incessant toil of a life on the land that locked most people out of participation in public affairs, out of the opportunity to exercise some degree of responsibility for the decisions that affected their lives. Today it is debts to the new feudal lords, the banks, in the form of home mortgages and loans for consumer spending, that lock people into a world of work that is wasteful and destructive, not only of the world's resources

and the biological foundations of life on earth, but also of their lives and their free time, that most precious of all commodities. The ‘mortgage slave’ of today is little advanced from the feudal vassal of yesterday.⁶⁸

In our society, everyone seems to think they have rights but few seem to think they have responsibilities. Employers think they have a right to privatise profits while leaving to society the responsibility to clean up the mess they make—rubbish tips are always seen as ‘civic’ concerns. Individual consumers see themselves as having a right to privatise pleasure and socialise costs. Thus, for instance, everyone thinks they have a right to drive a car, regardless of the noise, pollution, death and injury that accompany this mode of transport, not to mention the inordinate amount of land that has to be covered in concrete and tar to accommodate it. Consumers also feel they have a right to buy the cheapest goods, regardless of the origin of those goods, be that origin in unsustainable agriculture or sweated labour. Investors chase the highest returns, again regardless of the social and environmental costs associated with those returns.

Crisis and authoritarianism

The danger in this situation is that people and states will place their hopes in new forms of authoritarianism, as democratic solutions to the crises of the century, as and when these crises emerge, will appear unlikely. Kinds of ‘green authoritarianism’ are already in evidence.⁶⁹ There are already widely touted ‘model developments’ in urban planning, for instance, that have emerged under authoritarian regimes rather than more democratic ones. Curitiba, in southern Brazil, is famous for its ‘progressive’ urban planning. Yet ‘The progressive urban planning of Curitiba was not initiated by a democratic process; it was set in motion by the military dictatorship that seized power in 1964 and ruled Brazil until the mid-1980s. Its environmentalism is rooted in authoritarianism ... Jaime Lerner, the archangel of the Curitiba green movement, was anointed by the dragons of war’ (Lubow 2007). A smaller scale ‘model development’, the Ecovillage at Currumbin in South-East Queensland, has been acclaimed with over thirty international, national, state and local awards. Here again, however, the model of development was authoritarian. The developer instituted a thoroughly undemocratic body corporate arrangement, in fact a gerrymander, that provided a foundation for all kinds of dubious activities.⁷⁰ The longevity of such models appears to be in doubt; their disenfranchised ‘beneficiaries’ do not always agree that they have benefitted to the extent claimed and, when they can, they start to unwind the measures implemented. People rarely maintain a sense of commitment to measures which are imposed on them from above, in contrast to the dedication and commitment they often demonstrate when measures that affect their lives are devised with their participation and cooperation.

⁶⁸ On ‘time pressure’ in a broad historical perspective see Goodin et al. 2008, pp. 70-72.

⁶⁹ See Dryzek 2013, pp. 37-40, Machin 2013, pp. 69-71 and Flinders 2012, p. 126 forward. The examples given here are my own.

⁷⁰ In Queensland, a ‘layered arrangement’ of bodies corporate can be established to manage a property; a number of bodies corporate are created with a ‘principal’ body corporate made up of representatives from each ‘subsidiary’ body corporate acting as a coordinating body. At the Ecovillage at Currumbin, this arrangement (quite legally) embodied a gerrymander that allowed the developer to rule the roost, for the benefit of the developer at the expense of other owners of the property. Issues such as this were not canvassed by the award-giving organisations; they preferred to rely on marketing material provided to them by the developer!

Imposing limits, rules, boundaries, laws on one another, thereby limiting individual freedom, can be done in ways that are democratic and perceived as legitimate by all or most people concerned. How this can or should be done is explored in later sections of this essay. In authoritarian schemes however, things are never ‘on the people’s terms’. The problem faced by despotisms is that they can’t keep the lid on their populations forever, or even for more than a few decades, or a few centuries. The lid blows, then when the dust settles and the blood is washed from the streets, a new tyranny slowly takes shape. Permanent instability is the result. At the state level, governments which are able to impose measures on their populations in very short timeframes (by virtue of the fact that they bypass public consultation) can present, if they wish, an impressive record of environmental achievements at short notice. They can also rush into decisions that have unforeseen consequences, possibly even catastrophic consequences which weaken the internal cohesion of the societies they govern—those who have suffered collateral damage from the decisions tend not to forgive and forget. Anyone who knows the history of China, for instance, knows that it is not immune to internal disorder and chaos, which in turn creates a vulnerability to intervention by outside powers.⁷¹

Insofar as contemporary states represent vested interests, they are likely to respond to the crises that arise in the coming century by trying to protect, at all costs, the narrow vested interests that they serve. The social inequality that prevails in societies such as Australia gives wealthy minorities disproportionate political power. They can afford lawyers, employ people to write submissions to government, form lobby groups that run expensive public relations campaigns in the mass media, and bribe government officials with money or threats of disinvestment and hence loss of ‘jobs and economic growth’. Such minorities have no respect now for the democratic principle of developing policies that produce the greatest good for the greatest number and nobody should expect them to when the going gets tough. The rich and powerful will build their own private Elysium, leaving the rest of us to fend for ourselves. They are already doing it. In the USA, Lasch claims (1996, pp. 45-7):

To an alarming extent the privileged classes—by an expansive definition, the top 20 percent—have made themselves independent not only of crumbling industrial cities but of public services in general. They send their children to private schools, ensure themselves against medical emergencies by enrolling in company-supported plans, and hire private security guards to protect themselves against the mounting violence against them. In effect, they have removed themselves from the common life. ... Many of them have ceased to think of themselves as Americans in any important sense, implicated in America’s destiny for better or worse. ... The same tendencies are at work all over the world. ... [We are witnessing] the revolt of elites against the constraints of time and place.

There is no natural affinity between capitalism and democracy. In the last few decades, the flight of capital out of democratic countries to places like China demonstrates that the opposite is in fact true. In China, global capitalist enterprises have been able to pollute freely, to uproot and destroy communities, to set up sweat shops and pay minimal wages, to bribe officials to obtain approvals and contracts, to do whatever they like, all the while knowing that political dissenters will face repression by an authoritarian state. Capitalism finds its

⁷¹ See Rodzinski 1991. See Beeson 2010 for an overview of the ‘coming environmental authoritarianism’ in China and East Asia in general.

natural home in places like China. It abhors the situation in more democratic countries where it is, or at least was at one time, constrained by social, environmental, economic and political concerns imposed by elected governments and the political campaigns of citizens' groups. For its part, in the countries of 'democratic capitalism', the neoliberal agenda of privatisation, deregulation, corporate 'self regulation' and minimal government is inherently anti-democratic. Elected governments, for all their faults, are a form of rule by the many. Neoliberalism argues for, and has largely achieved, rule by the corporations, that is, rule by the few; it represents a concentration of power that is entirely at odds with democracy. Authoritarian capitalism, in its neoliberal form, allows private corporations to do what they want, without regard for the public interest. Thus development proposals are fast-tracked, cutting through 'red tape' and 'green tape' and freed from the 'regulatory burden' imposed by the 'nanny state'. This is of course code for allowing corporations, freed from government oversight and controls, to ride roughshod over those in the public or government with concerns about the social, environmental or wider economic effects of developments. The corporations have thus become a state within the state, 'too big to fail', albeit a shadowy state whose activities lack any transparency or accountability to the citizens in the country in which they operate. The ascendancy of neoliberalism as state economic doctrine from the 1970s represents a victory for the corporations in a struggle between private commercial interests and public interests, between corporations and the state, that has been an ongoing feature of the modern world. Sometimes the state has gained the upper hand—usually after some crisis has beset the system—at other times the corporations have. For the moment, in this ongoing tug-of-war, the corporations are the superior side. They have been for most of the time; pollution and treading on the public interest did not start in the 1970s with the rise of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism just represents a particularly aggressive form of capitalism, pushing and shoving against the constraints of the state and the public interest, a heightened form of tendencies that have always been present in the modern world.

Australia's banks, for example, free from state regulation of their home lending practices, have been able to make billions out of the housing market while driving Australian house prices into the stratosphere. Property developers have been able to reshape Australia's cities, often for their own benefit rather than for any desirable public outcomes. Mining companies have been able to build ports that pollute the oceans. Fishing fleets have been able to fish some species to extinction. The food industry has been able to make billions by creating an obesity epidemic. The chemical industry since the Second World War has been able to make billions by producing and selling about 150,000 new chemicals previously unknown in nature without adequate testing of their effects on human health and the environment. And on it goes. Whereas in feudal times kings, nobles and churches were able to treat their subject populations with disdain, today capitalist corporations conduct their affairs in similar fashion. Neoliberalism transfers responsibility for many of the decisions that affect our lives to unaccountable and unelected actors, the large corporations in particular, who nonetheless expect to be bailed out with public money when they get into trouble, as during the global financial crisis of 2008.

Along with this concentration of power in the hands of the few has emerged a concentration of wealth in the hands of the same few, undermining not only democracy but capitalism itself from within. As the political theorist John Strachey put it, ‘... it has been, precisely, the struggle of the democratic forces *against* capitalism which has saved the system. It has done so not only by making tolerable the conditions of life of the wage earners, but also by keeping open that indispensable market for the final product which the self-destructive drive of capitalism to a more and more inequitable distribution of the national income would otherwise have closed’.⁷² With social inequality on the rise, with elites becoming increasingly disengaged from any form of citizenship, and with other democratic forces (the labour movement, for instance) now caught up in the ethic of ‘everyone for themselves’ rather than an ethic of common wellbeing, the link between capitalism and democracy is increasingly weakened. Even in the early 1980s Raymond Williams noted an emerging rationality of self-conscious elites: a deep pessimism among them about the chances of solving the problems of the future (ecological crises, nuclear arms proliferation, for instance) and their consequent preference for a ‘game plan’ that delivers them ‘strategic advantage’, keeping them one step ahead or away from unfolding disasters. He called such thinking ‘Plan X’. It has also, he despairingly admits, made inroads into the labour movement, which at one time represented a great hope for democratic forces but now, when trade unions seek only to look after themselves regardless of the broader social consequences, the labour movement too marches ‘in tune with Plan X’ (1985, pp. 243-8).

There are historical precedents for the ‘Plan X’ thinking that Williams is talking about and these show yet again the commitment of capitalism to democracy to be somewhat less than rock solid. During the Second World War, the General Motors Company built aircraft engines for the U.S. air force. Its German subsidiary, Adam Opel, simultaneously built aircraft engines (plus trucks and torpedoes) for Germany. ‘The company profited from military contracts in both countries. Indeed, in the United States the company took a huge tax deduction for allegedly abandoning its German plants—which it reclaimed after the war—and then collected reparations from the U.S. government for bombing its German plants during the war’ (Ginsberg 2013, p. 18).

As a means to an end, authoritarianism tends to deliver above all else, in the last analysis, authoritarianism; the means eclipse the purported ends. The emergence of new forms of terrorism in the late twentieth century provides a case in point. Clandestine paramilitary organisations which practise targeted or random assassinations, massacres, kidnapping, rape, torture and illegal surveillance of other people pose a threat to fundamental liberties that have been enshrined in the Western way of life for centuries—though indigenous peoples, the colonised and other oppressed groups have their own experiences of the ‘Western way of life’. Paradoxically, such means have also become ‘acceptable and indispensable means’ in the ‘war on terror’ conducted by the U.S. and other states in the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001. The state-funded organisations charged with ‘fighting terror’ are themselves clandestine organisations beyond public scrutiny and

⁷² Strachey, J 1956, *Contemporary capitalism*, Random House, New York, p. 185, quoted by Habermas 1962, p. 146.

control, secret police in other words. Their methods resemble those of the terrorists they are supposed to be combating. Both terrorists and anti-terrorists, in their arbitrary and idiosyncratic dispensation of ‘justice’ without any judicial transparency or any accountability to the ‘public’ in whose name they conduct their operations, represent a threat to our freedom. The representation of freedom as immunity to arbitrary control is integral to the political theory that goes by the name of republicanism—the work of Philip Pettit is a good example—and to other traditions as well. Notions that freedom must sometimes be sacrificed to the need for ‘national security’ or ‘public order’ do not stand up well in the light of such traditions of political theory.⁷³ The shadowy and arbitrary nature of this threat marks it as a threat to us all; it is not just a threat to those who have something to hide. Liberty and freedom are things that belong either to everyone or to no one; that is what we know as ‘the rule of law’. Adherents of the republican cause in Australia are concerned about the arbitrary power of the monarch, unelected and unaccountable to the Australian public. Let us also be concerned about the arbitrary power of the secret police, which is probably more dangerous because it is less a dormant power than an all-pervasive power working unceasingly behind our backs.

A particularly sinister aspect of the operations of state-funded ‘counter-terrorism’ agencies is their attempts at the ‘psychological rehabilitation’ of terror suspects, including the use of psychiatric drugs. This is reminiscent of the treatment of political dissidents in the former Soviet Union. In all regimes that practise torture, not just in the old Soviet Union, the torturers pose as ‘specialists’ treating their ‘patients’; political dissidents are treated as ‘mentally ill’. Terrorism is a form of political dissent—violent, extreme, misdirected as it may be—and needs to be dealt with under normal criminal law and civilised modes of political debate. With KGB-style tactics becoming the order of the day, the fiction of films such as *Brazil* (1985) becomes reality.

If the threat of terrorism looms large today, it might be minor compared with the civil unrest and violence that occur if the worst-case scenarios for the twenty-first century come true: famine, refugees, weather events causing severe disruptions to the normal functioning of towns and cities or, in other unforeseen ways, things falling apart. How will the state respond? How will civil society respond? The response in the ‘war against terror’ forewarns us that responses will be authoritarian in nature. There is thus an urgent need to demonstrate the viability of democracy as a means of either averting or surviving the crises of the twenty-first century. If we do not, our political systems run the risk of returning to many of the features of the age of absolutism in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁴

To those who say we need to go on a ‘war footing’, to embrace a more authoritarian approach to government decision-making, in order to meet the challenges of climate change and other emerging crises, we can reply that we are already on that path. The few at the controls, however, are not and are not likely to be ecological mandarins, enlightened dictators, or

⁷³ See Tocqueville 2004 for a wonderful few pages on this subject: Vol. 2, Part 2, Chap. 14, ‘How the taste for material gratifications is combined in America with love of liberty and concern about public affairs’.

⁷⁴ Indeed, Habermas in *The structural transformation of the public sphere* argues that a ‘refeudalization’ of the public sphere is already in train (see, for example, p. 195).

philosopher kings or queens but people who will seek to ensure that in the ‘age of consequences’ the worst consequences are borne by the many. As now, profits and benefits will be privatised, costs will be socialised. Business as usual, in other words. The weaker civil society is, the higher the price it will pay.

The twin dangers of tyrannical states and ‘the tyranny of the majority’ are old dangers which have attracted the attention of political theorists for centuries. Today we are faced with both: governments that are becoming increasingly authoritarian and reluctant to address looming global problems, and majorities of citizens, in democracies at least, that continue to vote for them. A long tradition of democratic political theory provides us with possible responses to both these kinds of tyranny, emphasising above all, in republican democratic theory especially, the need to maintain a dispersion of power that weakens the potential for tyranny of both states and majorities. Examples of such dispersion of power include a federal system of government, a bicameral division of parliament, and the separation of powers of the legislature, executive and judiciary. A vibrant public sphere that allows government decision-making to be contested by members of the public within every part of society is another example. International treaties, covenants and conventions can effectively provide a check on the power of states. The breakup of business corporations that are ‘too big to fail’ can provide a brake on corporate power. Not allowing a few families or corporations or the state to own all the agricultural land in a country or other significant economic or cultural assets (the media in particular) is another important example of ways to disperse power, allowing private property to be in the hands of the many rather than the few. In Australia, for instance, where homes are often occupied by the people who own them, over a million households have installed solar panels, challenging government policies designed to prop up electricity supply based on the coal and gas industries. Dispersion of power contributes to the freedom from arbitrary domination by others that is so dear to the republican tradition. In this essay I focus above all on the freedom of association in the political public sphere as a bulwark against the tyranny of states and the tyranny of the majority. What kind of freedom is this?

Redefining freedom: republican models of freedom

There is a kind of freedom with which many of us today are unfamiliar, certainly in practice if not in theory. Rather than the self-centred freedom of individual consumers, it is *public* freedom, the freedom that finds its strength in the process of sitting down together with others to work out solutions to problems of common concern, of deliberating in concert with others and acting in concert in public affairs. Sitting down together might take place in physical space (a meeting hall), in cyberspace (the internet), in the circulation of ideas in print, or in any other space that can conceivably constitute a ‘public sphere’. This kind of freedom is available not only to legislators in the institutions of representative government (such as parliament) but also to members of associations in civil society, to citizens who wish to be ‘involved in politics’ or to ‘mobilise’ towards certain political goals. It is the freedom that various political theorists tell us has been practised, to some extent at least, if not perfectly or ideally, throughout history in various forms. Each theorist tends to have his/her own list but, to bring together a few examples from the various lists, public freedom was practised most notably in the *polis* of the Greeks and the *res publica* of the Romans in classical antiquity, in

the clubs, societies and meeting places, and the ‘republic of letters’, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, Africa and Asia⁷⁵, in the ‘public realm’ created by the French and American revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, in the sections of the Paris Commune of 1871, in the Russian soviets in 1903 and 1917, in the *Rätedemokratie* in Germany in 1918, in the revolutionary labour movement in its role in the European revolutions of 1848, in the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and in working class politics throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, in the civil disobedience and student protest movements of the 1960s, and in the various social movements since then (peace, ecology, women’s, etc). It is the freedom, I suggest, practised everywhere and any time that people have sought, even under the most adverse circumstances, to cast off the yoke of domination by others or the despair of being faced with overwhelming historical forces and to create for themselves little islands of freedom or public spaces in which they can actively participate in the responsibilities of public affairs, to develop the capacity to create a new beginning.⁷⁶ Lists such as these are often Eurocentric to a greater or lesser degree. They can also give the impression that the exercise of public freedom is the preserve of extraordinary people doing extraordinary things in extraordinary times, which would be incorrect, as it can be seen in more mundane activities as well. Dana Villa, for example, in his book titled *Public freedom*, sees the exercise of public freedom wherever there is ‘... a pervasive public spirit, an intense attention to political matters and local administration, and a habit of association for all sorts of purposes ...’, or wherever people are ‘... motivated by the desire to find avenues through which a sense of agency and public power could be either generated or restored amongst a ‘crowd’ of increasingly dispersed and privatized individuals’.⁷⁷

Seeing freedom in this way is characteristic of the model of democracy known as republicanism, though we cannot say that this idea of freedom is exclusively republican or that, even among republicans, the term ‘freedom’ has the same meaning. Pettit, for example, argues that ‘... while the republican tradition places a recurrent, if not unflinching, emphasis on the importance of democratic participation, the primary focus [in the republican conception of liberty] is clearly on avoiding the evils associated with interference’ (1997, p. 27). By interference he means the arbitrary interference in one’s affairs by others; whether they choose to interfere or not, their ability to do so constitutes a form of domination. Suffice it to say here that, in general, associations with other terms such as ‘liberty’, ‘power’, ‘authority’, ‘politics’, ‘the political’, ‘citizenship’, ‘participation’, ‘deliberation’, ‘the public sphere’, ‘the republic’ and so on can differ from one republican author or one strand of republicanism to another.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, John Uhr tells us (1998, p. 10):

... modern republicanism is fundamentally concerned with the promotion of open community deliberation about law and policy, in which all groups have equal opportunity to have their say under conditions which

⁷⁵ Bayly 2004, pp. 71-83 and pp. 482-7, notes the formation of ‘critical publics’ in Africa and Asia, as well as Europe, in these centuries.

⁷⁶ Christina Parolin in her study (2010) of venues of popular politics in London from 1790 to 1845 provides a colourful and detailed picture of such ‘islands of freedom’, which included prisons as well as taverns, theatres and coffee houses.

⁷⁷ Villa 2008, pp. 7 and 11.

⁷⁸ See Mary Walsh 2009 for a glimpse of some such differences.

require that political decisions proceed on a basis of considered debate, in which majority views are legitimated by their power to generate consent through the force of open argument and sustained public justification, as distinct from the tyranny of numbers [just voting every few years].

Though the term ‘freedom’ is not mentioned, this description of modern republican concerns may be taken, I suggest, as a partial description of the ideal of public freedom today. It is a freedom that individuals can find in, and only in, the public sphere. I say partial because Pettit, in a major restatement and articulation of his republican democratic theory, stresses we need to make it clear that majority rule does not necessarily allow all groups an equal opportunity to have a say and it is important that ‘no single, unconstrained body exercise lawmaking and other government functions, not even a body of the citizenry as a whole’. Under the ‘mixed constitution’ that he favours, there is ‘interaction among multiple, representative centers of power, not left in the control of any one individual or body; and the citizens who live under the rules [that result from the interaction] have a crucial contestatory role in shaping them’. The free citizen, in other words, is not just ‘someone who enjoys the right or experience of participating in communal decision-making’, only to then be subject to the tyranny of the majority, a kind of unfreedom for minorities and potentially their domination by the majority. The dispersion of power that the mixed constitution provides, ‘dividing, constraining, regulating, and sometimes even sidestepping elected representatives’, provides more opportunities for diverse groups, and minority groups, to have a say in public affairs. This is because the control over public affairs that republican democracy gives to the people ‘emerges from the interaction of many different bodies operating at many different points and in many different ways’.⁷⁹

Theorists of ‘the decline of the public sphere’, of the flight from politics of many if not most members of contemporary societies, tell us that the way we live now provides an inhospitable terrain in which it is difficult for republican ideas of public freedom to take root and grow. Zygmunt Bauman’s book *Freedom* (1988), for example, sees little prospect of ideas of public freedom taking hold in ‘Western, modern, capitalist’ societies, ‘consumer, self-centred freedom’ being likely to remain the dominant conception. Republicans nonetheless persist in their efforts, partly on the grounds that they see participation in the decisions that affect us all as part and parcel of being truly human, as well as being truly free and, indeed, truly happy. The price to be paid for a self-centred, privatised ‘freedom’, Bauman tells us when he turned once again to ‘search for politics’, is widespread feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety (1999, p. 5). As Villa puts it, ‘Our sense of political powerlessness grows as our creature comforts accumulate’ (2008, p. 7). Central to Bauman’s argument is also the idea that in the exercise of public freedom, the public concerned agrees to place limits on individual freedom, which is the price to be paid for being rid of the distress caused by fear of the future. The public sphere enables citizens, he says, ‘... to set, individually and collectively, their own, individual and collective, limits’.⁸⁰ Yes, limits; people making demands on one another, demanding adherence to standards of responsible behaviour, competent performance of obligations and of the arts of conversation and argument. If the price of the freedom of individuals and political groups to go their own way is collective

⁷⁹ Pettit 2014, pp. 133, 132, 13, 125, 145.

⁸⁰ Bauman 1999, p. 4.

impotence as a citizenry, the price of greater collective power is the limitation of the capacity to go one's own way, in the interests of the common good. The freedom to have a say, a consequential say, in public affairs can only be a *collective* freedom, of which unlimited individual freedom is the antithesis. Any individuals or groups who aspire to participate in democratic processes or to be agents of historical change have to recognise this. To quote Lasch again (1996, pp. 87-8):

To refer everything to a 'plurality of ethical commitments' means that we make no demands on anyone and acknowledge no one's right to make any demands on ourselves. The suspension of judgement logically condemns us to solitude. Unless we are prepared to make demands on one another, we can enjoy only the most rudimentary common life.

Though I am not sure if he would call himself a republican, similar themes are expressed by David Ritter⁸¹:

The notion of a mutual and obligational freedom, in which we can find a different kind of liberty by being indebted to others and being responsible for them, as they are to us ... [is what we ought to be pursuing]. [It] is an experienced truth that constraints often enable us to live more freely with others, and more meaningfully in ourselves.

Being free is about having the 'capacity to form principles of one's own and to act upon them'⁸², about making our own lives and controlling to some degree our own destiny. Yet such freedom can only be achieved by acting in concert with others, and today we know to add, with Nature—as Lévi-Strauss, whom I mentioned earlier, has urged us to do. There's the rub. Individuals can only be free or empowered to have a say in the conditions that shape their lives if they are part of a collectivity that constrains individual freedom to the extent required, and only to that extent, by the priorities agreed by the collectivity. The process is nonetheless ongoing; the issues are never settled once and for all. For Bauman, this is the essence of the republican idea of public freedom. As he puts it, the idea of 'the republic' in republicanism is that it is (1999, p. 166):

... an institution which casts the liberty of its citizens not just as negative freedom from constraints but as an *enabling power*, as freedom to participate; an institution which tries, always inconclusively yet with undiminishing zeal and vigour, to strike a balance between *the individual's liberty from interference* and *the citizen's right to interfere*. That right of the citizens to interfere, to participate in the making of laws that outline the order binding them all ... [is] the specifically republican mortar which cements individuals into a community, the *republican* community.

Another powerful motivating factor behind republican concerns is fear of the alternatives. In the republicanism of Hannah Arendt⁸³, the rise of totalitarianism in the twentieth century was a bitter reminder of what can happen when people surrender their capacity to act together to call entirely new possibilities into existence, possibilities beyond the narrow range of alternatives painted as inevitable or prescribed as desirable by the dominant forces, tendencies or groups in a society. With fear for the future again on the rise, it is no wonder there is a resurgence of interest in Arendt's work.

⁸¹ Ritter, 'The new politics of freedom', in Tavan, G (ed.) 2013, pp. 82-9.

⁸² Goodin et al. 2008, *Discretionary time*, p. 27.

⁸³ For a description of Arendt's republicanism, see Canovan 1994.

The republican concept of freedom is connected with the concept of power. Habermas once described Arendt's idea of power, not as the ability to impose one's own will on the behaviour of others, but as '... the ability to agree upon a common course of action in unconstrained communication' (1977, p. 3). Whenever we want to do something about a situation that concerns us, or to turn something in our imagination into worldly reality, we need the cooperation of others. That is the prerequisite for being *able* to do something, to have the *power* to do something to change the world and even, let's be clear, to be able to make our own lives, to control our own destiny. Personal freedom cannot be separated from public freedom; either we are all able to make our own lives, together, or nobody can. Political power can only be the product of collective effort; no individual alone—regardless of how much money or how many guns they have—can exercise it without the support of others, without winning the battle for hearts and minds.

In what follows, I attempt to explore some of the ways in which the exercise of public freedom can be seen to further the pursuit of political power by 'ordinary people' and to discuss some of the issues and problems that arise. Reformist political movements that base themselves on 'the people', both their goals and the solidarity they demand, are often today seen as antithetical to individual freedom, which is why alternative concepts of freedom, such as the idea of freedom as 'public freedom', need to be considered carefully. I am not attempting to develop a fully-fledged theory of public freedom or republicanism, or to describe their intellectual genealogy or place them on the map of social and political theory.⁸⁴ My focus is on civil society rather than the state and, within civil society, on 'the art of association' rather than issues to do with the press or the mass media. Civil society is the sphere of intermediary organisations—the diverse array of political, charitable, educational, religious, neighbourhood, and professional associations—standing between the individual and the state. The corporate associations of the private economy are often not included in the sphere of civil society but some theorists insist that they should be, especially when they exhibit traits of being devolved to and managed by voluntary, self-governing associations of citizens (as cooperatives are, for example).⁸⁵ The term 'civil society' stands for, in Dana Villa's words, '... a decentralized and pluralistic public realm, one capable of advancing society's claims not only against the bureaucratic/authoritarian state, but also against large economic interests (such as multinational corporations)'. As Villa also says, '... public freedom is not the alternative to, or antithesis of, representative government. It is, rather, an absolutely essential element of any representative system'.⁸⁶ The analysis here assumes the existence of a government that embodies '... a constitutional [or other] arrangement that provides ample and open-ended opportunity for ordinary citizens to learn basic civil arts (and modes of judgement) by doing [by participating in public affairs]'.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ The kind of work undertaken by, for example, Philip Pettit or Dan Villa in their numerous books and essays.

⁸⁵ See John Kane, 'Communitarianism and citizenship', in Hudson, W & Kane, J 2000, p. 219.

⁸⁶ This definition of civil society and these quotes are from Villa 2008, pp. 26-8.

⁸⁷ Villa 2008, p. 19, describing J. S. Mill's view of the nature of the 'public sphere'.

REMAKING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: CONCEPTS AND ISSUES

How can we recover or remake the public sphere or, more precisely, *a* public sphere, a world or realm in which public freedom thrives? Part of any quest by ordinary people for political power under democratic conditions must be an attempt to influence ‘public opinion’. Habermas (1962) provides us with a history of this term, analysing the changes in its meaning and historical significance in Britain, France and Germany from its emergence in the eighteenth century to the 1950s. Public opinion can be mobilised in ways that are manipulative (public relations campaigns, advertising) and that require the public to do little more than sit, watch (television, movies, internet) or hear (radio) a message in private. This is the preferred method of political parties in election campaigns, of wealthy vested interests seeking to turn ‘community sentiment’ one way or another, and of the purveyors of consumer culture. It does not seek to empower people or to create a ‘public’ in any sense other than that of passive, individualised recipients of a message or mood. It is not the manner in which, Habermas argues, public opinion was formed at the time of the beginnings of representative government, a manner which today, in some respects at least, can still serve as a model for democracy or, at least, as a set of normative ideals which we can use to assess the state of democracy today. One of the publics⁸⁸ that arose in the eighteenth century, in Britain in particular, exhibited to a significant degree several characteristics of genuinely democratic public participation in political decision-making, the practice of which constituted a ‘public sphere’. Drawing on Habermas’s analysis of the origins and subsequent historical decline of this bourgeois public sphere, we can measure the degree to which an opinion is truly a ‘public opinion’, that is, an opinion formed democratically, by the following standards, all of which are of equal importance and hence not listed here below in any order of priority.

A public opinion in politics is an opinion expressed collectively, usually by means of a plebiscitary vote, and formed collectively when private people come together to form a public in forums in which they attempt to compel ruling authorities to legitimate themselves by reasoning and argumentation, in short, to engage them, or their supporters, in a debate. Crucially, this debate is ongoing rather than sporadic; the public establishes itself ‘institutionally as a stable group of discussants’ (p. 37).⁸⁹ In Britain, for example, ‘... by the turn of the nineteenth century, the public’s involvement in the critical debate of public issues had become organized to such an extent that in the role of a permanent critical commentator it had definitively broken the exclusiveness of Parliament and evolved into the officially designated discussion partner of the delegate’ (p. 66).

Persons engaging in this kind of public debate are ‘private’ in that their minds are not ‘in the service of a patron’ (p. 33), they themselves have control over the conditions of their private existence (p. 161) and hence, not fearing reprimand or punishment, possess a degree of independence and autonomy. Delegates to parliament, in particular, and to other political meetings, must be given a free hand and not be ‘... instruction-bound appointees [who] meet to put their pre-determined decisions on record’; forcing delegates to abide by the majority

⁸⁸ I say one because as Parolin 2010 and others have emphasised, there were other publics, less influential to be sure, but nonetheless worthy in their own way of being considered as historical actors of importance.

⁸⁹ Page references refer to Habermas 1992 (1962).

opinions of the organisations they represent degrades the level of public debate in those meetings the delegate has been asked to attend (pp. 204-6). In the 'bourgeois public sphere' studied by Habermas, persons had acquired the status of 'private' in the sense that they had been emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence on the monarchy and nobility and gained an autonomy based on the private ownership of productive property (p. 74, 161). In Britain, religion too had become a private matter, following the religious civil war in the seventeenth century; people no longer had to fear the wrath of the state if their religious convictions did not match those of the state, thereby acquiring a certain autonomy in this sense also (p. 91).⁹⁰

What constitutes matters of 'general interest', 'public interest' or 'common concern' is defined by the debating public itself. The 'public agenda', in other words, is defined from below rather than imposed from above; ruling authorities do not have a monopoly of interpretation in this respect (p. 36).

The forums in which public debate takes place are, in principle at least, socially inclusive, that is, open to all regardless of social status. In the *salons* in France, for example, 'sons of princes and counts associated with sons of watchmakers and shopkeepers' (p. 33). Moreover, the authority of the better argument carries the day rather than one's position in the social hierarchy; 'Not that this idea of the public was actually realized in earnest in the coffee houses, the *salons*, and the societies ...' (p. 36). Political discussions among like-minded persons, or within in-groups formed on the basis of a commonality of views and which serve to enable members simply to mutually confirm these views, cannot produce genuine 'public opinion' (p. 213).

Participants in the formation of public opinion seek to be informed and educated, rather than relying uncritically on 'common sense'. They seek to raise their level of knowledge through private reading of books, periodicals and the quality press, through participation in 'high culture' rather than the dumbed-down version served up to the masses by consumer culture (pp. 165-6), all the time with a view to subjecting their understanding of what they have read or seen or heard to the pro and con of a public conversation, to using such conversation as a sounding board for their ideas (p. 221).

In public meetings and political associations that form true public opinion, as many people express opinions as receive them (p. 249), all voices are heard, participation in discussion rather than passive listening is encouraged.

The public opinion that emerges from public debate is ideally a consensus on what constitutes decisions that are in the 'general interest', the transformation of the private interests of many individuals or organisations into a common public interest (pp. 195, 234-5).

⁹⁰ What Habermas is referring to here is perhaps expressed more clearly by the historian Christopher Hill: 'In 1603 all English men and women were deemed to be members of the state Church, dissent from which was a punishable offence. Heretics were still burnt at the stake, just as suspected traitors were tortured. By 1714 Protestant dissent was legally tolerated: the Church could no longer burn, the state no longer torture. Church courts, powerful in all spheres of life since the Middle Ages, lost almost all their functions in this century. Under Charles I Archbishop Laud ruled the country; under Anne it caused a sensation when, for the last time, a Bishop was appointed to government office' (Hill 1961, p. 3).

Democratic opinion and consensus formation is aided when both communications within political organisations and communications between a political organisation and other organisations, including the mass media and state institutions, are characterised by transparency and accountability to the public as a whole. An organisation's goals and ideas, sources of funding, business interests, financial expenditures, contacts with state authorities and other organisations, and internal proceedings need to be on the public record or freely available for public scrutiny (pp. 209, 232, 248).

Public communications between an intra-organisational public sphere and the public sphere of the entire public need to be organised in such a way that there is a chance for anyone in the wider public sphere to respond, immediately and in a way that can be noticed by all, to any opinion or fact expressed in those communications (p. 249).

Habermas's work, both his original work on the public sphere, on which I have focused above, and his extensive work since, has stimulated enormous debate, critique and development by other authors. Here I attempt merely to use Habermas's points as a kind of touchstone, to highlight some of the difficulties faced by any group of people seeking to develop a genuine public opinion and mobilise for political ends, and perhaps some of the solutions to those difficulties, without attempting to engage in any comprehensive way with Habermas's work or that of his critics or followers. A few points are in order here though. I have extracted these standards solely from *The structural transformation of the public sphere* which was first published in German in 1962. Habermas went on to further develop his ideas on the public sphere in works such as *The theory of communicative action* and *Between facts and norms*. These are difficult works, more philosophical than his 1962 study, and not necessarily a better starting point.⁹¹ As for extracting standards from his 1962 work in the way I have, as a kind of 'normative ideal', Habermas would probably not approve of it. Nonetheless, I take comfort from William Outhwaite's comment that 'In some ways, though he [Habermas] rejects this vocation, it is as a normative ethical-political theory that his work seems most convincing' (Outhwaite 1994, p. 119). Dana Villa states, in his analysis of Habermas's work, that '... the idealized model of the 'bourgeois public sphere' outlined in *Structural Transformation* provides Habermas with a normative ideal he never abandoned, throughout all the twists and turns of his subsequent development' (2008, p. 174). To be clear, also, I am not saying that the standards I have enumerated here have ever been fully realised historically or that Habermas has ever said that they have. It is also an open question whether these standards can serve today as a kind of institutional blueprint for a genuine political public sphere in civil society, whether they are valid as normative ideals or whether they are practical. These are the questions I wish to address, in a cursory manner at least, to highlight some of the difficulties involved. I find, as the reader will see, nothing to suggest that Habermas's criteria are incorrect, merely that there is much else to articulate in making sense of them in practice today.

⁹¹ See, for instance, Dana Villa's critique (2008) of these later developments in Habermas's work.

What is reasoning, argumentation, discussion and debate?

What do we mean when we say we had a good discussion with someone, or a good argument, debate or conversation, or were able to successfully reason with someone? The *studia humanitatis*, part of secondary education in the Italian city-states in the fourteenth century, was a course of studies devoted to the arts of fine rhetoric and sound argument, using as a model Latin authors from the Roman Republic of the first century BC. With the rise of science in subsequent centuries, the art of persuasion came to be seen less as an art and more as the marshalling of facts in accordance with scientific method. Work by historians and philosophers of science in the twentieth century such as Gaston Bachelard, Thomas Kuhn and Mary Hesse has gone some way to restoring the idea that ‘art’ is as intrinsic to the ‘art of persuasion’ in science as it is in other spheres of human knowledge. Scientists partake of ‘the spirit of the times’ as much as everyone else and what seems ‘reasonable’ and ‘plausible’ to them reflects this to at least some degree in their work.

Amidst the ‘information society’ and ‘communications revolution’ that we have today, it is difficult to see among the general population (‘the masses’ if you will) much evidence of either sound scientific reasoning or a mastery of rhetoric and debating skills. Do millions of tweets on Twitter make a conversation? Or the outpourings of individual opinion in the blogosphere? Or the daily feed from the mass media? To a large extent, I think not. How much listening is there compared with speaking? How much reading compared with writing? How much asking other people, especially one’s opponents, exactly what they mean, asking them to spell out, elaborate on, articulate their view? In a good conversation, nothing is left to ‘common sense’, left in that shadowy world of the unsaid where things ‘go without saying’. Ideas are teased out, dispersed across numerous attempts at articulation, each person expressing to the other what they think the other is saying as much as expressing their own point of view. In the public sphere evident in ancient Greece, Arendt tells us, citizens learned to ‘look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint’.⁹² This enables us to see issues and ourselves in ways that are unfamiliar, in ways that other people see issues and us. It takes us outside of ourselves and we start to see ourselves as others see us. It returns to us an image of ourselves in which we see ourselves in new ways. Such conversation, dialogue, discussion, reasoning, debate, argument—whatever the subtle differences between these activities—is always a protracted matter, taking time, effort and commitment, things that are all in short supply in our fast-moving modern world.

It takes time and effort to write or read a long essay or a book, to listen to or to deliver a long speech. Much more than usually goes into a blog, a tweet or a media report full of ‘sound bites’. Yet to describe the latter as types of ‘dumbing down’ of conversation is often today branded as elitist, as antithetical to ‘social inclusiveness’. Our culture mocks high standards of debate and conversation, and this occurs even in the universities, as Frank Furedi argues at length. British universities today, Furedi argues, celebrate the ordinary rather than the exceptional and fail to challenge ‘... people’s perception of themselves, calling into question their common sense, and ... demanding that they become something other than what they once were’ (2005, p. 132).

⁹² Arendt in *Between past and future*, quoted by Curthoys and Docker 2006, p. 120.

In the political theory and practice of ‘deliberative democracy’ we see a considerable body of work in this area. There is the ‘ideally conducted discussion’ as John Rawls sees it, there is Habermas’s ‘ideal speech situation’ and one can find in fact broad agreement, in some fields of academic endeavour at least, on what constitutes ‘standards of good discursive practice’.⁹³

Defining ‘the public’

Depressingly, it is now common for social and political theorists to tell us that politics, by its nature, is local and national, but real power, especially in the economic sphere, has now moved beyond our reach, being vested in global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organisation and in transnational corporations whose threat of ‘capital flight’ beats any government into submission. Barry Hindess, for example, concludes that since ‘... it seems that the task of government is now to respond rapidly and effectively to the domestic impact of powerful outside forces which it has no hope of being able to control. ... [we are left with a situation where] in the world of the late twentieth century, the image of a state that is governed by its citizens cannot be regarded as a viable political ideal’.⁹⁴ Bauman is equally emphatic (1999, p. 170):

The most decisive parameters of the human condition are now shaped in the areas the institutions of the nation-state cannot reach. The powers which preside over preservation and change of those conditions are increasingly globalized, while the instruments of the citizen’s control and influence, however potent they might be, remain locally confined. Globalization of capital, finances and information means first and foremost their exemption from local, and above all nation-state, control and administration.

It follows from this, many authors argue, that to match globalization in the economic sphere nothing less than global citizenship is required, that is, global institutions or forms of organisation that will allow the world’s citizens to exercise political power over the global economy. To date, successful creation of such institutions remains elusive.

Donatella della Porta, while agreeing it is incontestable ‘... that the growing number, power and visibility of international organizations challenge the very principles of legitimation of liberal democracies as representing the will of their citizens’ (2013, p. 29), points out that the growing political globalization is the product of political decisions of nation-states, especially some of them, and is driven by political actors within these particular states. This is a critical observation, in my view, and I would give it more weight than she and others have. The power of transnational business corporations and institutions in the economic sphere stems from political forces within nation-states, some more than others, which *initiate* (often via the secret machinations of bureaucracies and politicians), *fund* and *support* (in both national and international forums) the transfer of power from nation-state (and hence national public) to transnational business entities. In the same way that some nation-states privatise publicly owned assets, deregulate business activities and in other ways transfer wealth and power to undemocratic private entities (with nonetheless important public roles), they simultaneously *actively* decommission themselves in transferring their decision-making functions to the transnationals. Like birds, transnational entities cannot remain in the air forever, constantly

⁹³ See John Rawls 1971 *A theory of justice*; Habermas in his *The theory of communicative action* and *Between facts and norms*; and Goodin 2008, pp. 187-8.

⁹⁴ Hindess, B, ‘Limits to citizenship’, in Hudson, W & Kane, J (eds.) 2000, pp. 71, 73-4.

circling the globe. They need places to roost, nesting sites, and it is only nation-states (which collectively cover the globe) that can provide (or deny) these. The placing of limits on national sovereignty⁹⁵ is as much the work of insiders as it is of outsiders.

Most importantly, many nation-states *value* the activities of these transnational business entities. To the extent that nation-states, or key political actors within them (politicians, bureaucrats, academics, media organizations), adhere to the mantra of ‘jobs, investment, growth’, they ascribe supreme value to ‘attracting investment’ and hence are keen to set up nesting sites for transnational businesses. It is especially this that makes states vulnerable to pressure from these transnationals; desperate to attract investment, they are prepared to accept any conditions imposed. Yet Australia, for instance, does not need investment in a second airport in Sydney, for example ; it needs fewer people flying so that we can reduce our greenhouse gas emissions from that sector of activity. Australia, and the world for that matter, would have been better off without the mining boom that occurred here in the early 2000s.⁹⁶ The people of China, for one, might today be breathing cleaner air if the boom had not occurred. Where the policy aim is a zero growth or contracting economy, which is what we need in countries like Australia, the fear of ‘capital flight’ is less likely to take hold. In poorer countries, which many argue ‘need’ development, attracting investment or loans often means lining the pockets of corrupt elites, resource depletion, environmental degradation, use of precious agricultural land to produce food for richer countries, and unsafe working conditions imposed on the workers used to produce consumer goods that the middle classes in their countries and the people in the rich countries to which the goods are exported do not really need.

Nation-states remain key actors in the globalization process and, consequently, so do national citizens. National citizens working bilaterally, multilaterally or globally with national citizens in other nation-states which are actively involved in nurturing the capacities of transnational business entities can exercise power in opposing such nurturing. The infamous Multilateral Agreement on Investment was stopped in just this way; pressure was exerted both on the OECD and on national governments from both within and without.

It is more accurate to say that national actors, be they agencies of the nation-state or organisations of citizens working within civil society, can pursue effective actions in relation to many of the issues with which they are concerned only if they work at multiple levels: local, national and international. Sure, there can be no isolationism, no turning away from the world, from the issues of the ‘global commons’, from the interdependence today of nation-states which precludes unilateral action by any one of them. If a country manages to chase off

⁹⁵ Limits on national sovereignty cover a wide range of matters: international treaties on Antarctica and the ozone layer, on human rights and on refugees, for example, as well as trade, the flow of capital and the (de)regulation of profit-oriented entities, the latter being the focus of my attention here. If we nonetheless consider a situation where international organisations are trying to improve human rights in a country, for example, clearly they will have more chance of success if they can work with organisations (however weak) within that country committed to the same ideals. For overviews of wider issues in relation to global governance and global citizenship, see Geoffrey Stokes, ‘Global citizenship’, in Hudson, W & Kane, J (eds.) 2000, pp. 231-42 and della Porta, D 2013.

⁹⁶ The Australia Institute has produced numerous reports on the downside of the boom.

some transnational investors, it will find they settle in a country nearby, and the wind will blow the toxic smoke from their activities across national borders. There are no purely national solutions to many problems that are today increasingly international in scope but nor can there be international solutions which are not based on political activity by actors within nation-states, actors who are both outward- and inward-looking so far as their country is concerned. My point is simply that it can be a recipe for impotence to give up on national politics because of a belief that issues are now global and require 'global solutions'. Case by case considerations rather than universal rules of thumb—whether 'think global, act global' or 'think global, act local'—are probably more applicable here. To fight human rights abuses in one's country, is it more effective to pursue claims in the International Court of Justice or to try to conduct a national political campaign in defence of human rights? To stop whaling, is it more effective to send ships out to sea to pester the Japanese whaling fleet or would it be more effective to pressure local politicians to take a stronger stand against whaling or to link up with groups in Japan who are opposed to whaling and to assist them in their campaign, within Japan, to put an end to whaling? In any case, when it comes to economic issues, the situation is clear in my view. An integral part of any military strategy is to attack the enemy's supply lines. The supply lines of 'global market forces' pass through nation-states and it is there that national citizens have a chance to confront them. These opportunities should not be foregone because of some over-generalised statements about the supposedly all-powerful nature of global forces.⁹⁷

There are multiple centres of power both globally and within any nation-state. Republicanism instructs us to look out for such different centres of power, to identify them or even to create them if necessary, for it is the dispersion of power that provides the weak with levers with which to challenge the strong. To be effective politically, 'the public' does not have to be a single, united global public, or national public for that matter. The size of 'a public' can be scaled up or down to match the size of the political unit where the key decisions are being made, whether that unit be local, regional, national or global. And within any political unit, a multiplicity of heterogeneous publics is possible and the connections between them do not have to result in a single, overarching, homogeneous public for them to constitute, together, a vigorous and effective public sphere.⁹⁸ I return to the issue of defining the public in the sections on social inclusiveness and historical agents. For now, let us turn to the vexed question of consensus.

Consensus

Another area of considerable difficulty is the question of whether it is desirable and possible for a diverse group of people, with varied or even conflicting backgrounds, interests and aims to come together and through discussion or debate arrive at an agreement or consensus on

⁹⁷ I am not here attacking either Hindess or Bauman for their statements, merely warning against taking such statements at face value. Bauman, for instance, elsewhere asserts that 'It is a grave mistake to locate the 'global' and the 'local' aspects of contemporary living conditions and life politics in two different spaces that only marginally communicate ...' (2003, p. 17). A fuller understanding of the position of these authors would require a study of more of their works, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹⁸ Craig Calhoun in Turner (ed.) 1996, pp. 457-462 provides some good arguments in favour of considering the public sphere as multiple intersections among heterogeneous publics. Pettit 2014 presents the view that such a situation is precisely what republicanism aims to achieve.

what constitutes their 'common public interest'. The idea of the desirability of consensus has had a life in theories of organisation and management as well as in political theory. William H. Whyte, in his classic study, *The organization man*, found nothing to praise in the idea, noting that the trouble with conferences or meetings that emphasise 'communication' and 'agreement' is that often the participants focus on the common denominators that everyone agrees on; 'To concentrate on agreement is to intensify that which inhibits creativity ... [and] makes for good feeling, but the net effect is to suppress the real issues' (1963, pp. 53, 103). In the political theory of Hannah Arendt, unanimity, if it does occur, should be interpreted as a danger signal, she says, a sign that people have ceased to think.⁹⁹ Chantal Mouffe, in her political theory, argues that 'The illusion of consensus and unanimity ... should be recognized as being fatal for democracy and therefore abandoned' (1993, p. 5). What democracy needs, she contends, is political parties and political movements that articulate genuinely *alternative* programs and that seek to *win the day*. The ideal of consensus should be limited, in her view, to consensus on the democratic 'rules of the game', that is, voting processes, democratic values and so on. Politics and culture overlap and often discussions of cultural differences have a bearing on politics. Ghassan Hage, for instance, in a paper on 'critical anthropology', argues that 'Some [cultural] differences are the product of different realities rather than different subjective takes on reality. As such, they are either destined to enter into conflict or coexist without either side coming to understand the other' (2012, p. 302).

The historian Norman Hampson tells us that in the early eighteenth century in Europe, discussions between officials representing monarchs and representatives of the nobility were often a *dialogue des sourds* which '... generally produced a muddled compromise that became the basis for new disputes'.¹⁰⁰ Nineteenth century cities, Bauman contends, were battlefields on which business interests (concerned with profit) and politicians (concerned with creating liveable cities) fought endlessly and without being able to reach unqualified agreement, let alone consensus. What was reached after each bout was a 'settlement', a compromise between '... contradictory interests, ambitions and forces [which] was intermittently fought, negotiated, undermined, broken, revoked, re-fought, re-negotiated, challenged, found and lost, buried and resurrected' (2003, p. 14). The twentieth century, the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1995) tells us, was an 'age of extremes': the first world war, then communism and capitalism versus fascism in the Second World War, then communism versus capitalism in a global cold war; hardly an age of consensus.

There does not appear to be anything different about this new century that makes the ideal of consensus more likely to be realised. In this century, as in previous centuries, people with different or conflicting cultures, ideals or interests are locked in mutual embrace, with little chance of being able to flee from one another: coloniser and colonised, bourgeoisie and proletariat, immigrants to cities and city 'natives', business people and town planners,

⁹⁹ Canovan 1994, p. 227. See also Arendt 1990, p. 93 forward.

¹⁰⁰ Hampson 1968, p. 67. Each was deaf (*sourd* in French) to the other's concerns.

farmers and city folk, upper classes and lower classes, global elites¹⁰¹ and parochial locals. Yet many strategies are available to people in these situations. Short of war or revolution, people can go about their business in ignorance and often, fear of one another, maintaining a distance while keeping an eye on one another, or seek to marginalise or outmanoeuvre one another, or seek to achieve, through dialogue, whether half-hearted or genuine, some kind of settlement or *modus vivendi*. In reality, all these things go on together, just as war and revolution serve to 'break the impasse' when all else fails, though the outcomes are rarely what their participants expect them to be. Why should anyone favour a 'consensus approach' to problem solving when history seems so against it?

When do people see a need to 'come together' in the first place? Before the birth of the modern world, it was common for rulers to make a virtue of cultural difference and separateness within their domains. Bayly tells us that (2004, p. 220):

The great [Ottoman, Mughal, Safavid, Qing] empires of the old [world] order before 1780, and even old national states such as England, France, and Japan, had developed ways of handling cultural, religious and life-style differences which minimized, even if they did not eliminate, persistent tensions. In societies where statuses were complex and intertwined, it was simpler to devise schemes to separate, segregate, and avoid conflict. If the king, rather than the people, was the fountain of authority, issues of 'us' and 'them' were less important. All were subjects of a universal monarch.

In this old world order, the freedom to go one's own way came at the price of exclusion from political decision-making and segregation from other subjects of the empire or state. As Tocqueville put it:¹⁰²

Despotism, which is fearful by nature, looks upon the isolation of men as the surest guarantee of its own duration and ordinarily does all it can to ensure that isolation. No vice of the human heart suits it better than egoism: a despot will be quick to forgive the people he governs for not loving him, provided they do not love one another. He does not ask for their help in conducting the state; it is enough that they do not seek to run it themselves. Minds that aspire to combine their efforts to promote the common prosperity he calls disruptive and restless, and, altering the natural meaning of the words, he calls those who keep strictly to themselves 'good citizens'.

When the people become the fountain of authority, the hallmark of modern democracy, the tasks of creating the rules of life in common and of responding to political challenges are devolved to the people, at least in the sense that the people have to show some signs of agreement (voting, expressing opinions) with decisions on these matters made by those in authority. That is the theory, if not the practice, of democracy. People are still not necessarily keen to meet and discuss *with one another* their common problems. Many people in contemporary democracies prefer to leave these tasks to governments and experts, being happy to just vote for this or that representative once in a while. Or many are so overwhelmed with earning a living and looking after themselves and their families, or are so concerned with having fun and pursuing the diversions of consumer society, that they have no time for

¹⁰¹ One of the defining characteristics of global elites is their ability to 'move on', yet as Bauman says (2003, p. 20): 'Like all the rest of men and women, they are part of the cityscape, and their life pursuits are inscribed in it'.

¹⁰² Tocqueville 2004 (c. 1850), p. 590 (vol. 2, part 2, chap. 4, 'How Americans Combat Individualism with Free Institutions')

politics. Conflicting groups will often only talk to one another if dragged before a court of law, or a government body charged with dispute resolution, or the actions of one force the other to the table (through, for example, an industrial strike, other form of protest action or even military action). The only groups that seem to have any interest in coming together to pursue a common cause are groups seeking to mount a campaign of opposition to a prevailing state of affairs or to initiate a process of transformation, reconstruction or even revolution in human affairs or to further the development of a common 'identity', be it religious, ethnic, national or economic. Thus Marx urged workers to unite on the basis of their 'common interests' and to set aside the things that divided them (nationality high on the list of these). Small and large business enterprises are similarly often urged to work together on the basis of 'shared interests'. The environment movement asks everyone to work together to uphold a 'universal interest' in survival, the women's movement sees identifiable 'women's issues' that must be addressed by women working together, nationalist groups urge a 'common struggle' against foreign incursions in the form of overseas corporations, refugees, or even ideas; many more examples could be added. To place such claims in quotation marks is not intended here to be derogatory or to question their validity; it is to highlight the quest for a common cause that they all share. More than this, though, the point can be made that there is no single cause today that draws, in most countries at least, a sizeable proportion of the population to its side. Fragmentation is the order of the day; what is obvious or essential to one cause is merely hypothetical or 'quotable' to another, just one view among many others. In this situation of 'pluralism', groups are free to pursue their causes free from suppression by the state or other groups (at least in non-despotic states). Parallel to political fragmentation is cultural fragmentation. The twentieth century ended with a resurgence of 'identity politics', whereby defining one's religious, ethnic or national identity, one's difference from others, became more important than finding commonality with others.¹⁰³ This fragmentation, whether cultural or political, can be seen as a good thing, reflecting the richness and diversity of society; it can indeed be seen also as yet another bulwark against the tyranny of the majority. To the extent, however, that diverse groups keep their differences intact, avoid meaningful cross-cultural or cross-political (if I may use this term) debate about their relative merits and shortcomings, and see such avoidance as a value to be cherished and politically defended (using perhaps tenets from cultural relativism or postmodernism to do this), their freedom to go their own way comes at the price of weakened political power (collective impotence might be a better term) and a susceptibility to narrow sectarian thinking or exclusivist ethnic nationalism;¹⁰⁴ just like, it seems to me, in the old pre-democratic world order, albeit in new historical forms.

If the adherents of any particular cause wish to expand their influence, they need to establish a forum that represents a coming together of persons who are not entirely like-minded, who do not share common views or life-styles—culture and politics often overlap; take for example the issue of women's rights. The aim of the forum cannot be 'to promote the cause' as not many people will turn up for a start, as nobody wants an ear-bashing—though it is

¹⁰³ See Hobsbawm 1995, pp. 424-30 and Bayly 2004, p. 466-7.

¹⁰⁴ This point is an adaptation of ideas from Bauman 1999, p. 198 and Geoffrey Stokes, 'Global citizenship' in Hudson, W & Kane, J (eds.) 2000, p. 240.

valid for participants to come prepared with preconceived ideas, indeed inevitable that they do—see my section on ‘blueprints’ later in this essay. Forums, on the other hand, that represent a chance for dialogue between persons with differing perspectives, in which people get a chance to speak as well as listen, in which the force of the better argument wins the day rather than adherence to any predefined ‘correct’ position, and from which the outcome is a collective effort, perhaps different from anything anyone expected or hoped for, or different from any preconceived ideas that anyone entered the forum with, have a better chance of attracting participants and, indeed, arriving at outcomes that people feel they ‘own’. Such forums thus enable a merging of diverse collective identities and the formation of a new ‘we’. A situation in which fragmented and diverse political groups pursue their activities in relatively closed worlds while nonetheless living next to one another spells impotence and failure for any political movement that seeks to magnify its influence. Any kind of political relativism (‘each to their own’), like its cousin, cultural relativism, spells stagnation and a failure to grasp the benefits of cross-fertilisation of ideas in an open forum. To expand, a movement has *no choice* but to engage in dialogue with others on terms that reflect democratic ideals, terms that could see the movement itself transformed in the process. This does not have to mean the ideals of a movement are compromised or reduced to the ‘lowest common denominator’ among forum participants. A single meeting is often unlikely to achieve much; forums need to be ongoing, having a ‘stable group of discussants’, in Habermas’s terminology. Longer term engagement of participants is more likely to result in longer lasting agreements. Importantly, meetings which allow the play of passions, in which people do not seek at all costs to avoid ‘conflict’, do not ‘agree to disagree’, would seem the order of the day. I do not see how people can turn off their sentiments, passions, prejudices, indeed their ‘common sense’, and leave only reason and moderation on, like so many lights in a house that can be turned on or off at will. A straight-talking Christopher Lasch gives many examples of how the desire to avoid ‘political and religious controversy’ or ‘sectarian quarrels’, and the elevation of the ‘reason’ with which professional elites consider themselves to be endowed above the mere ‘opinions and prejudices’ of ordinary citizens contributes to the deterioration of public debate and its ‘bland, innocuous, mind-numbing quality’.¹⁰⁵

What can or should we expect to happen in such forums? The sphere of democratic communication, what the ancient Greeks called the *agora*, ‘... is a territory of constant tension and tug-of-war as much as it is the site of dialogue, co-operation or compromise’, yet the Greeks expected it to be, demanded that it be, ‘... a space where the sharp edges of incompatible interests were blunted, contradictory pressures balanced, dreams and desires trimmed and kneaded so that they would not clash with one another and fit a harmonious whole, and the areas of conflagration cooled off so that it would not come to an explosion’ (Bauman 1999, pp. 87, 97).

Thus, neither ‘consensus’ nor ‘defeating one’s opponents’ captures the reality of the *agora*. It is not a stark choice: *either* we seek to ‘win the day’ *or* we pursue consensus. The two pursuits can, do and must co-exist but they do so in tension with each other. Against those

¹⁰⁵ Lasch 1996, p. 10. As an historian, Lasch brings to life in all their colour and detail many of the issues that political theorists tend to present more abstractly.

who assert that the end result of political debate must be unanimity, consensus, a unitary and rationally discernible idea of the public good, or a monolithic public opinion, we must counter with demands for more open-ended argument, for opportunities for minority groups to practise ongoing contestation of majority opinions, for opportunities for review, modification and reinterpretation of majority opinions. Against those who assert that our goal must be the preservation or establishment of individual, minority or sub-group rights to be different, we must counter with demands that those differences be continually put to the test of argument with others, with outsiders, even and especially with opponents, beyond the comfort zones of discussion held entirely within minority groups or other sub-groups. Against those who assert that deliberation and debate must be endlessly ongoing, never resting, never settling, always tentative, we must counter with demands for decisions, for compromises, for some kind of agreement that can act as a basis for political action, especially when political action is to take the form of legislation by government. Robert Goodin's emphasis on the need for 'settling' is instructive in this regard. Taking the rule of law as an example, he argues that (2012, pp. 46-7):

... providing a settled sociolegal environment within which people can plan and conduct their affairs is the whole point of the rule of law. ... [and this] underlying purpose of the rule of law is subverted when law is in a constant state of flux.

More widely too, for both individuals and groups, Goodin¹⁰⁶ says:

'Settling on' a belief or value, project or commitment, way of being or way of living ... [enables people] to formulate plans and pursue them, to make commitments and keep them, to craft narrative identities and live up to them. ... A settlement that remained deeply provisional in perpetuity—that was always subject to being reopened at the drop of a hat—would not be much of a settlement. ... Settling is not forever. It is merely holding some things fixed for a time, leaving open the possibility of reopening at some later date matters that are for now being taken to be settled.

Whichever way we choose to proceed, there are caveats, pros and cons. There are limits to this kind of abstract discussion of issues to do with consensus. As Smith says (2009, p. 10):

democratic theories or models tend to be incomplete, and, by their nature, their principles and rules drastically oversimplify the complexity of democratic practice (Jonsen and Toulmin 1998: 6). While theoretical work often proceeds as if it were an exhaustive account of democratic politics, theories offer only a partial analysis of our democratic condition.

Suppose we say political engagement means *attempting* to concur and converge, to combine and be combined, to join and be joined with other people;¹⁰⁷ attempting to collectively agree on a consistent and cohesive agenda defining the extent of practical choices that can or ought to be made; attempting to move towards a homogeneity and unity of views on particular topics—not on everything. 'Other people' has to mean the public with whom we consider it necessary to be engaged, not *all* other people, and we have to decide whether agreement means consensus or the view of the majority as expressed in a vote. As Goodin says, 'The more people taking part in meetings, and the more meetings strive for unanimity, the longer—and the more meetings—it takes to make any decision' (1992, p. 140). On the other

¹⁰⁶ Goodin 2012, pp. 3, 30, 35 and 62.

¹⁰⁷ As Bauman 1999, p. 63, puts it.

hand, if we rush to a vote, some participants are going to feel they haven't been heard and will be tempted to walk away. Not a good outcome, either way.

Suppose we assume that different cultural and political standpoints are not closed, mutually unintelligible discourses from inside which people are not able to communicate with other people inside (committed to) other (different) discourses, but rather that it is possible for people to translate from one discourse to another, to communicate and reach some kind of mutual understanding. 'Mutual understanding' might mean agreeing on what is important and worthy of pursuit, achieving a shared vision, closing ranks on issues of the public good, the good society, equity, justice and so on; in short, progress towards 'shared values' or 'grand narratives' of how to proceed, together. Or it might mean—might often mean—that full agreement or consensus can't be reached but the points of contention can be noted and revisited in the light of new circumstances if and when they arise. In the meantime, choices can be put to the vote and decisions made. Everyone lives to argue another day, with everyone chastened by the realisation that their 'shared values' are not as universally accepted as they would like, though they remain committed to ongoing discussions with one another.

Suppose we say, alternatively, that 'it is impossible to transcend disagreement and eradicate conflict from the political arena'¹⁰⁸ or that in politics opposing views are inevitably 'incommensurable' or 'irreconcilable'? How fruitful is holding such a view likely to be as a political *strategy*, ignoring the question of how certain we can ever be about something like that? Countries at war always have diplomatic discussions going on at some level. Why can't antagonists within society? How does one 'defeat' one's opponents, in particular if they are the majority in a society, without talking to them or some of them? To be sure, political groups will not want to allow people opposed to their aims to become members. At some point, though, members have to engage with the wider society. If you start with a small 'us' and a big 'them' and say the two are irreconcilable but the big 'them' has to be defeated, how far are you going to get? The small 'us' has to grow by winning the hearts and minds of people in the big 'them'. If people don't strive for consensus, they are likely to walk away from one another sooner rather than later. Consensus might be an unrealistic goal at a wider societal level, and complete consensus an undesirable goal (following Arendt), but we can see it as a useful goal, the very striving for it bringing people together in meaningful ways and forcing them to articulate their viewpoints more than they would otherwise. This, it appears, was in fact the position on consensus taken by the ancient Greeks in the *polis*.¹⁰⁹

Political decision-making entails reducing the number of practical options for action, limiting the freedom of choice of individuals to pursue other options; it means in other words collective agreement about the *limits* to be placed on individual *and* collective freedom. I say limits on collective freedom because individual freedom need only be limited to the extent warranted by the matters at hand. People do not all have to have the same religion, sexual preference or culture to come to some agreement on housing policy, for instance. The

¹⁰⁸ As Machin 2013 does, p. 90.

¹⁰⁹ See David Held 1996, *Models of democracy*, 2nd edn, Polity Press, UK, p. 21

homogeneity and unity—or consensus—to be aimed for is not a total remoulding of each and every individual in every respect so that all of us are completely alike. In politics one learns to keep one's mouth shut about things one does not like about other people in order to secure their cooperation and agreement on things that matter most. Everyone benefits from this. In order to obtain the support of others, Tocqueville tells us eloquently, 'Several of the passions that chill and divide hearts are then obliged to withdraw into the recesses of the soul and hide there. Pride dissimulates; contempt dares not rear its head. Egoism is afraid of itself.'¹¹⁰

No matter where we draw the boundary around the public, the party or the group in which we wish to participate, defining who is on the inside and who on the outside, the possibility of internal disagreement on substantive issues always exists. This applies even if we manage somehow to exclude persons who don't follow the 'correct line' or who don't manifest the correct 'identity'. How we manage that disagreement can determine the extent to which we can retain existing members and attract new ones, if that is our aim. Hence the importance of an issue like consensus, as difficult as it is to work through.

Within governments, decision-making is often too quick with too few people involved. The role of an *agora*, if it is to be politically engaged, that is, engaged with the decision-making processes of the *ecclesia* or other significant decision-making processes in civil society, is to slow the process, to allow more people to participate, to bring a plurality of perspectives to bear upon issues, but in the end to 'settle' on public policies that seem, for the time being, to the *agora* and (hopefully) the *ecclesia*, to be the solutions which are most 'in the public interest'—at least as far as the people who came together in this particular *agora* are concerned, and at least until there seem to be grounds to subject the policies to review. Anything less than this is political *disengagement* and ultimately insignificant and irrelevant to the powers-that-be, who are faced with different, even conflicting, proposals 'in the public interest' presented by the participants in other *agora*.

All that, it must be said, only works among people who are prepared to work together following the democratic 'rules of the game'. There are many political or cultural antagonists (usually the more powerful ones) who will avoid dialogue with one another at all costs, preferring to compete for 'control of the media' or 'influence on government' (notoriously undemocratic procedures when it means manipulative political advertising or back door lobbying of government¹¹¹), preferring in other words power games to any kind of rules of engagement overseen by some referee or 'accepted by the adversaries'. The only people interested in defeating their opponents democratically are, as I have suggested, people in opposition movements to whom the only possible path to power is in fact democratic opposition, because they lack the money or the military force for things to be otherwise, or because they believe that lasting change can only come about by democratic means.

¹¹⁰ Tocqueville 1850, p. 591, vol. 2, part 2, chap. 4, 'How Americans combat individualism with free institutions'.

¹¹¹ Or front door: in 2013, the Australian Government appointed the president of the Business Council of Australia to head a 'commission of audit' of the Australian Government bureaucracy.

Argue with such undemocratic opponents in public; we must do that, if we can. The rest of the time, however, if our aim is to challenge the power of transnational corporations, for instance, we need to spend weakening their economic position, their influence over government and their hegemony in public communications; diminishing, in short, the social inequalities and hierarchies of influence that poison democracy. Measures that white ant the structures of consumer society and the ‘jobs, investment, growth’ syndrome: taking our money out of undemocratic banks and superannuation funds and putting it into cooperatives and cooperative financial institutions instead, removal of speculation from the housing market, cities without cars, cities with neighbourhoods that allow real communities to develop, cities that link up with farmers and indigenous communities; all of these are measures that promote the autonomy of citizens and put them on a genuinely ‘equal footing’ with adversaries who currently hold positions of inordinate power in our society. After all, powerful groups in any society always have and always will employ their own dirty tricks to protect their position.¹¹² Bribing politicians, using their control of the media to confuse public opinion, using loopholes in the law to land their opponents in jail, and even employing standover thugs or paramilitary death squads are all part of the arsenal employed by powerful groups when they feel threatened. Thus the importance, to counteract this, of maintaining the strength of state institutions which allow conflicts to be played out and resolved in adversarial form: the law courts, parliaments and other bodies where the ‘moment of decision’ is embodied in a vote or an order rather than brute force.

It is not an easy matter to attract a diverse range of people to take part in an *agora*. Besides the powerful, who see no need to discuss the status quo, there are those who might not wish to take part for other reasons, such as differences in class, age, race or gender. Let us now examine this issue more carefully, as the extent to which one can claim to be developing policies in the ‘public interest’ depends on attracting people from all sub-groups in society.

Social inclusiveness and autonomy

The ‘public’ established in the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe was limited to jurists and other officials of the rulers’ administrations, military officers, merchants, bankers, manufacturers, doctors, pastors, scholars, and others who possessed property and education (Habermas 1962, pp. 23, 201-2). Women were generally excluded from key venues in which discussion took place; only men were admitted to coffee-house society, for instance (Habermas 1962, p. 33). Christopher Bayly gives a more complete picture of who was excluded from the new associations and the new vision of society (2004, p. 74):

Women were sometimes the center of salons which debated the ills of state and society, but only aristocratic ladies and ladies of less than perfect repute could generally enter these male enclaves. Working people began to organize themselves in friendly and self-help associations to fight the decline of old artisan industries and the appalling conditions of the new ones. But any attempt to combine for sectional good against employers was met with hostility and, after 1789, with severe repression. Slaves remained, inevitably, outside the vision of society being propagated by most of these associations, although many Quakers, Methodists, and

¹¹² Richard Cooke, writing in *The Monthly* in November 2014, gives some clear examples of how this has worked in Australia in recent times.

other humanitarians were arguing vigorously for their emancipation by the 1770s. Religious minorities—Catholics in Britain, for instance, and Jews virtually everywhere—were also excluded. Native peoples in the colonies of white settlement were equally regarded as outside the pale.

In his assessment of the European writers of the eighteenth century, in the period known as the Enlightenment, Norman Hampson concluded that ‘Not many were prepared to translate their theoretical belief in natural equality into practical terms when dealing with their social inferiors’. The ‘common people’ were regarded as an ‘unteachable majority’ unfit for ‘polite society’ (1968, pp. 154, 160).

Marxists, for their part, were ambivalent about whether groups such as small shopkeepers, for example, were part of the proletariat or the *petite bourgeoisie*, only the former status earning them an invitation to join the circles of the labour movement. One thing they were clear about: the representatives of big business were not invited to any of the meetings of the International to facilitate a ‘lively public debate’ or to attempt to reach an agreement on the common good.

It is difficult to come together ‘as equals’ in a forum where ‘the force of the better argument wins the day’, rather than the status of one’s position in the social hierarchy, when not everyone has the same degree of autonomy. The term ‘autonomy’ means here what the republican theorist Philip Pettit, for example, calls freedom from the domination, or potential domination, of others. As such it is of the very essence of freedom, says Pettit. ‘To enjoy republican freedom was [and is] to be able to hold your head on high, to look others squarely in the eye, and to relate to your fellows without fear or deference’ (Pettit 2010, p. 42). In Britain in the seventeenth century, writes the historian Christopher Hill, ‘The men of property won freedom—freedom from arbitrary taxation and arbitrary arrest, freedom from religious persecution, freedom to control the destinies of their country through their elected representatives, freedom to buy and sell. They also won freedom to evict copyholders and cottagers, to tyrannise over their villages, to hire unprotected labour in the open market’ (Hill 1961, p. 310). The men of property were able to go on in later centuries to participate in public debate without fear of reprimand or punishment; the same could not be said for those who feared *them*. In government buildings or in the offices of private corporations, whether today or in the past, the rule of ‘discussion and debate’ is that ‘the boss wins, every time’. Input to government consultation processes from individuals and community groups shares the same fate; executives in the government hierarchy decide which views are to prevail. Opinions expressed by women in meetings carry less weight than the same opinions expressed by men; or they used to, perhaps still do in some contexts. Or people are afraid to speak out because of a generalised sense of insecurity stemming from instability in the job market and an all-pervasive sense of the fragility of human bonds and relationships—an insecurity that Bauman describes as endemic to our globalised world. On it goes in many different ways and many different contexts; social inequalities, social hierarchies and insecurity pervade all societies to a greater or lesser extent. Some individuals and groups consequently possess more autonomy, more freedom from domination, more freedom to speak their mind, than others.

Is it possible for individuals and groups to ‘bracket’ their differences insofar as their degree of autonomy is concerned and come together ‘as equals’ for specific purposes in the public realm? Is it possible to leave one’s grievances and fears at the door, as it were, and meet one’s betters or one’s oppressors inside a meeting room (or other public space) on an ‘equal footing’, at least for the purpose of debating a matter of general interest? If the conduct of participants in that public space meets our other criteria (everyone has an equal say etc), then perhaps the answer is yes. In the republicanism of Arendt, ‘The equality attending the public realm is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being ‘equalized’ in certain respects and for specific purposes’ (1958, p. 215). This means, Canovan explains, that people who are unequal outside the public realm can be ‘equalised’ inside it by means of democratic organisation of the public realm. Inside the public realm, we are all equal as *citizens*. This is a *political* equality, conceived as distinct from social or economic or any other kind of equality. ‘What unites the citizens of a republic [in Arendt’s view] is that they inhabit the same public space, share its common concerns, acknowledge its rules and are committed to its continuance, and to achieving a working compromise when they differ’ (Canovan 1994, p. 227). In this view, the public realm affords us a new identity, separate from our other identities in other spheres of life. Villa puts it this way: ‘... the political life is a life of talk and argument, a life that takes place in a public space that is—at least in principle—open to all. It is this space—and the institutions and laws that articulate it—that we have in common. Not our identity, not our ‘values’, not our religion, and not our material interests’ (2008, p. 352). The identity thus created in the public realm is not the identity of a single, united ‘people’, united by, for instance, their ability to achieve consensus on issues of common concern. What unites the citizens of the public realm is an openness to, indeed a hunger for, different points of view and a readiness to form new opinions, to widen their horizons, on the basis of exposure to different points of view. The advantage of this kind of position on the place of autonomy in the public realm is that the potential conflict between the requirements of social inclusiveness and autonomy is side-stepped. I do not find this position entirely convincing however.

It can be argued that a coming together of equals to form a truly public opinion can only be realised in societies in which inequality, hierarchy, insecurity, uncertainty and fear are diminished, in which the autonomy of individuals has been realised, in *all* spheres of life, not just in the public sphere. There are many people who cannot even get near the public sphere because of their domination by others or because they are overwhelmed by the demands of sheer survival. A woman who works all day, picks up the kids from school in the afternoon, cooks dinner and washes up afterwards, with little or no help from her husband, has little time for public engagement. Fear of racism or other kinds of discrimination, fear of lacking the education to command respect in a public forum and any number of other fears can keep people out of the public sphere. Amanda Machin argues that forums that impose ‘standards of communicative rationality’ with which educated elites are familiar can marginalise other ways of communicating common among groups with non-elite social and cultural backgrounds (2013, pp. 80-2). How many associations in civil society actually have a membership that is socially inclusive along lines of gender, age, religion, disability, sexual preference, class, social status, city versus country residence, race, ethnicity, culture,

language, aboriginality, immigrant status and national origin, for example? A society characterised by inequalities in health and education, or in which the rule of law is uneven, or in which a large proportion of the population does not have a secure means to earn a livelihood or to survive, usually finds that its public realm is filled with people who do better on these counts. The eradication of social inequality and the domination of some by others nonetheless requires political action, by the state certainly but also in the public realm. Thus we are caught in a bind: a socially inclusive public realm that can truly represent public opinion has to be created by a public realm that is, for the time being, socially exclusive.¹¹³

There may actually be times when an association is better off being socially exclusive, for certain purposes at least. Women's groups, which exclude men, have served to help build women's self-confidence and abilities. Indigenous groups, which exclude non-Indigenes, have served similar purposes. And insofar as any political movement seeks to create within itself a public forum with a chance of arriving at an agreed 'public opinion' leading to an agreed course of action, it will have to exclude those who are at the present time opposed to its aims. To this extent at least we can agree with Mouffe that '... the central category of democratic politics is the category of the 'adversary', the opponent with whom we share a common allegiance [ideally-G.S.] to the democratic principle of 'liberty and equality for all' while disagreeing about its interpretation. ... the political is from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification; the political always has to do with the formation of an 'Us' as opposed to a 'Them', with conflict and antagonism ...' (2002, pp. 9, 5). One of the problems with this kind of perspective though is that the 'us' and the 'them' are rarely homogeneous groups in themselves. Every kind of group has its outliers or marginals, its doubters, its members with horizons broader than the horizons of the majority of the group, its movers and shakers. This is healthy and natural, providing grounds for contestation within a group, the challenging of its assumptions and practices, and constant renewal of a group's aims and strategies to keep it in tune with the times. It also provides grounds for discussion between opposing groups, discussion that seeks to develop a broader public opinion than that developed among the like-minded or brothers-in-arms or sisters-in-arms, as the case may be. Also, though a political movement or group must necessarily be an 'us' opposed to a 'them', this does not mean that its affairs need to be secret and its communications kept to itself. As a model of the kind of society it is trying to create, a democratic opposition movement must display transparency and accountability to the public as a whole and an openness to communication with the public as a whole. While there will inevitably be numerous 'publics' within a society, an outcome where these publics become closed spheres, sectarian and exclusivist, threatens the possibility of communication across the whole society, and it is on this possibility that the foundation of democracy rests.

On a practical level, in the meetings of some Green parties, for instance, attempts at social inclusiveness combined with a desire to reach consensus can backfire. As Goodin comments: 'By guaranteeing that everyone can come, talk for as long as they like and that no decision

¹¹³ Smith 2009, p. 15, identifies a widely held concern amongst democratic theorists that 'extending opportunities for citizen participation in the political process will simply reinforce and amplify the existing differentials of power and influence within society'.

will be taken until nearly everyone has been talked around, green theorists guarantee that only a small and unrepresentative sample of party members will be left in the room by the time the final decision is taken' (1992, p. 142).

Within any opposition movement or group seeking to convince others of the validity of its version of the 'public interest', every effort has to be made to remove hierarchies based on gender, cultural differences (whether racial, ethnic, national or other), religion, wealth, social status and so on. This does not mean, as Lasch goes out of his way to warn us, that the views of 'the oppressed' need to be granted a privileged status with immunity from criticism, thereby creating a new kind of hierarchy, equally deleterious to democracy or, as Peter Sutton argues in the context of Indigenous Australia, to the interests of the oppressed themselves (2009, p. 7).

The autonomy of citizens remains a political project rather than a given. The meaning of 'autonomy' and the means of its realisation in the public sphere remain, for all the reasons above and more, the subject of much analysis and debate in political theory.

Finding and defining 'public spaces'

Where exactly do we find today the *agora*, the 'public space' or 'public sphere' and what forms does it take today, if any? Precisely what forms of communication, what forums, can facilitate the formation of a public sphere and the realisation of the other standards of public opinion formation with which we are concerned? For the ancient Greeks, the *agora* was a sphere which allowed communication between the sphere of the *oikos* (household, or private sphere) and the sphere of the *ecclesia* (the public sphere, where decisions about the 'common good' are made—today we call this sphere 'the state'). As a bridge between private and public life, a way of allowing private worries to be translated into public issues and, conversely, public issues to be discerned and pinpointed in private troubles, the *agora* allowed two-way traffic between the *oikos* and the *ecclesia*. This intermediary role made the *agora* a kind of private/public sphere, a sphere facing both ways.¹¹⁴ Does it exist in any form today? Once again, 'the decline of the public sphere', where 'the public sphere' can be taken here to mean the *agora*, is heralded by many political theorists (some noted above in this essay) as one of the defining features of our age. Is there nowhere that we can discern the opportunity for people to 'go beyond their circle', '... to mingle on an equal footing with persons from all realms of life, to gain access to larger currents of opinion, and to exercise the rights and duties of citizenship'?¹¹⁵

Today one is more likely to find cars in neighbourhood streets than people having wide-ranging, free-wheeling conversations about politics, the latter similarly absent from neighbourhood parks, coffee shops, pubs, churches, community centres, sports fields and other places where we increasingly spend our time: supermarkets, shopping malls, airports and inside aircraft, motorways and inside cars, railways and inside trains, hotels and home in front of TVs and computers—places Marc Augé (1992) has called 'non-places'. Being dragged into a conversation in an informal setting with someone we barely know or someone

¹¹⁴ This is my interpretation of Bauman's description of the *agora* in his *In search of politics* (1999).

¹¹⁵ As Lasch puts it, 1996, p. 58.

we would not go out of our way to meet, a conversation moreover that drifts into opinions about political issues, is not something that many of us today would relish or see as politically significant—at least not in Australian culture so far as I am aware. Yet it is this kind of involuntary, haphazard, unpredictable conversation with people unlike ourselves that authors such as Lasch see as embodying the characteristics of a genuine ‘public forum’, as being an indispensable part of a ‘civic culture’ and the ‘civic arts’, more so than the voluntary associations and ‘networks’ in which the like-minded gather.¹¹⁶ A point that qualifies this view could be that in narrow, special interest associations one does in fact find people very different from one another in respects other than the particular interest that brings them together, though whether they actually talk about anything other than their special interest when they meet is another matter. There is evidence that they do: small groups of members (*han*) in Coop Kobe and the Seikatsu Club in Japan, for example, get together primarily to make decisions about their economic activities; but they also hold study groups and send representatives to larger assemblies with broader, often overtly political, interests.¹¹⁷ Another counterpoint to Lasch’s view arises when we ask how consequential this or that forum is in terms of compelling ruling authorities to legitimise themselves to the ruled. A vibrant civic culture might be the seed bed or training ground from which emerge people who become political actors but the forums which make rulers sit up and listen seem to have something that distinguishes them: power, or at least, the potential to prevent, disrupt or discredit the implementation of the decisions of the rulers. Such forums tend not to be socially inclusive; their participants are representatives of groups that a government respects or fears, for reasons to do with their economic clout or their capacity to influence electoral outcomes, for instance. We could thus ask in this context whether the ideals of social inclusiveness and consequentiality as standards of ‘public opinion’ are compatible.

There are more communication tools available to us today than ever before in human history. In addition to older forms of communication such as books, pamphlets, documents, letters in the post, newspapers, journals, magazines, face-to-face meetings, the telephone, telegraph, radio, cinema, concerts, theatre, the arts in general and television, the internet became available for general use in the 1990s, opening up a vast new range of possibilities. Alongside its uses for commerce, for private corporations and the state (including surveillance of the habits of their clients or citizens), and for cyber-criminals, the internet has been heralded as a great leap forward in the ‘democratisation’ of public communication. Never before have so many people been provided with the opportunity to have a ‘public voice’, not just a vote in elections once in a while, and that from the comfort of their own home, as the need for physical assembly (face-to-face meetings) is now superseded by the electronic assembly of local, national and even global publics—or that is or was the hope, at least.

Yet a voice is only a voice if it is heard, responded to, agreed or disagreed with, supported or argued against, then in turn given the opportunity to rephrase, reformulate or to make alternative propositions to those it originally expressed. A voice is only a voice, in other

¹¹⁶ See Lasch 1996, the chapter titled ‘Conversation and the Civic Arts’.

¹¹⁷ See Ruth Grubel, ‘The consumer co-op in Japan: building democratic alternatives to state-led capitalism’ in Furlough & Strikwerda 1999.

words, in dialogue with another voice or voices. After more than twenty years of experience with email, for instance, we now know that the dialogue it enables is not always an effective substitute for dialogue in face-to-face meetings. In business and in government offices, the preferred venue for discussion of important and complex issues remains a meeting around a table, not cyberspace. The late Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, a company that has done so much to popularise the use of electronic communication tools, believed that anyone who thought that ideas could be developed by email was crazy: 'Creativity comes from spontaneous [face-to-face] meetings, from random discussions'. Jobs designed the Apple building '... to make people get out of their offices and mingle in the central atrium with people they might not otherwise see'.¹¹⁸ Members of political parties, trade unions, charities, special interest groups, and alternative or oppositional political or cultural groups, still see a need to hold face-to-face meetings. Even the members of 'global movements' are drawn together periodically for a summit meeting, which occurs not in cyberspace but in some definite geographic location. There is no substitute for face-to-face talk when we want to work out what sort of information matters most when discussing an issue, a point made often by theorists of deliberative democracy.¹¹⁹

It remains the case nonetheless that in large, complex societies and, indeed, in a global world, anyone interested in public opinion formation has to be able to find a hearing before a wider public than the relatively small number of persons one could possibly hope to meet in person. Journalism once served as an extension of the town meeting, with opposing points of view expressed in a wide range of newspapers, or some newspapers providing a forum for opposing points of view. New technologies like the internet potentially provide public forums that allow dialogue between a diverse range of participants (including conflicting participants), collective agenda setting by these participants, decision making, and the formulation of political demands or a program of political action. I am aware of only a few such forums on the internet: the use of Reddit in Spain, DemocracyOS in Argentina, the newDemocracy Foundation in Australia; but I have not studied to what extent any of them have the ear and the eye of a national public, a city or a regional public which comes together (in an electronic assembly) with a view to challenging the legitimacy of government decisions at each of these levels respectively. One might have expected our middle class intellectuals to show us the way in this regard but it has not happened. 'The Conversation' (<www.theconversation.com/au>), the subject of one of my case studies below, is a case in point.

The internet offers great promise for the development of public forums with political clout, a promise that needs to be further realised through trial and error. Print, radio, television and face-to-face meetings are limited by the number of paper pages, broadcasting time or meeting time available. Such constraints do not apply to the internet, except to the extent that the internet audience can only spend so much time accessing it. More contributors can be given a place on an internet site than in other media. Editors of other media and chairpersons of

¹¹⁸ Steve Jobs, quoted in both instances by Walter Isaacson in *The Australian Financial Review*, 8 June 2012, Review section, p. 11.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Goodin 2008 pp. 93-107.

meetings, deciding who gets to speak and in what order, are necessarily individuals or small groups. In the development of internet sites, on the other hand, editors can be everyone participating in the development of the site. Participants themselves can select, through discussion, argument and debate, the order of presentation of material, of priorities requiring attention. Persons outside the group of participants in the site's development can still see the material lower down in the order of presentation of material and will have their own view on its priority which they should be able to convey, openly and publicly for all to see, in their own part of the site.

Public spaces are degraded and demeaned when they are invaded by aspects of the private sphere that have no place in the public sphere. We find this when individuals think they have to accompany expression of a point of view with a personal profile, as if the details of their personal life can somehow add to their credibility and, conversely, the details of others' lives can, on occasion, detract from their credibility. This kind of behaviour in public life, on the internet as well as elsewhere, reflects and exacerbates pre-existing social tendencies that weaken the public sphere, tendencies that sap our ability to turn private or personal concerns into public issues. Putting our personal views or experiences on public display is not enough. That might seem to us to promote our sense of personal identity, to enrich our personal life, or to make us more 'authentic' and convincing when we publicise ourselves. It does little however to enrich public life. Richard Sennett argued in the 1970s that we no longer know how to express ourselves in public.¹²⁰

As concern for questions of selfhood has grown greater, participation with strangers for social ends has diminished—or that participation is perverted by the psychological question. In community groups, for instance, people feel they need to get to know each other as persons in order to act together; they then get caught up in immobilizing processes of revealing themselves to each other as persons, and gradually lose the desire to act together.

Politicians, for their part, have set a bad example, he argues. They, or their public relations managers, try to emphasise their 'personal side' rather than their policies, to establish a 'private rapport' with their electorate rather than maintain the mannered distance of a public figure. Thus they appear in public with their families or, especially in front of the camera during election campaigns, are forever holding babies. The mass media, insofar as they see it as their duty to reveal to us the private lives of public figures, add to the illusion and the mischief, Dan Hind adds, in his take on this issue.¹²¹ Other authors concur that the public realm is weakened when it is invaded by concerns for 'warmth and intimacy' that properly belong in the private sphere: Arendt, Bauman, Furedi among them.¹²² We don't need to like one another or to know too much about one another's personal lives to be able to act together politically. Personal differences, cultural differences, differences in social status, and perhaps even—more problematically—differences in power can all be set aside in a political conversation.

¹²⁰ Sennett 1993, p. 11.

¹²¹ Hind 2010, p. 202.

¹²² For Arendt's view on this issue, see Canovan 1994, pp. 247-8. For Bauman's view, see his *In search of politics* (1999), p. 63 forward, p. 96 forward, etc.. See also Furedi 2005, p. 83.

There are many people who cannot or will not attend an overtly political public forum (whether virtual or physical) but who come to politics via a different route, that of getting together to help one another out with day-to-day practical activities. Again, this is where I feel the cooperative movement holds much promise. From participation in their small *han* groups, members of the Seikatsu Club in Japan, mentioned previously, have been able to gain confidence and a voice by taking initiatives for themselves and their families. Their consequent activism ‘... has affected politics, agriculture, and education in the regions where the Seikatsu Club exists’.¹²³ The pyramid structure of the Japanese cooperatives reminds me of Arendt’s idea of ‘council democracy’, some revised form of which might still have some relevance today, despite the criticism it attracted.¹²⁴ In the early nineteenth century in England, to give another example, the ‘labouring classes’ found their feet in the rules, discipline, ceremonies and pride of the friendly societies—oriented to mutual aid—and the nascent trade unions. One observer at the time remarked that ‘The poor, when suffering and dissatisfied, no longer make a riot, but hold a meeting – instead of attacking their neighbours, they arraign the Ministry’.¹²⁵

Still others have no patience for alternative institution-building, be it political or economic institutions, and prefer ‘direct action’: civil disobedience, demonstrations, boycotts, blogs on the internet exposing political scandals, and so on. There is no doubt that these activities sometimes achieve spectacular results.¹²⁶ But when this kind of reactive politics is not accompanied by attempts to build an alternative public sphere with better democratic credentials than the existing order, we can duly fear where it might lead in times of more acute crisis. If we get to the point where severe weather events, famine, refugees and other scenarios of the ‘age of consequences’ eventuate and become beyond the capacity of governments to cope with, people will come into the streets in great numbers. Having spent their lives devoted to self-indulgence and the pursuit of their rights as individuals, they are unlikely to be in any mood to sit around discussing proposals for the common good. It’ll be ‘me first’. This will almost certainly guarantee, if not a descent into chaos, a go-ahead to the state to implement authoritarian measures; the violence of the rioters will meet the violence of the state. Whatever the result, it is unlikely to be a more democratic or stable future. Ginsberg in his *The value of violence* can perhaps correctly claim that ‘Virtually every nation on the face of the earth came into being as a result of war, civil war, or violent revolution’ (2013, p. 174) and that it is a fact of life that violence achieves results. It is precisely what these results entail over the medium to long term that is the problem. As Dryzek insists: ‘... breakdown of [an old] democratic regime is more likely to yield a democratic replacement when there is a deliberative [democratic] capacity present under the old regime’.¹²⁷ There seems to be plenty of historical evidence to support Dryzek’s view. The rulers of Russia after

¹²³ Grubel, ‘The consumer co-op in Japan’ in Furlough & Strikwerda 1999, p. 324.

¹²⁴ For a critical overview, see John F. Sitton, ‘Hannah Arendt’s argument for council democracy’, in L.P. Hinchman & S.K. Hinchman (eds.) 1994, *Hannah Arendt: critical essays*, State University of New York Press, Albany, pp. 307-29.

¹²⁵ Quoted by Thompson 1968, p. 464.

¹²⁶ Ginsberg 2013, pp. 158-65, offers some cogent arguments in support of this kind of ‘defensive politics’ as he calls it.

¹²⁷ Dryzek 2010, *Foundations and frontiers of deliberative governance*, Oxford University Press, p. 141, quoted in della Porta 2013, p. 145.

the 1917 revolution have often been likened to the czars, the rulers of China after 1949 to the emperors of earlier centuries. In Egypt, decades of oppression under authoritarian regimes has left civil society, whether pro- or anti-Mursi, bereft of democratic experience and unable to turn the popular unrest of 2011–13 into rule of the people by the people for the people:

The protesters [against Mursi and his confreres in the Muslim Brothers] had neither a coherent organization for the post-Mursi future nor any agreed-upon policy prescription for a new government seeking to provide bread, freedom and social justice. Arguably, as well, they had no more convincing solution to the problem of representation in a democratic Egypt than did the Muslim Brothers. It was effectively an open invitation for the army to step into the vacuum.¹²⁸

Presidents in some republics have powers similar in some respects to those of the monarchs of old (though Tocqueville points out some critical differences in the U.S.A.). Parliamentary democracies (like the one in Australia) feel a need to have a Prime Minister. The so-called¹²⁹ republican debate in Australia in the late 1990s revolved around who should be the head of State, a royalist Governor-General or an Australian independent of the British monarch. An option presented by the Law Council of Australia, that a democratic republic had no need for an extra-Parliamentary head of State, received scarcely any consideration.¹³⁰ Clamour in the street, high hopes, even war and revolution, can just as easily bring nothing more than new forms of the past as bring fundamental change. It seems to be the deep undercurrents in a society that determine its future more than the waves on top. One of the key undercurrents in a society that seeks democratic reform has to be its ability to cultivate and reproduce democratic experience, an ability on the part of its citizens to coalesce, debate, decide and implement a course of action, to have, in short, the experience of public freedom.

The imperative mandate

Habermas, as we saw above, expressed the view that delegates to parliament, in particular, and to other political meetings, must be given a free hand and not be ‘... instruction-bound appointees [who] meet to put their pre-determined decisions on record’. Forcing delegates to abide by the majority opinions of the organisations they represent, the ‘imperative mandate’ as it is called, degrades the level of public debate in those meetings the delegate has been asked to attend, he argues.

Goodin, another important author seeking to address the problem of how democracy can be renewed and reinvigorated, presents some caveats we need to consider. ‘In parliamentary debate, no one seriously expects to change any other MP’s mind’, he says.¹³¹ In his view, deliberation can be sequenced, that is, there is a time for deliberation and a time for voting. Parliament is about voting not deliberation. With the volume and complexity of business that has to be dealt with in parliament, I find it hard to see how it could be otherwise. The place for deliberation can be elsewhere, in other kinds of meetings. Provided a representative of an

¹²⁸ The Editors, Middle East Research and Information Project, 10 July 2013, ‘Egypt in year three’, see <www.merip.org> under Egypt.

¹²⁹ I say ‘so-called’ because the narrow terms of the debate were a travesty of the ideas embodied in republicanism.

¹³⁰ Law Council of Australia (with a representative role on behalf of Australian lawyers), February 1998, Submission to the Constitutional Convention.

¹³¹ Goodin 2008, p. 197. See also p. 266.

organisation has participated in discussions in these meetings, it might not be unreasonable at times to expect that voting by the representative will reflect the majority opinion of the organisation. Perhaps, on the other hand, if it is expected that new information may be presented at a meeting that a delegate is to attend, especially information that ‘changes everything’, a delegate might need to be given a free hand to respond to such new information in the best way (s)he sees fit. Forcing delegates to toe the ‘party line’ can also encourage ‘branch stacking’, a situation where factions compete to get the most attendees at meetings. In an earlier book, Goodin argues against the imperative mandate on the grounds that if delegates from the same party but with different constituencies are bound by the decisions of their constituencies, there is a good chance they will be voting different ways on the same issues, thus blunting the parliamentary power of their party (1992, p. 143). On this issue, as with all the others addressed here, there are pros and cons, depending on the circumstances.

Historical agents

Historians often talk of the ‘drivers’ or ‘prime movers’ of historical change as a way of explaining why things changed. Whether movements of peasants or the working class, or the influence of such groups as nobles, landowners, religious orders, intellectuals, government bureaucrats or the ‘men of capital’, these drivers of history are depicted as groups whose actions come to define an age, a period or a significant event or series of events. Prime movers in the history of a society have been seen as processes as much as specific groups of people, the Marxist concept of dialectical materialism being a good example, Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ another.

The twentieth century, some say, was the century of the ‘common people’. ‘For better or worse, in the twentieth century the common people entered history as actors in their own collective right’ (Hobsbawm 1995, p. 582). The idea of ‘the people’ as political actors gained currency worldwide in the early nineteenth century, as the ideas of the revolutions in North America (1776) and France (1789) found fertile ground everywhere (Bayly 2004, p. 107). In these two revolutions, however, precisely who ‘the people’ were was quite different. The American concept was of ‘a multitude of voices and interests’ whereas the French concept was of ‘a mass that moves as one body and acts as though possessed by one will’.¹³²

It is not at all clear who today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is best placed to steer the world clear of the crises that loom ahead of it. If it will be ‘the people’, then will it be *all* the people—has it ever been?—or some of them in particular, and what forms of political association will allow them to work together to secure the future? In her essay ‘The people’, Margaret Canovan remarks that ‘It may be that the authoritative “people” that haunts our political discourse is indeed best thought of neither as a formally organized corporate body nor as an atomistic collection of individuals, but instead as an occasional mobilization through which separate individuals are temporarily welded into a body able to exercise

¹³² Arendt 1965, pp. 93-4. The difference, Arendt claims, was largely attributable to the fact that mass poverty and starvation were an omnipresent reality in France but not in North America. The ‘cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice’, so in France manyness assumed the guise of oneness.

political authority'.¹³³ Given that the crises will affect everyone if they materialise, it is tempting to hope that people from all walks of life will put their heads together and try to come up with answers. Is it realistic to hope this? Some of the most prominent social theorists of the last few decades seem to think not.

Raymond Williams, for example, identifies trade unions and professional associations (scientific, technical, economic) as the only sectors of society that can effectively develop the alternative kinds of thinking and planning that will be needed if we are to enter a future without chronic disorder and war (1985, pp. 259, 217). By this he makes it clear he means *transformed* versions of these sectors, which would see a shift in their orientation away from purely sectoral demands (pay, conditions, jobs, regardless of the broader social and environmental costs) towards broader public considerations.

Zygmunt Bauman, on the other hand, sees 'traditional agents' such as political parties, associations and trade unions as 'no longer capable of effective action' (1999, p. 98). Quoting Claus Offe, he claims that the political economy of postindustrial and global capitalism has destabilised their roles and domains. For him, it is the 'knowledge classes', the 'intellectuals', the 'learned elite' who need to step in, taking as their task the rebuilding of the *agora*.

The modern state, or a revamped version of it, is singled out by other authors as the institution pre-eminently suited to tackling environmental problems.¹³⁴ Still others are quite clear about who can *not* be counted on to do anything. Christopher Lasch (1996), for one, sees contemporary globe-trotting elites, the new 'aristocracy of brains', as having little time for civic obligations in the places in which they live or, more precisely, inhabit in transit to their next lucrative financial opportunity. Anne Manne, for another, points to studies showing that educated, middle-class, confident, white males are more likely than other social groups to deny the reality or the dangers of climate change. As 'cool dudes' with a dominant place in the existing social and political order, they are content with the way things are, reacting defensively and aggressively to any suggestions that the threat of environmental disaster means things have to change.¹³⁵

So who will lead the way? I have suggested that cooperative movements will be key players in an ecologically viable future. But who will start up the cooperatives, especially in places like Australia where they never really took off? My answer is simple: I don't know. A few things seem relatively certain nonetheless. We can no longer take comfort in illusions that the working class, the masses, the multitude, the students, the colonised, the poor, the vanguard party, neighbourhood organisations, the intellectuals, the technocratic elites, the free market, the contradictions of capitalism, or any other easily identified group or force will be the bearers of historical salvation or progress. Privileged elites will look after themselves, resorting to despotism and brutality if they have to. 'The people' will flood into the streets if their suffering becomes unbearable, crying for bread and baying for blood. The result can be

¹³³ Canovan 2006, pp. 356-7

¹³⁴ For an overview of such authors, see Robyn Eckersley, 'Greening the modern state: managing the environment', in James, P (ed.) 1996, pp. 74-108.

¹³⁵ Anne Manne, 'Turning the sky white', in Tavan, G (ed.) 2013, pp. 67-81.

anarchy rather than democracy. At the end of the day, we have to recognise that the social sciences are notoriously useless when it comes to predicting the course of events. Nobody can prophesy with any certainty which groups or forces in our societies will carry the day in the coming decades. If the role of the state is problematic, so too is the role of ‘ordinary people’, whoever among them we choose to single out. It seems the best we can do is define what a democratic future in the forthcoming ‘age of consequences’ would look like and issue an open invitation to ‘the people’ to take part in it. Or even better, we can experiment with ‘designing deliberative democracy’ in the various ways that have been developed in recent years—more on this in the ‘case studies’ section below. We shall see who wants to participate and who stays away, making every attempt to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the public sphere. By ‘we’ I mean people with an interest in political theory and democratic political practice, thereby affirming, following Bauman, the existence of a role for such people in any political strategy, if they are interested.

Blueprints

John Dryzek warns us that (2013, p. 228):

If the twentieth century holds one political lesson, it is that we should beware of anyone peddling ... [a blueprint for an alternative society]. ... Whatever the leanings of their advocates and supporters, such blueprints inevitably go wrong when confronted with the complexities of the real world, and bring at best only ... state centralization and authoritarianism ... [or, at worst] totalitarianism and a police state.

Let’s be clear on this point. If we are talking about blueprints meant for implementation by the state without subjecting them to public scrutiny and debate¹³⁶, the warning is valid. If on the other hand someone proposes a blueprint intended for just such public scrutiny and debate, as I do, then the warning does not apply. Everyone who comes to the table to discuss an issue brings with them a ‘blueprint’: cultural predispositions, a certain level of knowledge and skills, economic interests and ideas about what is possible and desirable in society.¹³⁷ As Goodin says (2008, p. 41): ‘If everyone came to the process with a completely open mind, to the extent that no one was prepared to take any position to start with, the deliberations would have nowhere to begin’. The role of the public intellectual is premised on just this foundation. Intellectuals are supposedly people with ‘something to say’, people capable of contributing something beyond the ordinary in any public debate, even if it is just a model for how democratic debate ought to proceed (which is still a kind of blueprint) rather than any proposal to do with the substance of an issue being debated.

The outcome of any discussion, if it is to be of any political consequence, must also be a blueprint, be it one of the existing blueprints brought to the table or a new synthesis or totally new idea that takes the form of a plan for action at a local level, a government policy proposal for implementation at a regional or national level or perhaps even a Bill to go before a national Parliament. Edmund Burke, warning in the late 1700s of the dangers of the

¹³⁶ In Dryzek’s terms, subjecting them to ‘deliberative democracy’, which ‘... rests on the idea that legitimate governance depends on the right, opportunity, and capacity of those subject to a collective decision (or their representatives) to participate in consequential deliberation about that decision’ (2013, p. 236). See also Bauman 1999, pp. 87-96 for a discussion of totalitarianism.

¹³⁷ Again, in Dryzek’s terms, everyone brings with them an adherence to one or more ‘discourses’.

revolution in France and of all schemes of wholesale innovation or radical reconstruction, expresses the issues involved here more eloquently than any of us writing today seem able to:¹³⁸

If circumspection and caution are a part of wisdom, when we work only upon inanimate matter, surely they become a part of duty too, when the subject of our demolition and construction is not brick and timber, but sentient beings, by the sudden alteration of whose state, condition, and habits, multitudes may be rendered miserable. ... The true lawgiver ought to have a heart full of sensibility. He ought to love and respect his kind, and to fear himself. It may be allowed to his temperament to catch his ultimate object with an intuitive glance; but his movements towards it ought to be deliberate. Political arrangement, as it is a work for social ends, is to be only wrought by social means. There mind must conspire with mind. ... If I might venture to appeal to what is so much out of fashion in Paris, I mean to experience, I should tell you that in my course I have known and, according to my measure, have cooperated with great men; and I have never yet seen any plan which has not been mended by the observations of those who were much inferior in understanding to the person who took the lead in the business. By a slow but well-sustained progress, the effect of each step is watched; the good or ill success of the first gives light to us in the second; and so, from light to light, we are conducted with safety through the whole series. We see that the parts of the system do not clash. The evils latent in the most promising contrivances are provided for as they arise. One advantage is as little as possible sacrificed to another. We compensate, we reconcile, we balance.

As Raymond Williams commented, when he used this quotation from Burke himself in one of his works (Williams 1961, p. 26):

Nothing is more foolish than to suppose, as reformers of many kinds have done, that this is merely a recommendation of conservatism. It is equally foolish for conservatives to suppose that such conclusions are any kind of argument against the most radical social reform. Burke is describing a process, based on a recognition of the necessary complexity and difficulty of human affairs, and formulating itself, in consequence, as an essentially social and cooperative effort in control and reform.¹³⁹

In other words, just because ideas for radical and comprehensive social reform (that is, blueprints) face thoroughgoing reworking in any public effort to scrutinise and implement them, that is no argument against attempts to formulate them and argue the case for them in the first place—an open mind does not need to be an empty mind.

If we accept that blueprints are a legitimate and unavoidable starting point in any public discussion of future directions for a society, there is still the question of what makes some blueprints more feasible or possible than others. Ideas can be good ideas but visionary ideas that remain just that, so many clouds drifting in the sky. Insofar as town planning issues are concerned, for example, new and old ideas for cities can easily forever remain ‘cities of tomorrow’.¹⁴⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, one of Europe's most influential sociologists, warns us that, in the context of the rising popularity of ‘gated’ or ‘secure’ communities (2003, p. 37):

... the troubles that afflict contemporary cities cannot be resolved by reforming the city itself—however radical such a reform may be. There are, let me repeat again, no local solutions to globally generated problems. The

¹³⁸ Burke, cited in Williams 1961, p. 26. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the revolution in France* was first published in 1790. The relevance of this quotation as an estimate of political virtue is clear, though today we might add that any plans might also be mended by the observations of those who are much superior in understanding to the person who took the lead.

¹³⁹ By ‘control’ I think he means control of the reform process.

¹⁴⁰ See *Cities of tomorrow: an intellectual history of urban planning and design in the twentieth century* by Peter Hall 2002.

kind of 'security' urban developers offer [with their segregated, closed, exclusive, walled, fenced, gated, patrolled, secure property developments] is impotent to relieve, let alone eradicate, the existential insecurity replenished daily by the fluidity of labour markets, the fragility of the value ascribed to the acquired, or currently pursued, skills and competences, or the frailty and assumed transience of human bonds and partnerships. Reform of existential condition precedes reform of the city and conditions its success.

Whatever the validity of such general conclusions in the context with which Bauman was concerned, one could ask in the context of the issues raised in this essay how people can get out of the waste economy and develop more stable human bonds and partnerships until they have cities that enable them to do so, cities (or human settlements more generally, which might not be cities as we know them) that provide opportunities for independence and self-sufficiency, for escape from the global waste economy. Historically, in the long development of the modern world, people have been forced into the labour market through being forced off the land and into the cities, where they have lost the ability to look after themselves and others in any way independent of the global market economy or the national state. If we can say that 'the expropriation of the agricultural population from the land', as Marx described it in *Capital*, was a precondition for the development of the modern economy¹⁴¹, then surely a precondition for the unravelling of the worst aspects of the modern economy, for the now necessary reversal of this part of the development of the modern world, must be some kind of restoration of ties of the mass of the population with the land, ties that give them access to social networks that provide them with food, goods and other benefits. In any case, these processes are ongoing and were not over and done with centuries ago. The number of farmers in Australia continues to decline to this day, as small farmers sell up to property developers or larger scale farming operations and fewer young people take over family farms (ABS 2012¹⁴²). The self-sufficiency, wherever it still exists, of indigenous communities or people in the 'developing' world is continually threatened by mining, logging, farming and other activities that are allowed to be subject to the laws of the global market economy. It is not a foregone conclusion that such processes are unstoppable or irreversible.

Yet in a crucial sense Bauman is probably correct. Changes in housing, urban design and transport patterns in cities, and new relations between the country and the city, and any other 'good ideas' that anyone comes up with, can only be achieved or realised by people coming together, finding common cause, and working together over long periods of time to achieve their goals. The majority of employed people find their days filled with keeping their job, paying off their home mortgage and looking after their family; the bright ideas of middle class intellectuals seem 'academic' at best. In cultures in which rampant individualism prevails, in which human bonds and partnerships are fluid and transient, how is 'finding common cause' to reform our cities going to be possible? This is the old problem of the chicken and the egg: which comes first? If there were 'historical agents' who had managed to free themselves from the 'existential condition' to which Bauman is referring, perhaps they could be the ones who push for city reform and have a chance of success?

¹⁴¹ In that it '... created for the town industries the necessary supply of a 'free' and outlawed proletariat' (Marx 1867, p. 805).

¹⁴² Both the *Year Book Australia, 2012* and *Australian Social Trends*, Dec 2012, feature articles on Australian farming.

REMAKING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: CASE STUDIES

The Conversation

Here on this website, <www.theconversation.com/au>, contributors manage to talk past one another, airing opinions as if nobody else was in the room. There is no dialogue, no debate, no collective decision making. Division and fragmentation of interests and priorities are the order of the day in the internet as a whole, and this state of affairs, the very antithesis of what happens when a public *comes together* to discuss the affairs of the day, is reproduced here among people—Australian academics—who should be showing us the way. Like the daily news bulletins from mainstream media sources which, for their part, give equal prominence to political issues, the latest murders, sporting events, the weather and intermittent commercial advertisements, The Conversation lulls us into a state of complacency and passivity. There is nothing for us to do except choose the next item from the smorgasbord of items on offer.

This is a website that I consult frequently as a source of educated opinion and I value it as such; we would be worse off without it. One does not find however the views of academics *as a group*. Given any particular topic, one cannot easily get a picture of what unites and what divides academics interested in that topic. Polite indifference to the views of others and a failure to prioritise issues by giving all issues equal prominence masks a reality with sinister consequences. By this I mean it's the kind of situation that we'll probably look back on in years to come and ask 'couldn't we have done better than that?'. Take, for example, the overwhelming scientific consensus that 2011–2020 is a critical decade for attempts to reduce the risks posed by climate change. When such an issue does not become a priority issue (among a few others to be sure), a primary focus of attention and deliberation, constantly held up before us as such, the message is clear: this view of the scientists is just one among many vying for our attention; it deserves no more or less attention than any other. In other words, the call for action in the critical decade can be ignored. Here again, there is no warning of imminent danger, nothing brought to the foreground to alert us, to allow us to see and understand the danger. The editors of The Conversation, like the editors of television or radio news, or of any other journal or newspaper, can plead 'political neutrality'. Yet political neutrality in the face of imminent crisis can be called something else: abdication of political responsibility or even complicity, the ultimate end effect of depoliticisation. It operates as another set of blinkers, not this time by putting some things in the foreground and leaving others in the background, but by having everything on an even plane of relevance. If everything is equally relevant, nothing is particularly relevant or, more precisely, everything is equally irrelevant in the sense that nothing demands our immediate attention and action. The Conversation is not a conversation, not among its contributors, not with government, not with a wider public. 'The idea of communication as an opportunity to change others' views and to have one's own changed through conversation ... [gives] way to a transitive model, in which active and qualified experts ... [adjust] the beliefs of passive audiences'.¹⁴³ Perhaps its title needs to be changed to 'Pet topics of academics in Australian universities'. This is not to

¹⁴³ A quote from Hind 2010, p. 177, which seems pertinent here. He footnotes Christopher Simpson 1994, *The science of coercion*, Oxford University Press, New York.

challenge the need for fundamental research or to decry the irrelevance of the effort of our intellectuals. It is to say that if *The Conversation* is meant to represent a coming together of university intellectuals in a collective conversation, with one another as well as with government and a wider public, it has to embody the traits of genuine public opinion formation as discussed in this essay. Tell us what issues we need to focus on now, this year, and what issues can be put to one side for the moment; tell us what the priorities need to be, what the public agenda should look like. The *ecclesia* is action-oriented; the *agora* must be too if it is to be in any way meaningful to the *ecclesia*.

Is this fair criticism? Is not *The Conversation* an example of academics coming out of their ivory towers and seeking to *engage* with the general public? It also appears consistent in its approach with contemporary theories of culture that, for the most part, to quote Bauman, see culture as (1999, p. 152):

... a process of a continuous and essentially undirected change, militating against all structure, and particularly against solid and constraining structures ... Lack of coherence and co-ordination, the spontaneity of change, the scattering of innovations ... [contribute to] fertility, vibrancy, exuberance, the very life of culture ... [This kind of 'postmodern' culture that we have today] ... supports the cause of human freedom, instead of servicing, as it was supposed to do [in the past], social orders self-reproducing with the help of the constraints put upon that freedom and exterminating human inherent variety and spontaneity of self-creation.

To be able to say that such a culture embodies political engagement or a vibrant political public sphere, it would have to satisfy at least two additional conditions. First, only people with diverse political opinions engaged in *dialogue* or *conversation* with one another can be said to be politically engaged. Second, such dialogue has to move towards collectively agreeing on a consistent and cohesive agenda defining the extent of practical choices that can or ought to be made; towards a homogeneity and unity of views; towards agreeing on what is important and worthy of pursuit, a shared vision, and closing ranks on issues of the public good, the good society, equity, justice and so on; in short, progress towards 'shared values' or 'grand narratives' of how to proceed, together—to restate what I have said earlier in this essay. When such unity is not achieved, we need to know the competing schools of thought, what unites and what divides them, and to ask each school, every time new circumstances arise, what they have to say. Editors need in other words to keep the conversation going.

If we do have a culture that exhibits diversity, variety and spontaneity, within that culture, especially among people who wish to contend with aspects of our culture that are hegemonic and that influence decision-making at government and corporate levels, there must be an attempt to confront the solid edifice of the dominant culture with some kind of unity and coherence. The belief that road funding is natural, normal and for the 'public good', the belief that a speculative housing market is an element of economic growth and a road to individual wealth, the belief held by city folk that there is no need to worry about where food comes from, the faith of many in the global marketplace and in a way of life that shuns politics, the complacent belief or hope that 'experts' will solve the problem of climate change: all these and much more, of course, are examples of hegemonic aspects of our culture. 'Diversity' of opinion or lifestyles expressed in an individualistic fashion or by groups closed off from one another is scarcely the engagement of diversity in political decision-making or the

formulation of a *public* opinion; it is more a collection of the *private* opinions of the powerless which can easily be marginalised and made irrelevant. As Frank Furedi remarked in his book *Where have all the intellectuals gone?*, ‘... cultural relativism may thrive on campuses and in the arts and the media, but government and business are continually looking for objective knowledge to settle many of the disputes facing society’ (2005, p. 69). Let’s change ‘objective knowledge’ to ‘policy-related knowledge’ and take it to mean here knowledge about things that matter expressed by people who matter, these people having spent some time debating the relevant issues and then coming up with an agreed, or tentatively or partially agreed, position, as a group. That’s what I find missing from *The Conversation*. If our ‘best and brightest’ in our universities are not people who matter, who does?

The internet enables an unprecedented level of freedom of individual expression. Individuals can express themselves to everybody and anybody. Individuals can listen and watch other individuals expressing themselves as they please, focusing on their favourites, ignoring others. Some individuals might seek out opposing views, evaluate them, accept or reject them. None of this activity, if it describes itself as ‘political’, can be called a public forum in the way the *agora* is a public forum. What we have instead is a democracy of atomised individuals, a ‘public opinion’ that is the sum of a multitude of individual parts or cells of compartmentalised individuals (interest groups). Again this is an individual freedom accompanied by collective impotence, a failure to agglomerate and to form a cohesive public (among other competing publics) that through argument and debate condenses its plurality of individual expression into a coherent set of political demands. A public that produces a cacophony is less likely to move ahead *together* than one that produces a symphony. When everyone is preoccupied with making their own music whenever and in whatever way they want, without regard to the music others are playing, this is an orchestra that has disintegrated and is unable to produce a composition with any coherence or direction; an orchestra, in short, that relatively few people will want to listen to or identify with.

Science and democracy

There is one group of people in our world whose freedom to ‘go their own way’ and whose place within ‘the public sphere’ poses some especially difficult questions; that group is the scientists. Science and technology have in the past appeared to offer *Homo sapiens* a god-like ‘mastery of nature’. No longer confined to being a passive spectator of nature, science allows *Homo sapiens* to interfere in the processes of nature, to create an artificial nature of its own making; or so it seemed until some scientists discovered that nature had its own ideas about to what extent it would allow itself to be interfered with. The question thus arises: who or what can or should guide such interference by science in the workings of nature? Can or should it be subject to democratic decision-making?

Many argue that scientists should be more aware of, and take responsibility for, the practical consequences of their work.¹⁴⁴ After all, the ‘meaning’ of science is not purely the

¹⁴⁴ For references here, see the brief but insightful history of science in the twentieth century in Hobsbawm 1995, ‘Sorcerers and Apprentices – The Natural Sciences’, *Age of Extremes*, pp.522-557.

mathematical formulae and technological applications which 'prove' science to be 'true'. We do not have to understand the physics that makes possible the atom bomb to be able to understand that this device has the potential to destroy all human beings. We do not have to understand the science of genetic engineering to understand that it is a way of playing God with nature with consequences for better or worse that cannot be foreseen. Scientists, insofar as they live among us as 'ordinary people', can only find 'meaning' in their lives through the language that we all use to talk with and make sense to one another. To this extent they could legitimately be expected to understand that while the workings of science may be untranslatable into ordinary language, the effects of science are translatable. Under many circumstances, particularly where scientists are engaged in research with already known consequences, this argument is convincing.

Yet even if scientists have political views of which we approve, it does not mean they can always foresee or control the practical consequences of their work. The nuclear physicists who urged the British and U.S. governments to build an atom bomb were politicised scientists, passionately anti-fascist. To their later regret, they simply could not envisage the barbaric way in which this invention would be used. The potential practical consequences of science are not always clear. For another example, this time more benign in many of its applications, lasers in 1960 'came not from optical studies but from work to make molecules vibrate in resonance with an electric field' (Hobsbawm, 1995, p.527). Science and the world in which it operates impinge on each other but not necessarily in ways we might expect. Insofar as the language of science is completely divorced from sense experience and common sense, it has its own internal criteria of 'truth', namely, the verification of hypotheses or predictions, and consequently its own criteria of when to stop research and when to proceed. The language used within this world (mathematical symbols) precludes the kind of decision-making that is possible within ordinary language. Only once issues to do with the direction of science are expressed in ordinary language can they become the subject of political decision-making, in which we are all capable of participating, not just scientists. Indeed, commercial corporations can and do guide scientific activity, as does the military and as do individual scientists and funding bodies with an intention to serve the 'common good'. If science could be construed as purely instrumental, purely a means to achieve ends defined by its funders and practitioners, things would be relatively simple. If, on the other hand, the central focus of science is on 'process', on 'what happens', on 'how things work', on 'what relationships pertain' or on what can be done as opposed to what needs to be done or ought to be done, we have in fact a reversal of the status of means and ends; the means now justify the ends, if something can be done it should be and will be.¹⁴⁵ Scientists simply cannot know what they are doing when they start, in their experiments, 'new unprecedented processes whose outcome remains uncertain and unpredictable whether they are let loose in the human or the natural realm' (Arendt 1989, pp. 231-2); nor do they care, at first, as their curiosity as to how things work is their main guide. In human affairs, in the sphere of human relationships, we can always go back and do things differently if things don't turn out the way we hoped they would. Intervention by science in nature, on the other hand, can set in train potentially

¹⁴⁵ For a discussion of this aspect of the 'technological society' see Zygmunt Bauman, 'Private morals, public risks', Chap 7 in his *Postmodern ethics*, Blackwell, UK, 1993.

irreversible, irremediable ‘processes of no return’. Writing in the 1950s, Arendt’s observations at the time were highly prescient, if not frightening (1989, p. 238):

Because the remedies against the enormous strength and resiliency inherent in action processes can function only under the condition of plurality, it is very dangerous to use this faculty in any but the realm of human affairs. Modern natural science and technology, which no longer observe or take material from or imitate processes of nature but seem actually to act into it, seem, by the same token, to have carried irreversibility and human unpredictability into the natural realm, where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done.

Biotechnology might feed the huge populations of *Homo sapiens* in the coming decades. Or it might do irreversible damage to the biosphere. Nobody can know for sure. There are grounds to be ambivalent about the ‘green revolution’ of the second half of the twentieth century, in particular whether it represents agricultural practices that are sustainable in the long term. And who would not feel ambivalent about the fact that there now exists in a laboratory in Holland a virus created by researchers in 2011 using genetic engineering with the stated purpose of helping scientists prepare for a possible superbug pandemic but which has the potential, if it gets out, to kill millions, if not billions, of people in a very short time?

The upshot of these considerations is that whether scientists work for the military, corporations, government, philanthropic institutions or some other part of civil society, it is unrealistic to expect that the results of their work will always necessarily match the expectations of their employers or serve their needs. There are those, and James Martin is a good example, who believe that the risks associated with scientific advances can be managed by putting in place appropriate safeguards, appropriate limits, and by setting appropriate directions for research. Yet science, in its internal working, is not like that. As much a Pandora’s box as anything else, it is unlikely that science alone, or science in the service of a democratic public, is going to be able to solve our future problems. The public sphere is not able to penetrate the inner workings of science. We won’t be able to do without science in the coming century but nor can we rely on it as our best hope. That place, I have suggested, is reserved for new conceptions and practices of democratic, collective action.

Citizen-led public policy?

Suppose you have been elected as a member of parliament, either as an independent or a member of a political party. From whom will you or your party seek advice on the many issues with which you will be confronted? From whom in the public will you seek support? What will make you an ‘ideal politician’?

If you have access to advice from the government bureaucracy, will you rely on that as your sole or main source of advice? I suggest you do not. There is no debate on issues either within this bureaucracy or between this bureaucracy and the wider public. Hierarchical organisations are not conducive to free debate. In Australia, also, senior executives in the government bureaucracy work under contract to the government of the day; they have little or no independence, their minds being ‘in the service of a patron’, to use Habermas’s expression. Even if you are part of the government of the day, you can’t expect ‘frank and

fearless advice' from hirelings. The government bureaucracies are moreover essentially secret societies; they cannot be trusted.¹⁴⁶

Governments often have to make decisions on complex issues quickly. Ideally, therefore, prior to your election you will have worked for years with other people to develop a position on various issues and gone to the electorate proclaiming your positions, especially on perennial issues such as the cost of living, energy, transport, immigration and defence, for example.

In deciding which kinds of forums will be most effective for the development of sound policies, you will examine carefully the opportunities provided by the internet, other mass media and face-to-face public meetings. You will want to try to hear educated opinion as much as the opinions of 'ordinary people' from all walks of life, preferably after they have all heard one another. Nobody in any forum should be addressed by their title, be it Minister, Professor, Mr or Ms, Doctor or whatever; one's position in the social hierarchy should be irrelevant and the force of the better argument should carry the day. Crucially, you will choose forums where people have the time to gather all relevant information and time to attempt to come to some agreement on key points. You don't just want to hear a lot of different 'voices'. You want to see dialogue, conversation, argument. If necessary, you want someone like a chairperson to distil the points of agreement and disagreement and to direct discussion towards resolving, or at least identifying in detail, the areas of disagreement. In the end, you want an agenda for action, something akin to what in government parlance is termed a green paper or a white paper. Your policy agenda will thus not be based on community surveys or simply listening to a diverse range of people but based on getting people together, people committed to learning together about an issue and moving beyond the common sense of each of them to a new agreed position—or contested position, if agreement cannot be reached. In the end you will have to make up your own mind about the best way to resolve issues; you should not have to toe the party line or be bound by any other kind of imperative mandate.

It is highly unlikely that you will find a consensus on what constitutes good policy in relation to any issue, though attempting to achieve consensus can lead to a thoroughgoing and robust explication of the differing views on an issue. Any policy position you adopt will necessarily be partisan, with some analysts more or less for and others more or less against your position. Rely therefore on individuals and organisations you trust, particularly organisations that exhibit a high degree of transparency and accountability in the way they are run and whose ideas of the 'public interest' have evolved in the kinds of forums I have just described.

Talk-back radio and much of the so-called debate or analysis in the mass media do not really fit the bill as far as genuine public policy debate is concerned. There are on the other hand many experiments in democratic renewal being attempted nowadays. Goodin lists a number

¹⁴⁶ For another view on what is wrong with the Australian Public Service, a view not entirely inconsistent with mine, see Laura Tingle 2015. The situation would be improved, in my view, if senior bureaucrats working in the government bureaucracies were compelled by law to make public the advice they provide to politicians and to defend it in public debate. In Australia, this could be in exchange for providing such bureaucrats with permanent tenure.

of examples of these that have worked: consensus conferences, planning cells, deliberative polls, study circles and national issues forums. In his view, 'The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform is perhaps the best example to date of a deliberative mini-public ... informing fellow citizens about what they might themselves think about the matter, had they the same opportunity to study and discuss the matter intensively with one another'.¹⁴⁷

Your process of policy formulation and debate will need to have included, as far as practically possible, people from all walks of life and to have resulted in a genuine 'public opinion' in the way that, for instance, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform arrived at a genuine public opinion. The fact that the recommendations of the Assembly were rejected by a majority of voters when put to a referendum does not change this assessment. Genuine public opinion, if we agree with Habermas, is not just what is expressed by a majority of voters in elections or referenda, though we are bound to abide by the results of such mass voting, albeit sceptically.

As soon as you are elected you will be bombarded with phone calls, emails, letters and requests to attend meetings and interviews. Lobbyists, members of the public and other parliamentarians will all be trying to influence you, inviting you to dinner, some even offering you free overseas trips. Instead of wasting time and public money responding to the many requests that you will receive from all and sundry for meetings, support and information, respond with a standard reply inviting them to participate in the policy forums with which you are engaged. Make sure these forums are ongoing so that people will always have a chance to make a contribution. Have good facilitators at your forums to make sure everyone gets to have a say.

Do not appear on the public stage with your spouse or family. Brush off all enquiries about your personality, biography, family, personal tastes, ethnicity, religion, race, femininity or masculinity, sexuality and anything else to do with your private life. Most of these details usually have little to do with the credibility of your policy positions, though contemporary popular culture thinks they do. The contemporary obsession with personalities and biographies is part of the depoliticisation of the public sphere, politics pushed out by the invasion of the private sphere into the public sphere.

And what of ideal citizens? In the absence of ideal politicians, associations in civil society should nonetheless produce their 'white papers' in the manner of an ideal politician as I have described it above, papers in search of a party or independent member of parliament who will carry them forward. So-called community input to policy papers developed by government bureaucracies is often a waste of time, the input disappearing into the inscrutable machinations of a secretive bureaucratic world. The bureaucracy needs to be dragged out of hiding to make open submissions to publicly produced policy papers, not vice versa. At various 'community consultation' forums that I have attended, forums organised by

¹⁴⁷ Goodin 2008, p. 269. The list is from pp. 11-37. I found the final report of the Assembly at <www.participedia.net>. The Assembly was state-sponsored and cost \$5.5 million (Canadian) but lessons can still be learnt from the processes adopted.

government bodies, I have seen the intense frustration of members of the public when faced with the ‘black hole’ their ideas disappear into. The answer is for publics within civil society to develop their own plans and policies, then to find, and help get elected, politicians to implement them. Clearly, this can’t be done across the whole spectrum of public policy—who has the resources to duplicate the state?—but it can be attempted in key policy areas where government policy is lacking or deficient.

To a greater or lesser extent, organisations known as ‘think tanks’ are a vehicle for public policy development in the way it should be done. We need however to develop the ‘think tank’ or ‘centre’ or ‘institute’ model in ways that embrace models for democratic innovation that meet more of the criteria for ‘genuine public opinion formation’ that have been discussed in this essay. Significant work is being done at present on the detailed institutional design of effective democratic practice. Graham Smith¹⁴⁸, for example, in his *Democratic innovations: designing institutions for citizen participation*, lists four democratic principles that he says are common to different streams of contemporary democratic theory: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency. To these he adds efficiency and transferability, measures of the institutional feasibility or practicality of innovations. These criteria, or Habermas’s criteria—the ones examined in this essay—can be used to evaluate the democratic legitimacy of each of the steps in the public policy process, which can be listed as follows: defining the problem, setting the objectives that will solve the problem, identifying alternative strategies to achieve the objectives, choosing which strategies to adopt, defining the financial and other resources required to implement the favoured strategies in a timely manner, and defining measures that enable evaluation of the degree to which the objectives have been achieved and the problem reduced or eliminated.¹⁴⁹ If we have decided to develop public policy outside and independently of agencies of the state, another key step is required, namely, choosing or creating an organisation that we consider to be most appropriate to sponsor, fund and coordinate the policy process. None of this is simple but do we have any choice other than to experiment with new institutional designs for public policy formulation, given the failures of the state in this regard?

A RUNAWAY WORLD?

When a Fellow of the Royal Society, James Lovelock, wondered out loud in 2006 whether this century might be the last century for *Homo sapiens*¹⁵⁰, one might have expected shock waves to reverberate around the world. They did not. Why they did not needs to be explained. Are we able to communicate to one another the presence of threats to our world, any threats, let alone climate change? Do we have the capacity to organise ourselves to respond to such threats? Are there any groups of people we can expect to be our leaders, key players or ‘historical agents’ of prime importance in this period? Do we need our leaders to be more authoritarian? Is there anything ‘ordinary people’ can do? Is there any chance today of a

¹⁴⁸ See also Goodin 2008, for another important author engaged in this work.

¹⁴⁹ There are many feedback loops in this process; it is not as neatly sequential as it might appear. See Michael Hill 2009, pp. 141-9 for a useful discussion of some of the issues involved in seeing the policy process as a series of discrete stages.

¹⁵⁰ Lovelock 2007, p. 189.

politics that involves active participation of ‘the people’? These are the questions I sought to answer in this essay.

Communicating with one another is not a problem, one would have thought, given that the reach and variety of communications media available today are greater than at any time in human history. Unfortunately, things, as ever, are not that simple. Finding a voice is one thing but finding an audience—a diverse audience, not just people who all think the same—is another. Finding a responsive audience, one willing to enter into protracted dialogue or argument, over many years, is quite another thing again, especially if the audience one is seeking is all or most or many or a significant number of the inhabitants of a city, a nation, or indeed, a planet. We find ourselves unable to enter a ‘public sphere’, a sphere where we could encounter alternative perspectives, learn to articulate our goals and priorities in ways that appeal to others, sharpen our sense of the realistic options and necessary trade-offs, abandon support for indefensible positions, and develop with those with whom we are in dialogue a mutual respect that allows us to coexist and cooperate when we disagree.¹⁵¹

Social theorists¹⁵² tell us that in the framework of our so-called late modern or postmodern condition (whatever those terms mean) there is no agreement as to what is important and worthy of pursuit. Society sends us mixed messages. For every idea promoted by one source, another equally authoritative source promotes a different, even contradictory, idea. The standards that would allow us to choose between the two seem to be absent, or rather, each source puts forward its own standards, as inconsistent with the standards put forward by other sources as the ideas themselves. The views expressed by scientists appear in such a culture, our culture, as one set of views among others, many others, competing for our attention. ‘Grand narratives’, especially those that tell us the future is in our hands and that if we do not act we are doomed, are received in this context with cynicism and indifference, if not incomprehension. As Furedi puts it, ‘The absence of culturally affirmed standards deprives people of a common language through which they can make judgements of value and gain coherence as a public. Debate and rational argument over the vital issues of the day is difficult in a society that is devoted to the celebration of individual voices’ (2005, pp. 152-3).

We could analyse—I have not—scientific practice over the decades to see if science itself has contributed to this state of affairs. The mediatisation, bureaucratisation, militarisation and commercialisation of science could be the first ports of call in such an enquiry, not to mention the segmentation of science into thousands of different specialisations. Scientists themselves, like the rest of society, find it difficult to talk to one another in meaningful ways; the things that divide them seem to be more evident than the things that unite them.

I did look briefly at the way the mass media, including the internet, give us ‘information overload’ and do not allow anything to stand out as particularly worthy of our attention, protracted attention, that is, over hours, days, weeks, months and years, however long it takes to resolve the issues involved. The fact that the content of the internet is not controlled by

¹⁵¹ This is a paraphrase of Flinders 2012, p. 162, who I think provides a particularly clear way of describing some key aspects of a public sphere.

¹⁵² For one such social theorist, see Bauman 1999, p. 150, for example.

anybody does not change this situation; the effect is the same. The notion of ‘the ordinary’ is the key here. It is ordinary, among the cacophony of voices, for there to be scientists proclaiming that the end is nigh; nothing to worry about there. There is one message, however, that is ordinary but nonetheless commands our respect more than any other, though not as the result of prolonged debate and investigation. It is in fact a ‘grand narrative’ that presents a view of the state of the world and measures whether the world is getting better or worse. Oddly, it manages to escape the status of being just one more message among many others, one mere opinion among others. It holds instead the status of representing things as they are, life as we know it. I am talking of course about the message that Gross Domestic Product is the measure of a society’s success, that we cannot do without jobs, investment and economic growth, and that the market needs to be given free rein, a message that is inextricably bound up with what today is widely termed ‘neoliberalism’. It maintains its hold over us because, some have argued, it expresses the interests of the powers that be—investors, financial markets, large industrial corporations, and conservative or social-democratic political parties—interests to which most of us are bound to be subservient for fear of losing our jobs.¹⁵³ Thus the neoliberal view, endlessly repeated matter-of-factly in millions of contexts daily, wins the day, not through the force of the better argument, but because it seems to correspond to the way the world works, or the way powerful forces want it to work. It acts as a set of blinkers, blinding us to other views of the world, including the views of scientists that there are dangers ahead. Both relativised (one view among many) and marginalised (not among the persons whose views matter), the scientists warning us of danger wait in the wings for their time to come. The failure of the mass media to encourage the formation of a debating public, a public that sticks with issues until they are resolved, favours the success of ideas that sit well with common sense or common experience, ideas such as neoliberalism, rather than ideas that challenge these, such as those of the doomwatch scientists.

Choosing between opposing points of view on a purely rational basis is not something that people are always free to do or able to do. Communication is about the media chosen, the messages conveyed and also the *receptivity* of people to some messages rather than others. The latter can only be understood fully by reflecting on the conditions of life in which people find themselves and how those conditions predispose them—perhaps even force them—to be more receptive to some messages than to others. In saying this I do not mean to say that the form communication takes and its contents are irrelevant but rather that these have to be considered in relation to people’s life situation. What determines the success or failure of communication could be any one, or some combination of, these factors. I focused in this essay on the issue of receptivity because I think it deserves emphasis in trying to understand the failure of scientists to communicate their views to the wider public, not because other aspects of the problem are unimportant. Deeply ingrained in our lives is the experience of needing a job to be able to earn a living, pay off a house, raise a family. I mentioned our disengagement, over the course of the last few centuries, from the land, from our families, from our neighbours and from other people in the cities in which we live. The cost of living

¹⁵³ See, for example, Bourdieu 1998.

has skyrocketed, mainly due to house prices, the need to own a car, and the perceived need to pursue the pleasures of the consumer society. These costs are all part of modern living and they add up to one thing: we need a job to survive. People are engaged in deforestation, coal, oil and gas mining, over-fishing and peddling the wares of consumer society, for instance, because these activities earn them a living and contribute to the revenues that support the welfare state. Holding down a job is precarious these days. Transnational capital, which creates many jobs, constantly threatens to flee to more hospitable shores. Under these circumstances, jobs, investment and economic growth appear as part of the necessities of life, as essential for survival. Conservation, environmentalism, the ecological or green movement thus appear illogical, however logical their principles might appear to their adherents. This is the logic of a situation that I termed the survival trap: activities we currently undertake to ensure our day-to-day survival threaten our survival as a species. If we can bring ourselves to admit this—and how many people want to torment themselves in this way?—our excuse is, ultimately, that we are powerless to do otherwise. As bit players in a larger game, as mere cogs in the machine, there is nothing we can do to reverse the process, or so we say.

A world beyond our comprehension and control is truly a runaway world.¹⁵⁴ We feel we are living in such a world for various reasons. Large chunks of our time and energy are consumed by the labour market, by our job. Our leisure time is consumed by the pursuits of consumer society, by home maintenance, by looking after a family. These activities are often undertaken in social isolation, without the mutual support and pleasure that social networks can provide. We are, in short, imprisoned in the realm of necessity, or what passes for necessity these days. Not many of us see political engagement as a viable option, though we might attend the odd meeting or rally on an *ad hoc* basis—nothing too demanding. Using a terminology from the ancient Greeks, our free time is spent mainly in the *oikos*, the private sphere. We leave decision-making about public issues that affect our lives to the *ecclesia*, the state, and to large private corporations. What is left empty is the *agora*, the sphere between the private and public spheres in which private worries are translated into public issues and public issues are discerned and pinpointed in private troubles.¹⁵⁵ A weakened *agora* means a weakened democracy, for a particular kind of communication should occur in the *agora*, the formation of ‘public opinion’. It is here that our communication focuses on how we can organise ourselves for the ‘common good’. To a large extent the mass media and the internet, the main channels of communication these days, do not fulfil the functions of the *agora*. They give voice to a range of views but deny many voices an audience, a critically debating audience that is, an audience that comes together to debate, to define an agenda, to make decisions on political issues. This situation favours voices that evoke common sense, that mesh well with the experiences of our daily lives, voices of the established order. Voices that are unusual, unexpected—such as those of today’s doomwatch scientists—do not fare well in this situation as they require the kind of articulation that only the to and fro of interaction in public debate can provide. The kind of publicity that the mass media and the internet usually give to ideas lends itself more to passive acclamation, disapproval or simply indifference on

¹⁵⁴ A term given currency by Edmund Leach 1968, *A Runaway World?*, British Broadcasting Corporation, London.

¹⁵⁵ This paraphrases Bauman 1999, p. 2.

the part of an audience than to being taken up by an audience in any institutional process of debate, striving to reach some kind of agreement and/or eventual decision. Reconstruction of the *agora* then necessarily entails reconstruction of a public sphere in which a debating public can find a collective voice, a truly *public* opinion that results from the deliberation and engagement of individuals who come together to find common cause. This will not be possible while the sphere of necessity stands in the way.

People in the past have been able to extricate themselves from the sphere of necessity—or at least minimise its demands—by various means. Having women at home doing domestic chores, allowing men time to participate in the *agora*, has always been one. Having slaves has been another. Urbanised populations have been freed from the necessity of having to grow their own food by improvements in agricultural productivity certainly, but also by being able to benefit from the exploitation of peasants in politically weaker parts of the world. Thus the early industrialisation and urbanisation of Britain was assisted by the fact that Britain at the time had ‘... the largest tributary peasantry in the world, in Highland Scotland, Ireland, India, and Africa’ (Bayly 2004, p. 418). Cities today are fed by farmers whose produce still resembles more a tribute they have to pay to their masters than something for which they have been paid a fair price. Men of property have often found the time to engage in public affairs because they have had others working in their fields, or factories, or shops, and have had wives or servants looking after their homes and children. Automation of production of goods and delivery of services once held out the promise of eliminating the most tedious jobs, though today we see its effects, chief among them unemployment, with less sanguine eyes.

Freedom from necessity, from the chains of labour necessary for survival, has clearly often been at the expense of the unfreedom of others. It has also been, we now know from our scientists, at the expense of nature’s capacity to sustain future generations. If nature’s bounty seemed limitless to the generations of the last few centuries, it will seem much less so to future generations. The waste economy, in both its capitalist and communist versions, embodies a sphere of necessity that has enslaved both humans and nature, using both as merely raw material for its endless expansion.

Freedom from necessity provides the conditions for freedom to participate in politics. Freedom from a bloated sphere of necessity, an unnecessarily extensive and nature-destroying sphere of necessity, its vast scope defined by the waste economy, will also provide the conditions for the longer term survival of *Homo sapiens*. Politics and survival, the conditions for both are identical: diminution of the sphere of necessity. So long as survival remains defined in the terms of the waste economy, the chances for survival of *Homo sapiens* are greatly reduced. This is the survival trap in which we today find ourselves. Winding down the waste economy means eliminating many of the jobs on which people currently depend to earn a living. I tried to explore what makes us so dependent on having a job in the first place. The escape route from the survival trap, I then suggested, has to pass through reductions in the cost of living: ending speculation in the housing market, ending dependence on cars for transport, and ending our love affair with consumerism. More than this though, I suggested that some of our key ties with other people need to be retrieved from relations that are based purely on a cash nexus. We in the city need a new pact with farmers and indigenous peoples,

one that supports them and ensures that they continue to support us. We need social networks that perform functions the extended family used to perform, child care and aged care in particular. The cooperative movement, which in some countries today does all of this and more, is a living model in this regard.

Once we have redefined necessity and the ways we deal with it in order to reduce its hold on our lives and the lives of others, we shall have time for politics. Our task will be to rediscover the *agora*, to rediscover democracy, and to try to constitute ourselves as a public able to voice a 'public opinion' that counts in public affairs and in matters of state. We shall have to learn to balance our individual freedom against the freedom of others to limit that freedom, in our common interest. Difficult to theorise and practise, these are formidable challenges. I merely highlighted a few key issues in contemporary democratic thinking and offered some perspectives, favouring a republican model over others. One especially vexing issue is who in particular is likely to want to band together to tackle the threats that scientists say we are facing. As we saw, no one group stands out.

'Democracy', the 'public sphere' and 'public opinion' are among the central categories of thinking in our society. Yet without social foundations, without identifiable historical agents, they seem hollow today, mere ideological templates, normative prescriptions with little chance of historical realisation. The same could be said of the status of ideas of classical democracy during the Middle Ages. Ideas of 'Greek origin transmitted to us bearing a Roman stamp'¹⁵⁶, they found little traction during the Middle Ages, but they found it again from the time of the Renaissance. The relevance, if not the effectiveness, of ideas of democracy persists as long as domination, tyranny, oppression, exploitation, the abuse of power and the blindness of the powerful to the problems of our times remain a feature of our lives. Preserving democracy in the coming decades might be akin to the actions of some to preserve plant and animal species 'for better times', a kind of incubation, but no less worthwhile for that. Things are probably not that grim, as the many experiments in democratic innovation mentioned in this essay attest. In any case, there are no grounds for either pessimism or optimism; no one can predict the future when it comes to human affairs.

A democratic future means meetings, be they face-to-face, electronic or in print, in which people come together to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. If such meetings have any substance, conflict and antagonism will soon emerge. People will note also the power imbalances between themselves and others, between oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited, coloniser and colonised, upper classes and lower classes, and so on, as the case may be. Those who glimpse a potential for common ground among themselves, or common interests, will go off together to try to achieve some consensus on goals and strategies. Battle lines will thus be drawn between 'us' and 'them', the latter being the 'others' with whom 'we' see little hope of reaching common ground, others who are henceforward excluded from the deliberations of 'our' circle. Each of the opposing groups formed in this way will try to defeat their opponents in the battle for the hearts and minds of the wider populace and by diminishing, wherever possible, the power base of their opponents,

¹⁵⁶ Habermas 1992, p. 3.

whatever this might be. History tells us that such processes can easily degenerate into violence and skulduggery of all kinds. To prevent this, the role of the state will be to provide—in addition to police and military forces—law courts, parliaments and other institutions that allow conflicts to be brought into the open and resolved in a decision-making process that brings together all the parties, or that canvasses the views of all parties. Civil society, the mass media in particular, will need to do all it can to keep arguments on paper or on computer screens rather than have them expressed angrily in the streets. There will be winners and losers in this decision-making arena; consensus at the wider societal level will be impossible. That is the nature of politics.

Civil society, moreover, has to be vigorously involved in monitoring and participating in the processes of government for the state to be able to successfully prevent conflicts from adversely affecting social cohesion or the ability of the society to move forward or meet the challenges that face it. Only this will give the state the adaptability and flexibility that will be required to deal with rapidly developing crises. Authoritarian states, or states captured by special interest groups, will lack these essential characteristics and face instability if not chronic disorder. Civil society has to effectively engage politicians and the bureaucrats and lobbyists who advise them in a continuous debate. Opposing groups within civil society also need to engage with one another in open forums, or be forced to by others keen to get to the bottom of the issues involved. The challenge of this century will be, firstly, to stay alive and, secondly, to keep alive the practice of public freedom.

There is no guarantee that politically active publics in contemporary societies will make decisions, and force their governments to follow suit, that satisfy my or anyone else's criteria of what a 'green future' would look like. They will nonetheless have taken responsibility for their and their children's future and will reap the rewards or regret their mistakes as the case may be, or even better in the latter case, admit they were wrong and say they are prepared to try something else. We can't do any better than that, though we are far from having achieved that kind of democracy in practice. Democracy as well as survival must be the end of our quest for survival in the coming decades, not just the means. Answers to the question 'How well are we doing?' will always be contestable and as many people as possible need to be given a chance to give their answer, based on their circumstances. An authoritarian regime, no matter how green its colours, will always describe the quality of life for its subjects in terms defined by those in authority, in the interests of those in authority and with the distortions that flow from that fact. The environmental challenges of the coming years will be more painful if they are managed according to an agenda set by oligarchic rulers rather than on 'the people's terms'. Environmental strife will be bad enough. Environmental strife combined with civil and political strife will be that much more unpredictable in its outcome. The war in Syria could be a sign of things to come in this regard. A combination of drought in its agricultural areas, large numbers of farmers moving to the city, joining there large numbers of refugees from war-torn Iraq, and an authoritarian regime with bitter enemies both inside and outside the country has proved to be an explosive combination.

In my view, we shall know we are making progress towards a way of life that offers some chance of survival through the coming centuries when various key indicators appear, in both

our way of life and the practice of politics. Australian house prices will drop by 80 to 90 per cent of their current market value, more in tune with their actual quality. The building industry will not be allowed to charge exorbitant prices for poor quality work. Car dependence will be massively reduced. People will no longer be forced to own cars to get around. Cities will have been redesigned so that most trips can be on foot, pedal cycle or low-powered electric vehicles. It will be safe, convenient and pleasant for parents to take the kids around and do their shopping this way, in cities designed for people, not cars. Trams, buses, trains and boats will fill transport gaps where necessary. There will be fewer aircraft in the skies, certainly none that run on fossil fuels. Most people will be members of cooperatives that link food producers and consumers, farmers and city-dwellers, indigenous communities and non-indigenous communities. The cooperatives will organise food, housing, transport, clothing, child care, aged care and provision of the other necessities of life. Shopping malls will no longer exist, as most people will see the products and services they offer as unnecessary and wasteful. Rubbish tips in cities will be a fraction of the size they are today. Credit cards will be illegal. Advertising of goods and services will be legal only if accompanied by independent customer reviews and independent certification of quality design and manufacture. Goods will be made to last; durability, quality and minimal use of scarce resources will be the order of the day. Banks, the undemocratic ones, will collapse as most people move their money into financial institutions where they can control how it is used. The social irresponsibility fostered by the employer-employee relationship will disappear—the former concerned only with profits, the latter with a fair share of profits, regardless of how these are earned—as most people will work as members of cooperatives, having equal say and equal responsibility in cooperative activities. Welfare state benefits will be strictly limited to health, education and other areas for which only measures at state level are just or effective. Unemployment in most instances will be a thing of the past as very few people will have a valid excuse not to be a member of a cooperative.

These are not measures that will be imposed on people from above; people will figure out for themselves that the old ways are a dead end and will agree on these new rules for our life in common. Freed from oppressive mortgages, from jobs that are damaging to the natural and social worlds, and from social isolation in undertaking family functions, people will have time to participate in politics, in forums to discuss public affairs and in decision-making bodies. Forums will entail heated debates in which people seek to resolve issues amongst themselves. There will be fewer polite occasions on which speakers have their say and audience participation is limited to short questions. Members of the Business Council of Australia will no longer have privileged access to government ministers and officials; they will have to argue their case in public forums like everyone else. International agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other free trade agreements will be terminated and the government ministers who signed them will be taken to task for fraud and treason, by civil society if not by the courts. Proponents of unlimited individual freedom will find the world a harsher place. Individual ‘rights’ that entail substantial damages to the wider community and nature will be severely challenged. The right to own a car, to live wherever one wants, to travel wherever one wants, to set up polluting industries, to sell defective products, to have as many children as one wants, to own dogs and cats, as well as the usual

suspects, the right to smoke, to drink alcohol or take drugs: all these and much more will face fierce public scrutiny. Of course, there will be many more indicators than these. Importantly, the economic indicators put forward as measures of progress by much of the mainstream media and government agencies will finally appear to most people as what they are, the focus of a lunatic fringe that we allowed to run our lives for over two centuries.

Nasty? Unrealistic? Time will tell. One thing does seem certain: the coming years will force us to rearticulate our views on the relations between freedom and necessity, freedom and politics, and freedom and constraint. This could be as much a rediscovery as a reinvention of democratic and republican ways of life. In the lives of people in the U.S.A. in the early 1830s, Tocqueville tells us, 'to take an interest in and talk about the government of society is life's most important activity and, in a way, its only pleasure. ... If ... an American were reduced to minding only his own business, half of his life would be stolen from him. He would feel as though an immense void had hollowed out his days, and he would become incredibly unhappy'. How can we retrieve this kind of public spirit in men and women in our time? Will we again acquire the habits of a civil and moral liberty that finds its strength in union with others? And will we come to understand this: 'In the United States ... it was never claimed that man in a free country has the right to do whatever he pleases. Indeed, the range of social obligations imposed on him was wider than in other countries'; a kind of freedom realised in mutual obligation?¹⁵⁷ Or this: 'the rights of humanity stop whenever and wherever their exercise imperils the existence of another species', a view that, Lévi-Strauss tells us, 'except for a few centuries in the West, has been explicitly or implicitly accepted in all places and in all times'?¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ From Tocqueville, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, hence his focus on men and exclusion of women: Vol 1, Part 2, Chap 6, p. 279; Vol 1, Part 1, Chap 5, pp. 79-80; Vol 1, Part 1, Chap 2, p. 48.

¹⁵⁸ Lévi-Strauss 1985, pp. 282-4.

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