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A World Going in the Wrong Direction



Longview, Washington. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

The converging crises facing our world today shout out the fact that their roots are systemic. Tinkering around the edges won't solve these problems, because they are embedded in the systems logic itself. The climate crisis is the signature of this. While definite progress has been made in deploying low-carbon energy technologies, overall carbon pollution has continued to increase because of the systemic economic and political assumptions under which dominant institutions operate.

The same is true of the general crisis of ecological overshoot in which climate is a major factor but by no means the whole picture. Scientists led by the Stockholm Resilience Center have been looking at ecological boundaries which mark out the safe space for human civilization and the Earth as a whole. Last September they announced the results of the first-ever evaluation of all 9 processes that preserve stability and resilience. Six boundaries have already been breached including the condition of climate, land, water and the biosphere, as

well as overloading of phosphorus and nitrogen, and introduction of novel entities such as microplastics and endocrine-disrupting chemicals. This all suggests, scientists wrote, “that Earth is now well outside the safe operating space for humanity.”

These facts underscore the necessity for transformative change in economic and political systems. Massive resources must be devoted to transforming the basic elements of human society, including how we gain energy and materials to produce goods and services, how we grow our food, how we get around, how we build our buildings, how we deal with waste products. That entails redirection in how we invest capital.

Two significant indicators that our world is not getting it are the dramatic accumulation of wealth upwards and record military spending. Over the past 4 years billionaire wealth in the U.S. alone has shot up 88%, from \$2.9 trillion in 2020 to \$5.5 trillion today. The top 10, led by Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, account for \$1.4 trillion of that. Globally, as a 2022, the richest 1% owned 46% of world wealth. No doubt that percentage has increased since. Would the planet be going into ecological overshoot if these people were investing in a way that created a resilient future? Obviously, they're not. Sure, some are putting money into low-carbon technologies and environmental philanthropy, but the overwhelming preponderance of their investments and businesses still propels overshoot. Whatever they are doing does not address the systemic roots of the crisis.

Meanwhile, world militaries gobbled a record \$2.2 trillion in 2023, up 9% over 2022, and another record is expected in 2024, the International Institute for Strategic Studies reported. That no doubt is a lowball, since real spending by the largest military power, the U.S., was estimated at \$1.5 trillion in 2022, double the nominal budget. All the while wars rage on in Europe, the Mideast and Africa, and direct conflict between great powers is predicted. The frightful words World War III are increasingly on people's lips.

All this indicates a world desperately in need of transformative change is moving in the diametrically opposite direction. It's enough to crush hope and leave people who care for the future in despair. Where do you gain leverage to change such an interlocked global system? We need a way to take hold and begin to put a new system in place.

Restoring the commons

The first step is to understand the essence of the systemic transformation that is required. The common thread in our multiple global crises is the elevation of narrow interests over the common good. Certainly, the crisis of ecological overshoot reflects blindness towards our dependence on the planetary commons. For instance, making the atmosphere a dump for fossil fuel pollution while cutting down forests and tearing up soils are major drivers of

climate disruption. Increasing global conflict and military expenditures reflect putting national interests over those of the world as a whole, despite the threat of nuclear extermination. The obscene and increasing concentration of the world's wealth in so few hands screams out the prevalence of private interests over the common good.

Thus, the necessity is to restore the balance in society by rebuilding our sense of the common good, and the institutional frameworks that express it. That is the core of the transformation that is required. Self-interest is a powerful factor in human life, and will remain so. It is a part of human nature. But we also have a strongly cooperative and social side that must be emphasized if we are to navigate our convergent crises.

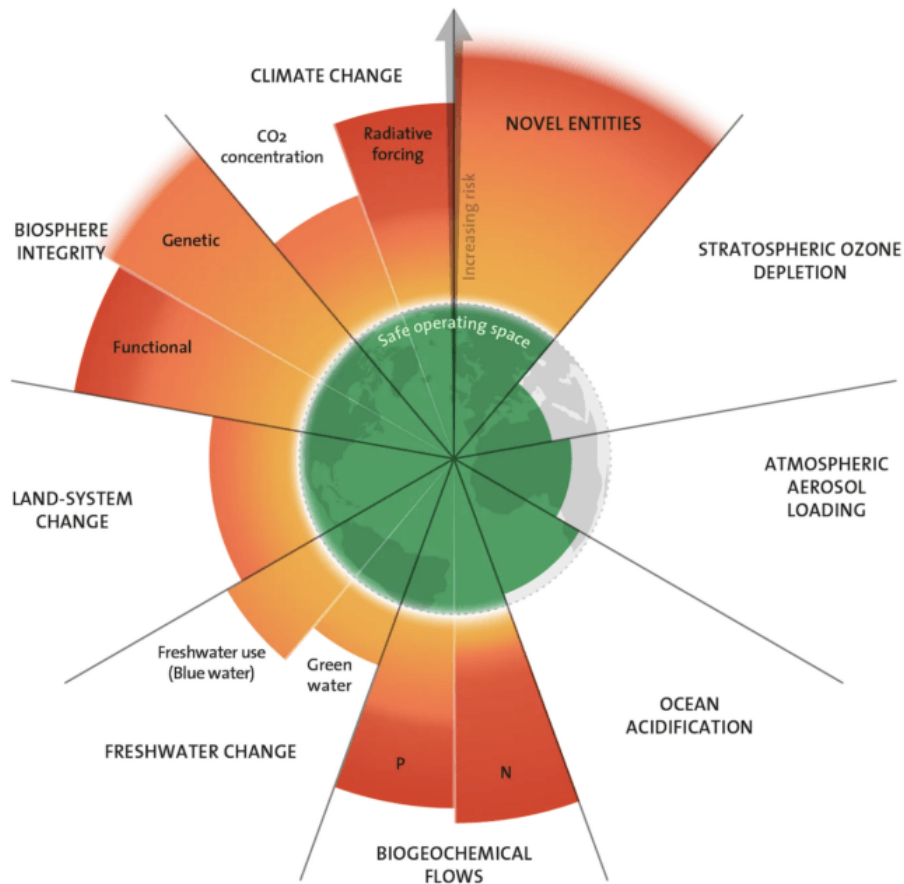
Over the past 4 or 5 decades, a philosophy known as neoliberalism has prevailed. It is built on a belief that if we each pursue our own self-interest, it will result in optimal results for society. The record has proved this wrong. The crises cited above, ecological overshoot, increased global conflict, and widening disparity of wealth, all testify to the need to restore a sense of the common good and common enterprise.

Neoliberalism has downgraded and denied these necessities and the institutions we have created to promote the public good. The general diminishment of the public sector, with the widespread evasion of just taxation by the wealthy classes, is central to this.

On my home turf of Washington state, we have a poster. We just lost a billionaire. That world's richest man, Jeff Bezos, just evaded around a quarter-billion dollars in payments under a newly enacted state capital gains tax by moving his legal residence to Florida. This is a man whose Amazon wealth depends on deliveries through public road and aviation infrastructure, and whose computer-based business is built on digital innovation publicly funded during World War II and the Cold War.

Capture of public institutions by private interests is the other aspect of the neoliberal era that makes them so ineffective at dealing with our crises. The fossil fuel industry and allies such as big agriculture and railroads have frustrated sufficient action on climate. The military-industrial complex promotes conflict and war. The wealthy fight just taxation. The list could go on.

The balance to this situation is people power democratically organized to advocate for the common good. That is why we need leverage points where people power can begin to make change, to reinforce existing institutional frameworks and build new ones that promote the common good. We need to build resilient economies that address the imperative to come back within planetary boundaries while meeting basic human needs.



Humanity has already exceeded 6 of 9 planetary boundaries that set limits for maintaining stability and resilience of civilization and Earth as a whole. We need transformative change to bring us back within bounds. Credit: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, based on analysis in Richardson et al 2023

Restoring the common good in place

Inherent in the idea of the common good is community. Restoring the common good and restoring community are one and the same. This directs us to the logical place to begin the process, the communities in which we live. This is where we can begin the work of transformation, of putting new systems in place. Our communities are where we develop the deepest connections and sense of commonality. Our surroundings, the social and natural environments in which we live, are where we can best envision and work for the conditions that promote the common good.

A key insight is that you can't change everything at once. You have to build a new system within the shell of the old, using elements of the old system that nonetheless embody the changes you want to make. In the case of building the future in place, local and subnational state and provincial governments are vital. These are the institutions charged with maintaining the public sphere, and powerful in crucial areas including transportation,

building and zoning codes, public greenspaces, waste management, water supplies, pollution control, and economic development. In many areas they own energy utilities, while private utilities are regulated by state commissions. In other words, local and subnational jurisdictions play central roles in many of those areas requiring transformation. In fact, much of the progress made toward a more sustainable society has been accomplished at these governmental levels.

But we need something more. We need to coalesce a broader political movement with a vision for transformative change, and to reclaim capital flowing out of our communities for investment in public and community-based institutions that address basic human needs. We need a kind of evolutionary revolution that builds the common good, one which makes systemic, transformative changes in specific places, in that way building models and constituencies for changes on broader scales, creating networks that are both horizontal with other places and vertical up to national and global levels.

Many of these concepts go under the rubric of municipalism, a fundamental idea of which is not only leveraging existing governing institutions for change, but also creating a more participatory and inclusive context. This entails creating community assemblies or congresses that draw together diverse groups and movements to create visions for transformative change and build the political power to make them happen.

This strongly suggests that building a future based on the common good, on restoring community in place, begins by drawing together the many organized groups working for specific changes in localities into discussions aimed at coalescing their forces around a common agenda. One can envision stages beginning with conversations among group organizers leading to community congresses that agree on unified platforms and prioritize steps to realize them through work with local governments and civil society. Election of local officials who remain accountable to the will of community congresses, who will work to enact the agenda, is a key element. Many of these actions have already been modeled in places such as Barcelona, where for some years a civic movement made significant gains based on organizing through neighborhood and citywide assemblies. Though the movement there has seen setbacks, it still remains an influential model.

Beyond building a new political base, the key priority is to build a new economic base, one based on peace rather than war, which meets real human needs. That is why the growing movement for public banking is foundational. In the U.S., banking is largely a private enterprise built on bottom-line considerations. An exception is the state bank in North Dakota, a legacy of the populist era. So individuals, businesses and governments keep their

money in institutions that send it around the world in search of the greatest profit opportunities, often undermining the interests of their depositors. Banks also have the power to create money, being able to lend beyond their reserves on the calculation most loans will be repaid.

A public banking system would treat money as a public utility, to be invested and created by social, economic and environmental criteria that promote the common good. Public banks created at local and subnational levels could fund public infrastructure, and eliminate interest paid to private banks. They could also fund needed community institutions such as social housing and worker coops. They could focus investments in areas crucial for sustainability at all levels, such as public transit, food production and distribution, clean energy, and materials recycling and recovery. Cities and states could become dynamic actors in building community-based economic institutions that meet needs where the private sector is falling short.

A political strategy for all seasons

Of course, such an agenda will be opposed by the same narrow private interests that obstruct progress at broader levels. Local business interests are powerful, and generally well organized and well funded. That is why we need coherent political movements with their own institutional infrastructures and visions and agendas for transformative change. The place such people power movements have the greatest potential to gain leverage is local areas. And where there are powerful local movements, the ability to move state and provincial governments is greatest. They can also coalesce into bioregional networks that build a new sense of identity and common purpose around place defined by nature.

Obviously, the multiple crises facing us require transformative change at all levels. The interest group politics that maintains a stranglehold on national governments must be dislodged. A new level of international cooperation must be achieved. These are necessities. Local focus allows us to build models that are truly transformative, and networks to spread them more widely and achieve broader gains. Local and regional communities are where people power politics can gain the most traction to begin re-balancing society and politics for community and the common good.

Ultimately, we need a politics for all seasons, one that can address all exigencies, a no-regrets political strategy that prepares for worst case scenarios, within reason, but which will work and provide gains under all scenarios. One which provides effective routes for transformative change through people power organizing. Which begins to re-balance who has power in society, turning around the trend to increased concentration of economic and political power

by distributing power more widely. And which effectively addresses our convergent crises by beginning to restore the common good in economy and society.

Many fear, and even consider inevitable, that systemic collapse will be upon us in coming years. Ecologically, in the form of intensifying climate disruption and connected breakdowns of vital systems such as food production. Economically, in the form of a new great depression. Politically, in the form of deepening social conflicts and electoral outcomes that push national unity beyond the breaking point. All this speaks to the need to build strong, resilient communities. A political strategy that builds a future based on the common good beginning in the places where we live can meet this need, and potentially help avert worst case scenarios.

If humanity survives the current age, it will be recalled how we as a species navigated a time of great disruption on multiple levels. Certainly, we will have left a legacy of disrupted climate and ecosystems. We will have experienced consequences that are now unavoidable, but will somehow have avoided total civilizational collapse and nuclear warfare. I believe that when that story is told, it will be one of rediscovery of the common good, building a future based on community, human solidarity and mutual aid. Beginning by building the future in place.

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