

**LAND COMMODIFICATION AS A BARRIER
TO POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC AGENCY:
A DEGROWTH PERSPECTIVE**

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In response to today's political, ecological, social and economic crises, a broadly anti-capitalist 'degrowth' movement has emerged. This critical body of literature and activism sees the growth imperatives of capitalism as being fundamentally incompatible with our finite and increasingly degraded planet (Weiss and Cattaneo 2017; Kallis *et al.* 2018; Alexander and Gleeson 2019). Degrowth advocates are virtually united in their call for the developed – or, rather over-developed – regions of the world to initiate a process of planned and equitable contraction of their energy and resource demands, with the goal of moving toward a stable, broadly egalitarian, steady state (or zero-growth) economy that operates within the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet (D'Alisa *et al.* 2015).

Although the degrowth movement has no singular vision of the 'good society' (Kothari *et al.* 2019) or singular theory of transition, there seems to be broad support for the notion that a degrowth society, if it is to overcome the many social, economic and political obstacles in the way of its emergence, will have to be driven into existence from the grassroots up, with individuals, households and communities coming together to 'prefigure' a new post-capitalist society within the shell of the old (see D'Alisa *et al.* 2015). According to this broad theory of change (Buch-Hansen 2018), such prefigurative action is projected to filter upwards over time to change social, economic and political structures in recognition of the systemic nature of the problems (Alexander 2013; Trainer 2010).

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The privileging of grassroots or community-led action is mainly due to the widely shared perspective that the ability or willingness of politicians or business to lead a degrowth transition is scarce-to-non-existent (Alexander and Gleeson 2019; Rickters and Siemoneit 2019). Nevertheless, despite the coherency of these doubts, similar doubts could be levelled against hope for a degrowth transition rising up from any kind of a socio-cultural groundswell (Frankel 2018; Sanne 2002). Indeed, this article argues that such paralysis in degrowth transition theory stems from the growth imperatives of the dominant politico-economic order of global capitalism – particularly relating to land, whereby ordinary people expected to lead the transition are essentially locked into market participation to buy or rent housing and keep a roof over their head.

While the biophysical aspects of the degrowth perspective are important, coherent and largely compelling – indeed, we accept the validity of the case (Turner 2019; Kallis 2017) – the movement has given insufficient attention to land and housing costs, which are significant barriers hindering true political and economic agency and any grassroots driven degrowth transition. As we will argue, the struggle for access to land and housing almost always locks people into sustained, but not sustainable, market participation.

While land has been analysed by political economists for centuries (see below) – including astute analyses within this journal (see, *e.g.* Collins, 2018; Munro 2012; Anderson 2011; Morris 2010; Foley and Anderson 2006; Jordan and Stilwell 2004) – none have presented an extended analysis of land in the context of the ‘limits to growth’ predicament (Turner 2019). Nor have they examined how access to land in market societies is a barrier to prefiguring sufficiency-based ways of living necessary for post-carbon social structures to emerge within the safe operating space of planetary boundaries (Steffen *et al.* 2015). Our contribution to the literature is to analyse this terrain, exploring why access to land is a barrier to a degrowth transition and how that barrier could be removed, or partially removed, to facilitate a degrowth transition.

We could present our central thesis in a different way. Those in the degrowth movement who have been fortunate enough to afford land and housing may be able to grow their own organic food, put solar panels on their roof, bike to work, and reduce working hours in the formal economy – and these practices may indeed provide some important prefigurative degrowth examples of localised economy, downshifted consumption, and

post-carbon energy practices. However, we will argue that they provide a fundamentally compromised example of a degrowth pathway. Many of those practices imply access to land, with the implication that ‘downshiffters’ are often in a minority of privileged market actors – spending decades ‘buying in’ to the market economy in order to downshift lifestyles and ‘opt out’. Anyone seeking to follow their example would also have to commit to long and successful market participation to afford their rent or mortgage payments. In short, it is very hard, and often impossible, to live a life of downshifted consumption and increased self-sufficiency, especially in modern urban contexts. In turn, this entrenches the ecologically destructive paradigm of economic growth, essentially locks people into market participation and consumerist lifestyles, and inhibits people prefiguring local and post-carbon modes of production and consumption. Our reading of this structural obstacle to degrowth suggests that this reality represents a deeply problematic curtailment of political and economic agency, because land privatisation only permits agency (such as related to degrowth) to emerge *within* a market context.

We begin by briefly acknowledging how land and democracy have been linked in political theory and practice, before reviewing how the foundations of capitalism in the historical ‘enclosures’ movement dispossessed people from land upon which to live and a commons from which they could source a livelihood. We then unpack the reasons why the struggle to access land and housing, especially in contemporary urban contexts, has oppressive and ecologically problematic implications that must be recognised as major barriers hindering a degrowth transition. The fundamental implication of this realisation is that degrowth and related movements must give increased attention to land, housing and property rights as a fundamental enabler and prerequisite to any degrowth transition (Buch-Hansen 2018).

Accordingly, after presenting a detailed case for this neglected obstacle to degrowth, we consider what new land governance arrangements might look like if they were designed to foster and enable sufficiency-based living consistent with the degrowth imaginary. We will defend a strategy we call ‘Neighbourhoods that Work’, which essentially involves providing people economically and socially marginalised by late capitalism with (1) access to public land and housing; and (2) a ‘participation income’ (*ie.* a modest living wage) for helping build new, relocalised, ecologically viable and socially just communities and economies.

As we outline this approach and unpack a broader vision for transition, we will argue that this strategy could support the prefigurative action mandated by the degrowth movement. Just as importantly, it may expand the political imagination to make more space for degrowth in cultural visions of progress and prosperity. Central to this vision is recognition that access to land, just as with air and water, is not a commodity. Rather, land is an essential element of nature, necessary for the realisation of many human rights (Polanyi (2001 [1944])). In turn, we explore how a strategy combining public tenure with productive local community development programs could open a new post-growth pathway. For those public residents choosing it, this option could represent a shift in their status as economic citizens. Such a new option could help overcome what has become a very destructive binary – where people are either positioned as ‘successful market citizens’ (having secured paid work and private housing), or are positioned as ‘flawed citizens’ (because of their inability to do so and resultant welfare dependency) (Flint 2003; Bauman 1994).

The broader theory of transformation we will defend is that demonstrating successful examples of new land and economic arrangements, even if initially at a small scale, could also be of critical importance as the existing system comes under greater stress and potentially collapses (Streeck 2017). As more people are cast into unemployment or insecurity by financial crises, the automation of jobs, globalisation of labour, intensifying global climate change and pandemic events, phasing-out of high impact industries like fossil fuel power stations, it is highly likely that they will require and demand new housing and community options that are both economically and environmentally sustainable.

How land privatisation has locked people into the growth economy

While missing from most contemporary political, economic and environmental discourse, many of the themes around land at the centre of this article are not new. The importance of land access and its foundational implications for economic and political freedoms can be traced back to a perspective found in the commons (Hickel 2019). There is also a tradition in political theory that holds-up land access as a prerequisite for genuine economic democracy (Lasch 1995). In this section, we provide a cursory

theoretical and historical review of such literature to contextualise our contribution.

Land and democracy in political theory

Amongst historians and philosophers, there is a tendency to separate human and natural history (Chakrabarty 2009: 201). Jacob Burckhardt (1979: 31) provides an illustration:], holding that '[h]istory is not the same thing as nature' and history 'is the breach with nature caused by the awakening of human consciousness.' This position has been challenged in other disciplines. For example, in nature writing, Aldo Leopold (2013) brought to life the active role that land has played in shaping human social relations and institutions. More concretely, in political economy, Marx (1981 [1867]: 949) theorised the potential for a metabolic rift in capital accumulation, and land was central to Locke's (1988 [1690] labour theory of value and the classical liberalism which sought to carve out a 'private sphere' into which the state had no right to enter. Yet, despite these celebrated writings, land remains a minor player in cultural history and theories of democracy and self-governance.

A rare exception to this is nineteenth-century US political theory. Within this context, there flourished deep reflections on the importance of land in a robust democracy (Lasch 1995: 7; Newton *et al.* 2006: 43). The catalyst for these writings has a material explanation – the (colonial) frontier opened new kinds of political participation and pacified class fears about expanding the franchise to poor males (Smith 1973). 'This fear' notes Christopher Lasch (1995: 7), 'rested on the observation that a degraded laboring class, at once servile and resentful, lacked the qualities of mind and character essential to democratic citizenship.' However, the opening of land on the Western frontier diminished the prospect that unhappy workers could join together and organise for better conditions or more decision-making power (Newton *et al.* 2006: 43). Of course, it must also be made explicit that the expansion of the frontier displaced First Nations people who waited until 1924 for enfranchisement.

Thus, land was integral to the development of US democracy and, in time, foundational figures like Thomas Jefferson promoted the idea that democracy required a commitment to landownership and secure tenure (Newton 2006: 43; Griswold 1946; Hardt 2007). This argument went beyond the truism that the public sphere must be grounded in a physical

place and included the idea that landownership enabled citizens to develop certain 'democratic habits', such as 'self-reliance, responsibility, initiative' (Lasch 1995: 7). Property provided the foundation for people to develop these basic competencies and opportunity for people to solve common problems together. Jefferson had grander hopes than this. For him, 'a society rooted in the soil would exercise a salutary curb on the destructive commercial passions, stifling their propensity toward avarice, speculation, exploitation, and war' (Yarbrough 1998: 79). While limited, these ideals were given expression in place-based celebrations that flourished at the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps the best documented example is in the Indiana dunes pageant, which utilised its secure tenure system to enact rituals of peace, democracy and ecological preservation (Engel 1986).

Jefferson's recognition of the centrality of land in social life was developed further by Henry George and John Dewey. George focused on urban land and raised concerns that poor people could be (and were being) priced out of the market and excluded from amenities and social relations vital to democracy (1886: 240-2). Building on George's concerns, Dewey argued that land value taxation was necessary to establish a 'public' or 'great community' based on personal interactions and face-to-face experiences. Dewey (1946: 219) argued that this was essential for democratic life: 'intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint, until it possesses the local community as its medium.'

Today it is rare to find the connection between land, democracy and citizenship expressed in such rich terms. There are several interconnected reasons for this, including the enclosure of the commons and the way neoliberal rationality has economised our thinking and reduced landowners to taxpayers or vehicles for stimulating economic growth (Brown 2015). We now turn to consider those pressures, beginning with the enclosures that became widespread from the 16th century. We contrast access to commons with the contemporary situation dominated by the central institutions of capitalism – private property and the market. This highlights how the privatisation of the commons changed the contours of political participation and reshaped political subjectivities of citizens in ways that are increasingly entrenched within the growth paradigm of political economy. To the extent that this paradigm is unsustainable and distributively unjust, such entrenched subjectivity undermines the prospects of genuine ecological citizenship and political participation.

The commons, privatisation and changing political subjectivities

In feudal England, the common was an integral segment of the estate or manor that was overseen by a lord. In this system, an individual was typically born into the allegiance of local nobility and provided labour and other forms of feudal duties to a land 'lord' in return for use of the lord's land and protection from invasion. This arrangement was characteristic of Europe in the eighth century through to medieval times (Neeson 1993). While commoner land rights indeed restricted and far-from-ideal in feudal times, the extent to which land remained unexploited by the nobility allowed the continuation of ancient subsistence traditions (Yadle 1992). However, under feudal exploitative conditions, these land rights were ultimately eroded and lost as it became profitable for the nobility to enclose the commons (Thompson 1991). Struggling or unable to secure a livelihood off the disappearing commons, more people were driven into the cities to sell their labour, work in factories and purchase access to land – the birth of the proletariat and rise of capitalist social relations. Although times have changed, this process of urbanisation is still underway today (Linebaugh 2014).

In accordance with this dispossession, E.P. Thompson states that enclosure 'made the poor strangers in their own land' and that '[i]t would be fair to say that our people resisted tooth and nail against being turned into the working class' (1991: 184). It was of course this European notion of private property and market modes of participation that was spread through the world by colonisation, a striking example being the British colonisation of Australia (Roberts 1969).

Pre-enclosure commoners retained a form of subsistence access to land that was still direct, not tradable, and not entirely subsumed by exploitative forces. It provided a context that shaped what it meant to be a good member of society – a good citizen. In this 'commons' conception, good economic citizenship involved performing local, collaborative and productive roles on common land. Contrary to Hardin's 'Tragedy of the Commons' thesis (1968) – which fails to acknowledge any kind of community of users and instead sets forth a fictional unmanaged individualistic free-for-all system – commons have been successfully managed over countless millennia by widespread communities with complex and varied systems of boundaries, rules, social norms and sanctions against free riders (Ostrom 1990; Basurto and Ostrom 2009; Bollier 2014).

This economic and social form of good citizenship is remarkable in that it can be directly contrasted with the reality of the contemporary market citizen, whose access to land – and, in turn, economic, political and social existence – is primarily subsumed by the market (Hickel 2019). The market, rather than any kind of direct relationship with land, has become the location of ‘normal’ acts of economic and political participation. It can, thus, be concluded that the perspective or rationality shaping current democratic subjectivities (as well as all other rights) is directly informed by the market paradigm (Brown 2015). For example, public-housing residents, in their use of public land and efforts at local unpaid collaboration (*i.e.* ‘tenant participation’ schemes), are not recognised as ‘good’ economic citizens – an issue to which we will return. Instead, public tenure is constructed within a ‘charity’ framework and, if at all possible, as a stepping-stone to acts of ‘real’ or ‘normal’ economic citizenship – such as paid work and private housing. The obvious shadow of this framing is that public tenure is constructed as a site of dependency and what John Flint (2003) and Zygmunt Bauman (1998) term ‘flawed’ economic citizenship.

Both pre-enclosure commons and pre-colonial Indigenous subjectivities on land, housing and participation remind us that the market discourse dominating economic and democratic citizenship can be juxtaposed against another perspective and discourse. This alternative discourse contains within it notions that fundamentally reshape thinking about ‘good’ economic, political and social citizenship. In this pre-capitalism subsistence perspective, we meet a fundamentally different citizen: one whose independence, productivity and integrity come from a direct and intimate relationship with common land and subsistence collaborative participation, rather than private land ownership and selling their labour in the market (and subsequent dependence on economic growth).

This brief historical account identifies and contextualises the market rationality dominating contemporary conceptions of democracy. As argued below, it also has the potential to lay the groundwork for an alternative path, with different implications for citizenship.

What does current land (and housing) governance mean for degrowth and democracy?

Despite the political, economic and social freedoms presumed available in Western democracies, these do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, our freedoms must attempt to navigate and survive within a highly pressurised market context – central here being the payment of a rent or mortgage.

While much scholarship points to various injustices and inequalities related to this market context (particularly within neoliberalism), the notion that we are nevertheless democratically free remains principally accepted in the collective ethos. To undertake a foundational critique, we are seeking to re-examine a key institution of Western liberal democracy – the idea of land privatisation. By re-politicising this particular economic institution (which is historically synonymous with Western liberal democracies (Locke 1988 [1690]; Smith 1970), we seek to expose a structural obstacle to genuine democratic freedoms and political participation. Our analysis explores democratic freedom in terms of private land as an economic determinant – where citizens of capitalist economies have no option other than to secure market opportunity to gain access to land for housing, which delimits the scope of people's political and economic freedom – shaping everything from their daily economic activities and relationships to their voting practices.

The logic of our argument so far can be briefly restated, beginning with the context of ecological overshoot. In the overdeveloped capitalist nations, planned contraction (or degrowth) of energy and resources is needed for justice and sustainability – and it follows that being free to practice degrowth and vote for degrowth must be an option. Since governments and businesses under capitalism have various growth imperatives that are antithetical to degrowth trajectories (Rickters and Siemoneit 2019), most degrowth advocates seem sympathetic to a theory of change that privileges grassroots, prefigurative action 'from below', assuming with good reason that degrowth will not be introduced by government and business leaders from the 'top-down.' This is coherent so far as it goes. However, when one then questions how degrowth supporters and activists are supposed to prefigure the new society within the structural constraints of capitalism, it becomes clear that access to land creates a major barrier to living in ways consistent with the degrowth imaginary.

To understand the degree of the pressure faced, consider the fact that Australia's long-running housing crisis has seen house price inflation outstrip income growth since the early 2000s (Wilkins and Lass 2015). According to the Grattan Institute, median Australian house prices have 'increased from around 4 times median incomes in the early 1990s to more than 7 times today (and more than 8 times in Sydney)' (Daley *et al.* 2018: 16). This persistent housing affordability crisis has placed tremendous and unrelenting pressures on a broad gamut of Australian households – from intensifying rental affordability problems for those with lower incomes, to over indebted and locking-out would-be first home buyers (Pawson *et al.* 2020a). Contemporary housing scholars, such as Hal Pawson *et al.* (2020b: para 2), recognise that this problem of housing unaffordability is:

fundamentally structural – not cyclical – in nature. Yes, periodic turbulence affects prices and rents. And yes, market conditions vary greatly from place to place. Australia-wide, though, there is an underlying dynamic that – over the medium to long term – is driving housing affordability and rental stress in one general direction only: for the worse.

Surely, if there were a 'structure' we may review in this regard, it is the structure of the commodification of land, which is not so much a market good and more a social need. In the context of this tremendous and lifelong pressure to pay, our daily democratic, economic and lifestyle practices will necessarily be constrained by the reality of meeting what is a generally unavoidable mortgage/rent obligation. Meeting this obligation is no small matter and has a range of knock-on implications: affecting what a person does for work, how much they work, their need for a car, what they wear, where they source their food, and a range of other consumer habits. Within the market paradigm, where land is intensely commodified, our political and economic agency or freedoms become contingent on our ability to acquiesce to markets. In this market paradigm, we are not free to live simply off the land. What would Jefferson say to that? In this regard, private land is pivotal to broader social relations within capitalism. This is consistent with a Marxist perspective, where alienation from land is indicative of the separation of the majority from access to the means of production more generally, creating market dependency for housing and many other essential goods and services (Wood 2012).

Furthermore, since most people are under financial pressure to afford rent and mortgage payments, they are effectively dependent on growth-orientated political parties – a dependence which has significant

implications for how many vote. For households struggling to make ‘ends meet’, the idea of degrowth can seem to be antithetical to their immediate economic and survival needs and, thus, unthinkable.

The degree to which most people in capitalist societies are dependent on market opportunity for housing security has crystallised during the COVID-19 economic crisis, with the declining economy resulting in a threat to people’s ability to service their rent and mortgage payments (Ong Vifor 2020). In light of this relationship between economic opportunity and something as basic-to-survival as shelter, it is little wonder that political parties live or die on their ability to secure ‘Jobs and Growth’. Even purportedly progressive parties like the Greens must attempt to demonstrate their viability by mapping some sort of path to jobs and growth (Greens Policy 2018). Where such ‘progressive’ green-Left parties are forced to promise growth to demonstrate their leadership viability, how can we expect a broader prefigurative degrowth movement to emerge? Our critical point is that the market paradigm, through the privatisation of land, thwarts the right to pursue degrowth in our lives and politics.

Beyond critique, our positive intervention is to emphasise why changes to land governance are a fundamental prerequisite for enabling and expanding the degrowth movement (and related movements). But, in ways to be explained, our transition theory is organic and pragmatic rather than revolutionary – although, we will argue, not lacking the potential to be transformative. If land commons could be restored for housing, it would release people from what is essentially the largest and most unavoidable part of their dependence on the market. Given common land, those wishing to engage in pre-figurative degrowth practices would be free to focus their labour on myriad subsistence needs – from self-build housing and maintenance, to food production, resource repair and share programs.

Our more nuanced theory of change is this: as more people recognise the forthcoming dangers presented by the ‘limits to growth’ predicament (Turner 2019), we expect that the degrowth movement, or something like it, will expand more broadly into the cultural consciousness. Indeed, this is already underway (Drews and van den Bergh 2016). As more people accept that governments and businesses are unable to lead a degrowth transition and endeavour to live materially downshifted, post-carbon lives, it is inevitable that they will discover that access to land is a foundational structural impediment – making transition difficult or impossible. Frustrated by this barrier to living their values and exercising democratic

agency, the movement will shift its focus to land rights advocacy, in order to broaden access to land, thereby enabling greater freedoms to choose a sufficiency-based way of life without such extensive and prolonged market engagement. Indeed, mandating broader access to land may become a necessary political expedient if economies enter prolonged crisis or deterioration and engender increasing unemployment and social tension (Alexander and Baumann 2020a).

If this movement were successful, people would no longer be under such constraining financial pressure to meet basic land and housing needs via extended market participation. Sufficiency-based living would be a more viable option through new land governance arrangements. This post-consumerist culture would expand the political imagination beyond growth politics and, over time, lead to more extensive institutional and structural changes in the direction of degrowth (Alexander 2016).

A politically palatable land strategy is needed to begin: From theory to prefigurative politics

All sustainability movements need to answer the question: how can we shelter and feed ourselves if not through (unsustainable) long-term market growth and participation? Until this question is answered, sustainability movements, including degrowth, will continue to be movements that are too often elitist, out of touch, politically alienated and sadly, hypocritical in what they demand from government, industry and, most importantly, ordinary people trying to make ends meet.

In recognition of this inescapable need for inclusivity and degrowth, we will now explore a land and community development strategy that we think has the potential to be politically palatable. That is, we are choosing to be pragmatic rather than idealistic. Indeed, we believe that, if framed correctly, this strategy has the potential to provide benefits that could be marketed beyond 'progressives' to economic and social conservatives. This strategy is seeking to help remedy what has become an extremely polarising social and environmental justice debate – where economic prosperity and opportunity are often in contention with environmental and social justice.

In the following sections, we argue that if public land and participation experiments could begin to show potential as enabling a flourishing but low-impact mode of living, they could play a role in the provision of real-

world examples of non-private property relations and a new form of economic opportunity/agency.

Neighbourhoods That Work (NTW): A public housing strategy

We are calling our strategy ‘Neighbourhoods that Work’ (NTW). As foreshadowed in the introduction, this involves linking (and ultimately expanding) existing government policies with public housing residents that could elect to secure their unemployment benefit as a ‘participation income’ (through the existing voluntary-work-dole-the-dole scheme).¹ For unemployed residents who volunteer, this would give them a participation income for a formal 15 hour per week commitment to community development work (Baumann and Alexander 2019). Combining this validation of voluntary local community development work with existing public housing, while not without challenges², provides a starting point for those seeking to practice prefigurative degrowth practices and lifestyles effectively proscribed by the structural centrality of commodified land in the current market context.

The first step in developing this strategy involves addressing the problematic way public housing is understood within neoliberal market framing and what alternative framings might need to encourage. Despite decades of neoliberal policies, many countries around the world maintain some heritage of public housing (or ‘social housing’, which includes housing managed and, in some instances, owned by a community organisation for a specific social purpose). We will argue that public housing could offer a starting place to begin to envision and practice an economic variant to private housing. We believe this variant has the potential to re-frame public housing beyond existing connotations of dependence and transition, and remove the barrier to sustainability outlined above.

In some public housing communities, particularly public housing estates, residents already self-select to participate in community development

¹ See the policy at: <http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/3/2/9/130>.

² As part of an incremental neoliberalism, public housing has increasingly been framed as ‘transitional housing’. In NTW’s conception, public housing will be seen less as ‘transitional’ housing if it can progressively be seen less as a welfare safety net and more as part of a viable and economically responsible direction for ‘good economic citizenship’.

programs (sometimes under the umbrella of ‘tenant participation’), such as community food gardens, resources repair/share programs, housing management, maintenance and, in the UK, even housing construction (Hedgehog Self Build Housing Co-op 1996). In this way, public housing provides an example – albeit limited and sometimes problematic (Baumann 2011; McKee 2008) – of publicly owned land for a form of community development that is local, cooperative and not inherently defined by dependence on market growth.

Unlike most market citizens, who must secure life-long market opportunity just to keep a roof over their heads, public housing residents, with affordable access to land and housing, have the potential to realise a very different opportunity. If reframed, the potential is for willing residents to create local or community-based activity to supplement their needs and, indeed, minimise the need for income via the market. Such supplementing is, of course, incremental and, in the meantime, unemployed participants would be no worse off (Alexander and Baumann 2020b). Before explaining the NTW policy in more detail, we first address the problematic framing of public housing and welfare under the neoliberal orthodoxy.

The dependency framing of public housing

In its current form, public housing is almost exclusively constructed within the prism of welfare dependency. This construction seriously constrains the productive agency of residents, in that it has had a detrimental impact on the success of community development programs, like tenant participation (Baumann 2011). In this dependency framing, public housing residents are regularly presented as being flawed or failed economic citizens (Baumann 2016; Flint 2003; Bauman 1998). This perceived deficiency is constructed within a market rationality, in which citizens’ economic obligations are best served through acquiring and maintaining paid employment and private housing (Bauman 1976, 1998). In this market mentality, accentuated by neoliberalism, good economic citizens are taught to recognise themselves (and others) primarily by two key hallmarks of economic achievement: paid-work and private housing (Flint 2002; Pateman 1989). Flawed citizens can, conversely, be identified by the lack of these two key hallmarks.

Such perspectives on the ‘shortcomings’ of public-housing tenants are illustrated through the agendas of various tenant-participation programs

that have been created in numerous national contexts, including Australia. Many of these programs have been experienced by public residents as being less about helping them ‘find a voice’ – and achieve vital community development goals – and more about capacity-building tenants (McKee 2008) with the skills and subjectivities required for their integration into paid-work and private housing (Arnstein 1969; Baumann 2011; Flint 2003).

This market construction of good economic citizenship has been accentuated in recent years through a regime of incremental neoliberalism. For instance, Queensland’s landmark twenty-year review of its tenant-participation program (Department of Communities Housing and Homelessness Services 2011) reinforced the market agenda for tenant participation programs. This review not only positions paid employment as an outcome of capacity-building among residents, but asserts employment as the first and most central objective of tenant participation.

While accentuated by neoliberalism, this market context for tenant participation is hardly new. Indeed, it was identified at the very inception of these programs. Arnstein (1969: 219) found that these programs were only ‘masquerading as citizen participation’ and that: ‘[t]heir real objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programs, but to enable powerholders to “educate” or “cure” the participants’ (Arnstein 1969: 217). In such terms, critical scholars like Flint (2003: 614) point to ‘the new attitudes and skills involved in tenant participation’ as an attempt to help subjects ‘create the means for their own consumption, primarily through gaining access to the labour market’.

Should individuals choose not to be ‘cured’, and adopt such market subjectivities, their behaviours are in turn problematised. As Bauman (1998: 614) outlines:

individuals unable or unwilling to undertake these ‘normalised’ acts of consumption become conceptualised as flawed consumers, with a particular focus on the deficiency of those reliant on allocated, as opposed to chosen, goods.

Beyond this construction of residents’ economic subjectivities by market state housing actors, resident participation subjectivities are also directly shaped by Federal Government agencies, such as Centrelink. In this regard, unemployed residents often have mutual obligations where tenant

participation activities are typically not recognised, and can even be seen as unauthorised and in breach of job search time commitments.³

The only alternative to job search or employment-related capacity building (such as study) is that residents must capitalise on their dependency (*eg.* disability pension), rather than their capacity. In this setting, where only welfare dependency or market engagement is authorised, unpaid local community development is often unvalued, discouraged and undermined – seriously limiting alternative expressions of productive political agency. In this way, some public housing residents – who may not have the spirit or ability to secure paid work – are forced into dependency subjectivities. Where an absolute binary of market integration or welfare dependence is established, dependency subjectivities inevitably emerge as both a defence and a necessity by people alienated by market-based constructions of participation and housing (Baumann 2016).

The NTW approach that we are unpacking critically engages with and challenges this neoliberal construction of good economic citizenship by juxtaposing it against a pre-market perspective. This alternative perspective asserts that collaboration on non-private land is, in itself, a valid expression of productive or active citizenship. In fact, local collaboration on non-private land is a very widespread idea that is far from new. Despite it being rendered invisible by the full gamut of market actors and forces, it is humanity's oldest and most widespread mode of productive operation (Ostrom 1990; Gibson-Graham 2010; Bollier 2014). For Indigenous Australians, it underpinned their way of life for tens of thousands of years (Rose 2000, Common Ground 2020). Similarly, in Britain, people lived and locally collaborated on common land for many thousands of years before it became enclosed (Thompson 1991).

We are arguing that productive collaboration in public housing has the potential to re-establish a 'common' productive space, in a modern and urban setting. This would liberate a non-marketised form of political and productive agency – providing an alternative to the false dichotomy of market integration and welfare dependency. Ultimately, we feel that a validation of housing and local collaboration on public land (a commons

³ In the Australian context, unemployed public residents are expressly limited in the amount of hours they can volunteer and are expected to drop any community development commitments on demand. Instead, they are compelled (at risk of income penalties) to enter into market-related mutual obligations – such as job search or study (Australian Government Services Australia 2020).

form of development) is a necessary foundation for restoring balance – addressing the environmental and social down-sides of an exclusive focus on capitalist development.

Validating public housing participation

As outlined above, central to liberating the agency of public residents – who wish to participate in local community development – is the way their participation is given status and economically validated. One existing Australian policy setting that could be harnessed to help advance this validation, is Centrelink's voluntary-work-for-the-dole (VW4D) policy. Distinct from Centrelink's mandatory work for the dole policy, VW4D allows for unemployed public housing residents, who are over 55, to volunteer in a formal 15hr weekly commitment to local community development work – as a valid option for fulfilling Centrelink's mutual-obligations (earning participants their income benefit as an ongoing participation income). For those under 55, this opportunity must be approved by a Centrelink officer, and is usually permitted only if it can be seen as leading to paid work – and usually only for a limited time of 6-12 months.

While VW4D is currently a policy that is not well engaged (or even well known), we believe that it is an existing policy setting that could be used to make local collaboration in public housing much more feasible for those residents who may wish to voluntarily participate in local community development as a way to satisfy Centrelink's income benefit requirements. It could be developed to help liberate residents' productive agency in this important area of localised, collaborative and community-orientated post-growth development. To this end, our NTW strategy is working to mobilise this policy setting, by combining it with other key supportive structures in a fit-for-purpose proposal for any unemployed person. To help resource those interested in this option, this proposal also includes easy to engage community development programs and a community-led process for program management (Baumann 2016).

Each participant would be accountable for 15 hours/week in their choice of a range of neighbourhood programs, such as facilitating tool and other resource sharing, food gardens and playing a role in maintaining their homes and neighbourhoods. NTW's community-led management process also supports participants to develop their own neighbourhood program.

Such programs can provide cultural value and strategic housing and food security. The innovation of NTW's proposal is that it would lend a vision, good citizenship status and key supports to those seeking out this opportunity. While housing affordability and security means that those in public housing are far better placed to take advantage of this opportunity, the design of NTW is intended to support any unemployed person to choose this form of recognised and supported community development as an alternative to jobs search or welfare dependence.

An exciting aspect about this seemingly radical idea is that it is not actually particularly radical. With the right supports, it can commence immediately – given that the policy settings are already in place to allow unemployed public residents to self-select into VW4D. Such an opportunity, if properly supported, could show that access to land plus a participation income could help build new forms of genuinely sustainable development 'beyond the market'.

An 'active participation' framing of public housing

Among those eligible for public housing and VW4D, there will be many who would simply not be interested in the sort of participation NTW is attempting to encourage. This policy would not interfere with these peoples' income or housing entitlements. To mandate involvement in NTW, as programs like work-for-the-dole (Australia) and Workfare (UK) do, is antithetical to NTW, and would completely undermine its ethical and practical integrity. However, we believe there are people who would be interested in choosing NTW as way to meet Centrelink's requirements for their income benefit and find a creative role in their locality. In the way that NTW could give ongoing status and validity to local community development on public land, it is entirely distinct from market-centric mutual obligation policy – constructed, as it is, around the idea that the market is the sole site of valid economic citizenship.

Some of these NTW volunteers would inevitably take the new skills learned and use them as a stepping-stone into paid work and possibly even private housing, should that be their goal. For others, who might enjoy the option provided by this alternative and sustainable path to security, or for those who might otherwise face long-term unemployment, NTW could provide a fulfilling, ongoing housing and participation option. Progressively, as new skills are found, this group could begin to

demonstrate a new type of productive and political agency that is consistent with the degrowth imaginary.

While such a new path to security is certainly radical to some degree, at risk of appearing naïve, we would tentatively but pragmatically suggest that providing those alienated from the market with such an alternative site of valid participation might also represent a shift acceptable to many on the political right. They would likely see peoples' involvement as a step toward skill development and potential market involvement – as it would inevitably be for some. Even for those who might continue in public housing and VW4D, conservatives would likely see such participation as a more active, and less passive, form of 'welfare'. If self-selecting participants could demonstrate the economic, social and environmental value of their participation, this VW4D policy setting could ultimately be expanded to include a further easing up of restrictions on those under 55 years old who might choose it in the longer-term.

In essence, NTW's strategy is that, in lieu of market engagement, public housing and community participation could be organised (for those willing) so as to facilitate the emergence of local and increasingly self-reliant community development – a form of participation consistent with pre-market commons. If such a space proved productive, the identity we give to public housing tenants who choose to participate could begin to be uplifted and even celebrated alongside market forms of housing and employment. Indeed, if these self-selecting residents could be better supported, their status in our market-centric society, and how they might conceive of themselves, could gradually move from being regarded as 'social dependants' to pioneers of a new type of local, cooperative and sustainable form of development.

By showing that access to public land can help with the emergence of local and sustainable community development, NTW is attempting to be part of an experiment that will ultimately encourage a broader cultural and policy rethink of how land and participation are conceived.

Vision of organic transformation

Empirical studies show that some simple living communities (Lockyer 2017) and strategies (Trainer *et al.* 2019) can reduce ecological impacts by up to 90 percent or more, which is arguably the scale of downshifting needed to bring developed nations within sustainable limits of the planet

(Trainer and Alexander 2019). In NTW's living arrangement, the opportunity of public housing and many benefits of local collaborative development make a small income (and small engagement with the market) sufficient and arguably even desirable. In this way, NTW would be an example of degrowth that would put those participating within the realms of globally sustainable resource use (Trainer and Alexander 2019). In essence, NTW could give people a productive participation option that relies on their access to land and local collaborative productivity – rather than welfare dependency subjectivities or their success in the competitive housing and employment markets.

For the poorest in the world (the unemployed and insecurely housed in the developed North and many in the South), the policy planks of NTW (secure land and housing and an opportunity to make a globally sustainable income level stretch further through localised collective-sufficiency) would offer increased material opportunity.

Many of us in the developed North are simply too embedded in the market to come to terms with the sort of degrowth that is required for a true path to global resource justice and sustainability (Trainer 2016). It is likely that those market subjects that are relatively successful will mostly continue to place hope in technology – and the unreasoned hope that perverse levels of consumerism and growth can be made sustainable and equitable for the whole world through high-tech renewable innovations (Hickel and Kallis 2020). Some may certainly follow the lead set by a project like NTW – if they were to understand the necessity of degrowth and were given the opportunity to overcome the structural impediment of lifelong land debt.

However, it is likely that many others will need to directly experience the limits to growth – and the loss of opportunity engendered by economic and environmental crisis – to extract them from consumer culture. Because of this, we think that the poor leading the more affluent into examples of commoning and a socially and environmentally sustainable future is the most likely scenario – if the poor were given a way out of their poverty through a scheme like NTW. This strategy has nothing to do with any naïve belief that the poor are somehow more principled in their decision-making. It simply acknowledges the fact that, for the poor and dispossessed, the opportunity to achieve land security, a participation income and the benefits of local collaboration, represent a material opportunity – rather than any kind of voluntary simplicity or relinquishment of wealth.

While this strategy will necessarily begin with the unemployed in public housing, it could be expanded to include others alienated from the market: the ever-growing victims of the automation of jobs, the globalisation of labour – such as manufactured goods being increasingly produced in developing nations⁴ (Borland 2016) – or the decline in polluting industries such as fossil fuels (Trainer 2012, 2016). Perhaps even more significantly, this strategy could help model a path for many in the developing world – who require a model for housing security and appropriate development. As the serious unsustainability of market growth becomes increasingly problematic, NTW seeks to be one model that can be activated within the social and economic vacuum that will inevitably grow. In this scenario, it is estimated that governments could transition organically, local participation on public land (NTW) being a far more economically and socially viable option than passive welfare (including a UBI⁵) (Alexander and Baumann 2020a). An option like NTW is also more viable than widespread social unrest – with the political bedlam, conflict and security threats such social unrest would inevitably generate.

Scaling-up new land governance arrangements to the point where they influence the broader economy would require a gradual expansion in public housing. We feel that it is not unlikely that the economic and social difficulties that lie ahead will prompt just such an increase in public housing – which could be made far more economically and socially viable if combined with an ‘active participation’ program like NTW. COVID-19 has already highlighted Australia’s public housing shortage – prompting social welfare advocates (ACOSS 2020), unions and the building industry (Mealey 2020) to recognise the problem. The stimulus following the Great Depression and the end of World War II offers a precedent: it led to the ‘golden age’ of Australian public housing (Green 2016).

4 For example, studies by Siu and Jaimovich (2015) emphasise that the ongoing decline in manufacturing employment and disappearance of other routine jobs is causing the current low rates of employment.

5 Unlike the Universal Basic Income (UBI), this reestablishment of land and skills is not essentially dependent on market growth, because (while it does have a small market relationship) it ultimately draws on the wealth of land and community cooperation – not on market taxation revenue for redistribution (economic growth).

Conclusion

Without assuming that we have joined all the necessary dots, we invite readers to consider that a strategy like NTW could be used as an important part (and only a part) of a deep sustainable transition. We have argued that experiments with ways to broaden access to land is utterly indispensable to facilitating the political and economic agency necessary for any degrowth transition. Moreover, since degrowth in some form is necessary to the ongoing habitability of Earth, we maintain that strategies to achieve land access (like NTW) ought to be given more attention by those seriously concerned about sustainability, justice and the flourishing of the community of life on Earth. It is time to experiment with new frameworks that can increase access to land, empowering more people to explore lifestyles of reduced consumption, increased self-sufficiency and local economic collaboration, thereby enabling a prefigurative degrowth movement to build new worlds within the shell of the old.

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