

Alternative Economies for the Anthropocene: Change, Happiness and Future Scenarios

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Abstract

This article analyzes the cultures of the alternative economies that have emerged in Spain as a response to not only economic crisis, but also climate change and global warming. After drafting a conceptual map of alternative economies, the essay focuses on a number of local environmental projects in Spain that can be considered as examples of “alternative biopolitics”. These projects involve networks of human and non-human realms such as other species, crops, the monetary economy, the metaphors that render relations between human and non-human life, and alternative constructions of the meaning of life. The second section problematizes contemporary purely eco-systemic perspectives by introducing considerations of individual fulfillment and happiness. In the conclusion, the alternative economies are reconsidered in light of future scenarios in which their impact as well as individuals’ well-being may vary significantly. Bringing together frameworks of cultural studies and environmental studies, and juxtaposing systemic ecological analysis with narratives of individual happiness and frustration, this article offers a new approach to understanding alternative economies as novel environmental cultures of great potential importance for the future of the planet.

Keywords: alternative economies, environmental restoration, local currencies, happiness studies.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las alternativas económicas y culturales que han surgido en España como resultado de la crisis de 2008, pero también como respuesta a la crisis ambiental y el calentamiento global. Tras trazar un mapa de las economías alternativas, el ensayo se enfoca en una serie de proyectos ambientales considerándolos como ejemplos de una “biopolítica alternativa”. Estos proyectos incluyen redes de ámbito humano y no-humano, como, por ejemplo, otras especies, cultivos, la economía del dinero, las metáforas que expresan las relaciones entre la vida humana y no humana, así como también construcciones alternativas del sentido de la vida. La sección final problematiza la perspectiva ecológica, considerando las posibilidades de la satisfacción y felicidad individual. En conclusión, las economías alternativas se reconsideran a la luz de escenarios futuros, según los cuales su impacto en el bienestar individual puede variar de modo importante. Conectando los marcos de los estudios culturales y ambientales, y yuxtaponiendo un acercamiento sistémico de la ecología y las narrativas individuales de la felicidad y frustración, este artículo ofrece un análisis innovador de las economías alternativas como culturas ambientales con un enorme impacto en el futuro planetario.

Palabras clave: economías alternativas, restauración medioambiental, monedas locales, estudios de la felicidad.

Cause that's what life's all about: To arrange and rearrange and rearrange. (Pete Seeger)

In my trips to various sites of alternative economies in Spain, I look for images of happiness emerging from abandoned construction sites—covered these days with steel nets to prevent the homeless from occupying unfinished buildings. I have learned that for activists one of the sources of happiness is the very realization that a change is necessary, especially if the conviction comes as a result of synergy between various voices. This is an ethical and epistemological satisfaction in recognizing that one has understood the situation and acted accordingly. On 25 July 2009, Ton and Carmen walked with other citizens of Vilanova i la Geltrú to the town's lighthouse, where they all joined the Transition Towns movement—a movement aiming to build an equitable, participatory, and sustainable society, one that will slow Global Warming and make the necessary preparations to survive it. Ton, a social worker, inspired by the ideas of Bernard Letaier and by the music of Pete Seeger, would soon launch a social currency to allow the unemployed and underemployed to exchange services and locally produced goods without conventional currency. This newly created currency allowed the realization of projects that could not be launched earlier for financial reasons. Ton and Carmen gave it the name of the music of love, “turuta,” which is traditionally played during the annual fiesta of Vilanova i la Geltrú, when people throw candy at each other and dance. In this way, memories of joyful togetherness were connected to the project of the alternative economy in town. Since that first night in July 2009, every 25th of July, Turutians—as the members of the association are called—gather by the lighthouse on the beach. As the night falls, people sing, dance, talk and think of new projects. These and other gatherings when *ciudadanos* get to know each other better and form a community based on similar values have been among the most satisfying experiences of their alternative economy.

In an article on “Changing the Intellectual Climate,” Castree et al. (2014) argue for the involvement of Environmental Social Sciences and Humanities in research on Climate Change because separating the sciences from the humanities risks insulating research from those key “human dimensions” that determine its very significance. They describe, for instance, how different conceptions of well-being may frame plural notions about appropriate transformations. Castree et al. suggest that the problem of “global environmental change” in the human context should be approached as a complex systems problem: “A single, seamless concept of integrated knowledge is thereby posited as both possible and desirable, one focused on complex systems” (np). Although the proposed complex system would include a wide array of knowledges, not only knowledge derived from different academic fields, but also forms of non-academic, activist knowledge and different cultural epistemologies, its “seamlessness” is understandably questionable.

Ecology is a science that has always dealt with the complexity of the biosphere and the unforeseen consequences of interdependence between all of its multiple elements. Ecological complexity emerges from the interactions between the organisms

and their environments, but while ecology cares for species, ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole, it is somewhat indifferent to the fate of individuals (Anand and González). Writing from the perspective of environmental humanities, I propose to complicate purely systemic ecological approaches by considering narratives of individual fulfillment and happiness both in the present and in future scenarios. My project incorporates ethnographic material collected in various sites of alternative economies in Spain, especially Cardedeu and Vilanova i la Geltrú, on which I will focus. Further sources are interviews with the activists Ton Dalmau, Carmen Dastis, Juan del Río, Miriam Urbano Flecha, Beatriz García and others, as well as the fictional accounts *Memorias de la Tierra* by Miguel Brieva and *Cenital* by Emilio Bueso, which afford insights into and from the future.

Mapping the Change

There are different interpretations of the nature of the current crisis. While it is well known that capitalism generates crises that, if taken advantage of, are profitable for its economic elites, Edgar Morín (2011) defines crisis as an event that reveals what usually remains invisible, forcing those around it to recognize flaws and injustice within the system, and releasing forces of transformation. Various other scholars view the current alternative economies as a symptom of the culmination of an ongoing crisis of capitalism (McKibben) or even more broadly as the crisis of Modernity (Caraça). While previous crises of capitalism were to some extent transitory, this one has a more permanent appearance due to the general decline in job availability caused by the structure of the prevalent economy, the information and communication technology revolution, the growth of the world's population, and the environmental destruction and climate change. According to Bernard Letaier, "The historically unprecedented convergence of the four megatrends—the Age Wave, the Information Revolution, Climate Change/Species Extinction and Monetary Instability—points out that business as usual is just not a realistic possibility" (87). Similarly, Manuel Castells and Joao Caraça (2012) conclude that the crisis is systemic, because it reveals "a non-sustainability of certain values" as the guiding principle of human behavior and consequently "any substantial socio-economic restructuring of global capitalism implies the formation of a new economic culture" (4). These thinkers also observe that social disintegration and violent conflicts can only be prevented by the rise of new social and economic practices which consider "value of life as a superior form of human organization" (13). These cultural changes are the objectives of the alternative economies that have emerged as a result of the current crisis.

In the introduction to *Memorias de la Tierra*, Zuth Egdebius Mö, writing from the future in the planet Zutón about the possibly already non-existing Earth (what really has happened is not revealed), reflects that when the biosphere of the planet was on the verge of collapse, most of the humans inhabiting it seemed to ignore this threat, but there were some exceptions: "... although a small minority, some humans had sufficient lucidity to understand and anticipate their imminent decline, even trying to prevent it"

(6)^{1,2} Two pages later, two future scenarios are considered and contrasted in an image where the Earth is divided in half. The upper (northern) part shows nature in the service of economy (“economizar la ecología,” 8) and where as a result, thirty years later, armed soldiers guard the one last tree of the planet. The lower (southern) part of Earth represents an alternative scenario, where a minority promoting change manages to subordinate economy to ecology (“ecologizar la economía,” 8). In 2043 a young couple that initiated the change in 2010, now aged, congratulate themselves: “in the end we managed to halt climate change, and tomatoes again taste like they used to” (n.p.).³ But, in order to read this scenario, the reader has to turn the book (or laptop) upside down, and this effort itself is the metaphor of what needs to be done to save the planet: unlikely and counterintuitive, it is yet easy, and once done, not upside down anymore.

A few pages later the extent of the change is represented by a vignette, titled “Revolución mundial” (World revolution, 59). A small lab mouse menacingly gets hold of the whiskers of a huge cat, which pledges “Do not hurt me please, Mr. lab mouse! It was not my idea... It was society that made us like that and nature!” (59).⁴ This apparently simple image has various layers of meaning highlighting the role of science that constructs hierarchy in the very experiments where knowledge is produced. It also shows that the concepts and ideas that capitalism presents as natural laws may be in fact constructed to maintain the status quo of power. As this and other vignettes show, change involves a complex set of processes of deconstruction of meaning, rather than a simple reversal of hierarchy. Brieva's “Instrucciones para salvar el mundo” (Instructions to save the world, 164) include: think by yourself independently of the media, become the owner of your time (by throwing the TV out the window), consume and travel as little as possible, do not cast a vote within a two party system, and ultimately, begin to imagine a different world. The vignette, titled “El gran salto revolucionario” (The Great Leap of Re-evolution, 167), calls for more value to be given to the traditionally feminine work of care and reproduction, returning also significance to “nature.” Finally, “Instrucciones para habitar el mundo” (Instructions to live in the world, 173) encourage the reader to sit before the Ocean contemplating and asking oneself existential questions “Quién soy? Qué soy?” (Who am I? What am I?, 173). While answering them one should remember one's life, one's family and friends, but also the people that one does not know with whom one shares the Earth. One's flesh is made from the same particles as the rest of the universe; we are a minuscule part of the universe that surrounds us, which is consoling and motivating. All these reflections and more are necessary to build an alternative culture that would halt the environmental disaster.

Change has many faces. Projects of socio-political, economic and cultural transformations undertaken in the face of the impending environmental disaster have been multifarious. They call for direct democracy and restitution of the commons, the

¹“aunque de manera muy minoritaria, algunos humanos sí parecían tener la lucidez suficiente para comprender y anticiparse a su inminente declive, incluso para tratar de evitarlo”.

² All translations have been made by the author unless otherwise stated.

³ “por fin hemos conseguido que no cambie el clima y que los tomates vuelvan a saber a tomates”.

⁴ “No me haga daño señor rata de laboratorio! No era mi idea... Es la sociedad que nos ha hecho así... la naturaleza”.

end of “economism,” a global tax on wealth, citizens’ control of central banks, political transparency, open source knowledge and technology, basic income guarantees, and more. They rethink work outside of the profit matrix: Should it be for public good? They rethink time, food, media and consciousness: Should we slow down? They rethink money: Would it work better given a pure exchange value and ridden of interest based profit? And finally, these movements focus on the environment. The restoration and health of ecosystems that are thought of as homes for many species become objectives of newly structured local economies. In various cases, nature is no longer thought as a passive material (re)source, but rather as a partner in a life characterized by give and take between the human and the non-human.

Alternative economies start small. They focus on those areas that the neoliberal market leaves out. They incorporate the unemployed, provide opportunities for the excluded, clean polluted areas, reestablish environmental diversity and focus on maintaining sustainable economic practices that decrease monetary gain, but allow tissues of living spaces and creatures to heal. In these “transition” initiatives, objects habitually trashed receive a second chance and urban gardens begin to form a significant part of city life. These gardens are spaces where herbicides, pesticides and artificial fertilizers are substituted with a mixture of old and new bio-mimetic solutions worked out by permaculture and agro-ecology.

Permaculture constitutes a systems approach to environmental crisis. It is a practice framework, worldview, and movement aiming at constructing an economy that would work with nature rather than attempting to master it. Its first principle is an interactive observation of the environment which allows for a high quality design of habitat that would conserve energy and benefit all its members. Its biomimetic approach involves learning from ecosystems to construct one’s own. Permaculture is a model of a trans-disciplinary endeavor, as it connects various kinds of knowledge and know-how, such as engineering, design, construction, architecture, water management, agriculture and nutrition, as well as education, art and narratives. Permaculture’s emphasis on whole system design is heavily influenced by the work of the ecologist H. T. Odum, who represented relations between diverse ecosystems by analyzing the flow of energy between them. However, “despite a high public profile, permaculture has remained relatively isolated from scientific research” (Ferguson and Lovell 251). Although it developed in parallel with agroecology, in the scientific literature it is mentioned only in passing, as an alternative approach to agriculture. Agroecology itself is a novel holistic approach to the management of agriculture that draws on traditional knowledges and new technologies, while aiming at the long-term and multi-species sustainability of agroecosystems (Altieri, 1995). In alternative economies, human lives change not only through transformations of the community, but also through different relations with objects, plants and animals. Mutual aid networks in alternative economies provide care for children and the elderly, assistance with house and garden, repairs, construction and education. The growth of alternative economies has been slow on purpose. Like members of the *Indignados* movement, the activists of alternative economies in Spain

say that they “go slow because they go far”. They think of their communities as laboratories for future society, where there is a lot to learn.

The Transition Towns movement can be viewed as a signature of alternative economies. Founded in 2006 in Totnes, England, the movement seeks “to create healthy human culture and to reduce CO₂ emissions” (*Totnes Town in Transition*). Red de Transición España (Net of Transition-Spain), announces that “Transition is a manifestation of the idea that a local action can change the world, Red de Transición”.⁵ Comprised of grass-roots community initiatives, the transition movement seeks to creatively transform local socio-economic structures in the face of climate change, peak oil, and on-going environmental crises, connecting the need to repair environmental and political damage. Transition strives to create to an organic model of democracy based on social deliberations where all the stake-holders participate in debates and vote directly on projects. While they literally take up responsibility for the piece of Earth under their feet, they are also aware that the organization they propose can only work in a smaller-scale, local context. Most of the Towns in Transition initiatives are wary not to outgrow their limits, but the movement is expanding through the networking of hundreds of Transition Towns all over the world.⁶

Transition is by no means the only alternative economy initiative in Spain. For example, by 2014 there were 70 alternative economies experimenting with social currencies such as *boniato* in Madrid, *ecoseny* in Tarragona and Barcelona, *demo* in the Canary Islands, *ekhi* in Bilbao, *puma* in Sevilla and *turuta* in Vilanova y la Geltrú. These social currencies provide networks of support for communities plagued by unemployment and poverty. Local money can be obtained by volunteer work at community projects that are always available, and through selling services and products including second-hand objects. Among those who become involved in alternative economies, no one goes hungry and no one is lonely. There is a considerable variation among the ways that different communities structure their alternative currencies. Some are printed and based on the Euro, while others are just a mutual credit balance system. In some cases, all work is considered to have equal value; an hour of open heart surgery equals an hour of floor sweeping. In others, participants fix prices for their services. In general terms, however, alternative economies move in the same direction in the sense of prioritizing community well-being over economic growth. Non-human animals and plants are considered to be a part of the community. This no-growth or even de-growth aspect of alternative economies is what they share with various slow movements, such as “slow food,” “slow towns,” eco-villages and, in part, also the cooperative movement.

Yet another different form of post-capitalist economy is the P2P (Peer to Peer) economy. According to Michel Bauwens (2014), the co-founder of P2P, the post capitalistic economic systems may be already taking over capitalism. The P2P economy is a cooperative framework, where people contribute their best expertise to social projects that they are interested in on a voluntary basis and *pro publico bono*. Wikipedia, Lenovo file sharing, Airbnb House Exchange, Relay Rides, SnapGoods, E-Bay or OuiShare

⁵ “la Transición es una manifestación de la idea de que la acción local puede cambiar el mundo”.

⁶ According to Wikipedia, in 2013 there were 1130 transition initiatives registered in 43 countries.

platforms engage people into direct exchanges of goods and services aiming to avoid the large multinational firms and governmental agencies as mediators. In P2P networks, the participatory threshold is kept very low, but the feedback from peers is constant, ensuring a high quality of the contributions. An important part of P2P economy is “fair use,” an exemption from copyrights so as to assure a free flow of knowledge especially towards those who might be deprived of access to it due to their economic status. According to Voss (2007), in the ideal future, the basic income check will free all minds and hands to participate in P2P according to their work ethics, desires and needs.

Alternative economies of knowledge based on open source technologies and publications, are an essential part of the change. Among various others, the Madrid based publisher and educational venture, Traficantes de Sueños, puts into practice the ideal of free culture.⁷ While a commercial publisher prints books that can be sold, Traficantes chooses to publish texts that bring change. Their books hold Creative Commons licenses. They are uploaded on the Traficantes website for everyone to download for free. When this publishing initiative began in 2003, various observers wondered if the project would be economically viable without state subsidies. There were doubts if people would buy printed books if they could read them for free on the Internet. Today, given that Traficantes has already established itself on Madrid’s cultural scene and moved to a new prominent location near Tirso de Molina, it is becoming clear they have succeeded. According to Beatriz García (2016), editor of Traficantes, the sale of printed books brings in 80% of the income, while the remaining 20% comes from members’ contributions and public events such as Nociones Comunes (Common Notions) seminars, which deliver lectures unveiling the flip side of common assumptions that are in fact constructs subservient to hegemony.

In *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), Erik Olin Wright distinguishes three possible scenarios of change: *ruptural*, through a break with the existing system, *interstitial*, that seeks to build “new forms of social empowerment in the niches” of the existing system, and *symbiotic*, that increases social empowerment while at the same time strengthening the system. The emerging alternative economies trouble these categories. Even if they are growing in the spaces not taken by the global economy, they are *ruptural* in their focus on future transformation, and *symbiotic*, since they delay systemic collapse by building communities’ resilience.⁸ The members of the communities involved in alternative economies projects are themselves divided in this respect. While some, such as Cooperativa Integral Catalana, dream of a rupture of capitalism, others would like to transform it through alternative community networks. Most of the alternative

⁷ Ateneu Candela in Terrassa, La Casa Invisible in Málaga, and la Universidad Nómada in Madrid, are connected to Traficantes through the Fundación de los Comunes. There are also similar ventures in other towns, such as La Hormiga Atómica in Pamplona-Iruñea, La Pantera Rosa de Zaragoza, Synusia de Terrassa and La Fuga in Sevilla.

⁸ Resilience is a complex and widely contested term. Used both in psychology and ecology, it signifies a capacity of an organism or ecosystem to bounce back to an optimal state of functionality after undergoing stress. Susie O’Brian (2012) argues that the concept of resilience has “aligned itself with the ideals of neoliberalism” as “there is a non-coincidental relationship ... between the rise in the value of ‘resilience’ and the dismantling of environmental and social welfare programs” (np).

economies are politically ambidextrous, because their goal is to protect local life, preparing it to face a challenging future whose details are not fully known.

Alternative Economies in the Environmental Context: Vilanova i la Geltrú⁹

Alternative economies create special kinds of socio-ecosystems by restoring their environments with the idea of human and non-human species well-being in mind. Urban gardening, new city design for food production and cohabitation of multiple species, agro-ecological farming and permacultural design of living spaces are examples of refurbished alternative ecosystems. It is, however, through deep structural transformations of local economies that a non-destructive relationship between economic activities and the environment are built. Vilanova i la Geltrú's alternative economy attempts this through the ingenious construction of their new currency: *turuta*. *Turutas* are created by the volunteers who invest their time in the project of regeneration of the local ecosystem (10 *turutas* per hour). As a matter of principle, this alternative economy can be only built *as* the environment is restored. Before food is produced or before local festivities occur which are paid for with *turutas*, park or ecological zone space is given back to plants and animals, and water and soil are cleaned. This reverses the habitual relation between the economy and the environment that has always been one of consumption and destruction.

Care for non-human life results in an alternative form of biopolitics—administration of life understood as a whole in its human and non-human forms.¹⁰ Both the modern economy and the dynamics of the socio-economic conflicts in the 20th century owed their metaphors to social Darwinism that naturalized predatory behavior as a mechanism of the market. Thus modern biopolitics is often legitimately characterized as “necropolitics,” the production of death rather than life (Mbembe, 2013) and the “necroeconomics” that Warren Montag (2013) defines as the market-driven passivity of “letting die.” Alternative economies imply a biopolitics inspired by an ecological vision of symbiosis, where changes are based on models of plant life rather than those of human/animal confrontation, the latter of which provided metaphors for modernity and capitalism. These new economies are consciously moving away from confrontational patterns towards a model of a forest, where all trees are passing resources to each other through a network of roots and symbiotic fungi. According to one narrative, local alternative cultures would spread by finding niches in the monolith of the global capitalism like weeds (Marder, 2013). In this view, alternative economies

⁹ The alternative economy in Vilanova i la Geltrú has been growing slowly, like other similar initiatives in Spain and elsewhere. In 2010, Vilanova organized a national meeting of alternative currencies with 15 participating social currencies, but at the next such meeting in Seville in 2012, 32 alternative currencies were represented. By August 2014 in Vilanova, 30 businesses were accepting *turutas* and 300 people participating in the exchanges. Among the participating businesses are organic farms, an organic bakery, local food and garden stores, computer stores, health services such as macrobiotics, yoga, massage and psychotherapy, restaurants, hairdressers, musicians and photographers. In June 2014, Vilanova's municipal counsel recognized *turuta* as an official “moneda social” (people's money) and granted the association space in the town hall Office of Environment.

¹⁰ See Beilin (2015).

are not fighting against the global system, but merely growing within it, and strengthening roots to survive a possible future collapse of civilization as we know it. Future change is conceived, however, in a non-confrontational and non-violent way, as a slow, surreptitious, and bloodless takeover.

Thinking how to restructure money for such a transformation, Letaier (2005) represents it through a body metaphor:

Money is modern society's central information system, akin to the nervous system in our own bodies. Mutations in a nervous system are relatively rare but rather important events in the biological evolution of a species. Similarly, a change in the nature of our money system has the potential to facilitate a fundamental shift in our societies (np).

In Vilanova i la Geltrú's alternative economy website, the traditional conception of money is transformed by references to plant-life. The local currency is imagined not as blood, but rather a tree-resin where the new economy is represented visually as a tree "We are like a tree that can give many fruits. The fruits are the enterprises, establishments, all that is offered... The trunk, the wood are all the members" (transcióvng).¹¹ The shift from human-body to plant-body metaphor stages plant life as a matrix of the change. This has great environmental significance, since plant life implies a different ecological dynamic where the consumption of resources characteristic of modern biopolitics is substituted by plant production. Plants not only feed animals, they also consume CO₂ and produce oxygen, slowing down global warming. With few exceptions, human societies have done more or less the contrary. A tree as a founding metaphor of an alternative economy points out the direction of ethical and economic transformation: planting trees is not enough, we should become more like trees in our relations with the rest of the world: contribute more, consume less, grow more slowly. This is also a reflection about time.

The commonplace notion that time is money may need to be reconsidered. While in some cases, in fact money can buy us time, more often than not our time gets consumed in pursuit of money to pay for commodities that lose their luster and must be replaced. As a result, we spend or rather waste time to get money whose value is deceptive due to planned obsolescence and other commercial strategies. Very few manage to earn enough to retire early while they are still able to enjoy life. For this reason, critical thinkers propose to transform the system by decreasing working time for the sake of leisure, or what J. Nørgaard (2009) calls an "amateur economy" that comprises volunteer contributions to the causes that matter. In the words of Stephanie Rearick (2015), in the development of alternative economies "the photosynthesis level is time." If we had time, we would plant more gardens, cycle instead of driving, repair things rather than buying new ones, and last but not least, we would think and, perhaps, realize that we do not need to work all these hours to buy stuff that breaks to be happy. But is that really so? While there seems to be no doubt that the efforts of alternative economies to transform a destructive economic system are meritorious in the face of the

¹¹ "som com un arbre que pot donar molts fruits. Els fruits són les empreses, els estabiments, tots els oferents.... El tronc, fusta ... tots els socis/es".

impending global warming, there are doubts about how their de-growth models, where consumption of industrially produced goods has to be drastically reduced, will affect individual human well-being and behavior.

The Happiness Factor

People have come to associate happiness, progress and success with commodified consumption and these very same concepts, defined through economic growth and gain, are responsible for social stratification and environmental depletion. Joseph Stiglitz's and Amartya Sen's (2013) research on people's self-reported life satisfaction and happiness shows, however, that these are false constructs. The post-war growth has not really made high income countries' citizens happier (while self-reported happiness was surprisingly higher where income per capita was much lower). Since the 1990s, research problematizes purely economic measures of well-being. McKibben (2010) argues that *more* has always been considered as a synonym of *better* and while it is so to a certain extent, since deprivation of basic goods makes people suffer, beyond a certain threshold of earnings, *more* is not *better* anymore. In 2009, *The Observer* published a meaningfully titled article "Forget GDP: Happiness is the secret of success" that noted the change of rhetoric of British and French leaders who called to move economic focus from GDP to GWB (General Well Being). *The Observer* accompanied the article with the picture of a couple embracing in front of an ocean, tacitly dialoguing with one of the discoveries of Happiness Economy that having regular sex makes people happier than earning lots of money. According to Stiglitz, "looking at GDP without accounting for environmental damage in the figures gives an artificial picture" (2009, np). Stiglitz and Sen (2013) argue that GDP is misleading as a measure of success while social health is declining as a result of an excessive speed of life and environmental toxicity.

Different strands of ecological economists theorizing post-growth (John Barry, political science), self-contained economy (Jorge Riechmann, philosophy), de-growth (Joan Martínez Alier, economics), and deep economy (Bill McKibben, Environmental Studies) argue that the vision of well-being not only needs to be disassociated from growth and economic gain, but that it also needs to include a transformed relation with natural environment, because a healthy, flourishing biosphere is essential not only for economic security but also for everyday human health and joy. Interspecies relationships and vegetarianism are both also discussed within the work of the aforementioned scholars. Both Riechmann (2005) and McKibben (2013) devoted whole volumes to reconsidering human treatment of animals, and David Harvey (2012) argues that through learning from animals, humans should search for environmental solutions as a species. Limiting growth for the sake of well-being has a number of other positive consequences. On the level of everyday praxis, it amounts to reducing the number of hours of work, and a greater individual flexibility that contributes to community power in decision-making when investments are considered. The trend to reliance on exchange and acquisition of second-hand goods prolongs the durability of objects and strengthens

social networks. A smaller array of durable goods leads to “living with less” (Riechmann, 2005),¹² but in a more meaningful way, as objects passed from generation to generation accumulate memories and significance. Demaria et al. (2013) note that voluntary simplicity in the degrowth movement becomes an important source of “meaning of life” (197). As a result, more value is given to house work, child care and other forms of community care and environmental regeneration projects (Barry, 2014). These economic changes require a dramatic transformation of role models, motivation structures, and a wholly different kind of “cool.” It is clear that consumption would need to be reduced, house sizes decreased, and cars given up. While this vision of happiness exists in thinkers’ writings, it is not clear to what extent today’s society agrees with it. As the well-known UK environmental activist George Monbiot has written, “no one has ever rioted for austerity, people have taken to the streets in the past because they want to consume more goods, not because they want to consume less” (qtd. in Leonard and Barry, 7). We may have a false image of what makes us happy. But changing ideas may perhaps also affect a transformation of the perception of happiness.

Juan del Río, coordinator of the network of the transition movement in Spain works three days a week as environmental manager and spends the rest of his time building the Towns in Transition movement in Spain and elsewhere. He organizes workshops and gives lectures all around the world, while writing books and articles. This rigorous lifestyle forced him to move out of Barcelona and share an apartment in a small town belonging to Barcelona’s metropolitan area, Cardedeu, where life is cheaper. He does not have a car, he takes his vacations on the bike, and he commutes to the city by train. But, in Cardedeu, he has become a part of a vibrant community that shares his ideas and precisely this is what he values the most. This town of approximately twenty thousand, located an hour by local train from Barcelona, has a rich network of associations such as *Cardedeu autosuficient*, Time banking and a Co-op that has begun to coordinate its activities with Tarragona’s Co-ops network. We met in *Esbiosfera*, an urban garden with its own organic restaurant, secluded in a fenced green oasis, which is a place of gathering of activists connected to the alternative political and environmental movements in town. I find out that it often also functions as a school where adults re-learn how to make certain foods, grow certain crops, and how to transform their physical and mental life to feel better. In his recently published *Guía del Movimiento de Transición: Cómo transformar tu vida en la ciudad* (2015) del Río questions the separation between the reform of individual interior life and that of the society. He explains that these two realms transcend each other, as human emotions and values are co-constructed through relations with others. According to del Río, a solitary hero cannot save the world and because of that, social and political change requires first and foremost that we improve strategies of communication, cohabitation and the solution of conflicts. This “in common” dimension is hard to construct, but it cannot be overestimated because it is the criterion of reality. Del Río begins a chapter of his book with a quotation from Raul Seixas: “A dream dreamt alone is only a dream. A dream

¹² In *Un mundo vulnerable*, Riechmann imagines a chair that could last through several generations like a house.

dreamt by many is a reality” (Del Río 138).¹³ This is not only about what is real but also about happiness.

Conill, Castells et al. (2014) focus on the transformation of values and lifestyles in Barcelona’s alternative economies. The authors distinguish a group of people who, like del Río, “dared to live alternative ways of life” motivated by a “quest for the use value of life and for meaningful personal relationships” (211). These are “the transformatives”, who are willing to earn less money in order to employ their time in ways that contribute to socio-political and environmental change.¹⁴ The “transformatives” construct an alternative vision of the meaning of life that involves an effort to live according to ethical and political values emerging in the face of ecological crisis. They value their own activities for pursuit of better future and personal happiness more than their careers within the global economy or state institutions. In contrast, the group of “adapted” (a majority among older people) values beyond anything jobs, earnings and profits, which give meaning and security to their lives. Conil, Castells et al. (2014) recognize that participation in the alternative economies involves varying degrees of risk, whose perception differs among “transformatives” and “adapted” due to the difference in their values. While “adapted” cannot understand why talented professionals would choose to work and earn less, risking to lose their jobs and have insufficient savings, “the transformatives” dread having to spend all their time and energy feeding the economic system that is consuming them and the world altogether. Working two or three days a week for the system and spending the rest of the time transforming it is in their personal alternative economy of happiness, a compromise with the world. In del Río’s work as well as in Barry’s writings, individual happiness must be posited as a main attraction of an alternative economy of life.

Both Barry and del Río stress that freedom from “corporate time” (O’Brian, 2012) allows one to develop more human and non-human relations and gain freedom for reflection and creativity, all three being important factors of human satisfaction. Images that Barry shows during his conferences feature father and son jumping from a rock to the ocean together or walking up a mountain path (Madison, 2013). In del Río’s posts on Facebook, groups of friends stand in circles smiling or laughing, always in gardens, forest or on mountain slopes. In this way environment connects post-growth imaginaries with images of pleasure. To build enthusiasm for change, people must be convinced that they are improving their well-being rather than giving up satisfaction. Del Río often repeats that “if it is not fun it is not sustainable”, “if there is no good food, it will not work” and finally “without music there is no revolution.”¹⁵

It is also true, however, that not all the images of alternative economies that I collected are pristine and not everyone I talked to appeared to be happy. For example, Germán, an agro-ecologist, who takes care of a community farm in Zarzalejo, firmly

¹³ “Un sueño que se sueña solo es solo un sueño. Un sueño que se sueña conjuntamente es una realidad”

¹⁴ Authors of this publication interviewed 800 people and divided them into two groups: *transformatives* that initiate and lead the alternative practices, *practicioners* that participate in some of them and *adapted* who remain as a part of main-stream culture.

¹⁵ “si no es divertido no es sostenible”, “si no hay comida rica, jamás funcionará”, “si no hay música, no hay revolución”.

stated that rather than taking care of the crops, he would prefer to drink piña coladas in the Caribbean, but his salary does not allow him to take such extravagant vacations. He took the only paid position created by the local alternative economy, because he liked the ideal and also needed a job, and he is still visibly passionate about what he does, but also growing tired of certain elements of the dynamic. In order to close the self-sustainability circle that permaculture and agro-ecology describe, animal-produced fertilizer is needed and the community does not own animals. On the other hand, natural methods of weed control do not work all that well and lots of manual weed removal has to be done. When Germán calls for help, and people come to pull weeds during the weekends, they quickly get tired and complain. Germán's own children come reluctantly to work in the field. While it is clear that the neoliberalized global economy is destructive and that it needs to be transformed, it constructed a number of needs and pleasures that are hard to give up. Only the future will show if (and which) alternative economies will manage to make people happy.

Future scenarios

Seen from the point of view of individual comforts and freedoms, we, the people of the privileged and rich North, may actually be living in the happiest moment of our history, protected from the wars on our peripheries and blissfully ignorant of the damaging scarcity of basic goods. Yet neither Barry nor del Río or any other environmental activists and critics are really optimistic about the future. Theirs' is a *spem contra spero* kind of optimism. They believe in the need to act as if it were still possible to repair humans and the Earth altogether even if they are not sure what the future holds. Today's prevalent mood of environmental studies is also doom-laden. Scientists predict that if the temperature on Earth rises beyond the tipping point of four degrees, civilization will most likely collapse due to the unrest following catastrophes and loss of habitat. Timothy Morton (2007, 2013) coins the term "dark ecology" for the world that has already ended, overwhelmed with destructive processes that take our freedom away, affect our thinking and embed us in "hyperobjects," one of which is Global Warming. In Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), the world is also on a fast track spree towards the Apocalypse and our main task is to find ways of dealing with the catastrophes heading our way. Black humor with a corrosive edge is the signature of Miguel Brieva's cartoons on the subject of Global Warming. On one of them God announces to human kind his new invention: flippers. On another titled "Bienvenido al fin" (Welcome to the End), two old friends sigh with a sense of relief entering through the gate: "Look, hard to believe, home at last."¹⁶ In Mike Davis' essay "Who Will Build the Ark?" the discursive framework is also ambiguous. So what are the future scenarios?

According to Letaier (2005), if the current economic system continues, slowly transforming itself towards a more sustainable economy, and if we manage to avoid

¹⁶ "Pues mira, a lo tonto, a lo tonto, ya hemos llegado."

cultural fragmentation following the collapse of cosmopolitan global society, alternative economies will help avoid poverty caused by the growing unemployment and will foment projects focused on restoration. They will constitute supplementary local socio-economic systems that develop a mutually beneficial coexistence with the global market. If, however, climate change leads to a collapse of the global system due to unforeseen catastrophic events, today's small-scale economic experiments may provide ways for a longer-term survival serving as a bridge towards the post-capitalist economy. This is not at all an optimistic scenario even for an alternative economies' enthusiast such as Letaier. He predicts that the rupture of the global system of exchange would lead us back to a world with isolated city-states governed by more-often-than-not authoritarian rulers with wild hordes in the open. Such an image appears in various climate fictions,¹⁷ such as *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, and in a Spanish setting, in Emilio Bueso's *Cenital*.

Cenital is an eco-village established by a group of survivalists led by the young visionary, Destral, just before the collapse of the global system. They are governing themselves through direct democracy, and as in the P2P economy, everyone contributes the kind of work that they like and are best at. However, this is not a happy vision, but, as Destral states, rather a nightmare. In spite of all their hard work, the inhabitants live in precarious conditions, always afraid of reaching the limits of the supply of food that their fields can produce. They had to surround their village with high walls, from which they defend it against the attacks of outsiders in bloody battles. Their freedom is limited by the simple lack of condoms that forces them to raise more children than they want to bring into their grim world. But, outside of *Cenital*, things are much worse. In what remains of Valencia, armed bands are confronting each other and various groups unable to get or grow food resort to cannibalism. Considering what is happening in the outside world, *Cenital*, which has grown out of an alternative economy, is not the worst of nightmares, as long as they have sufficient food. Various scholars have argued that "sufficiency" is emerging as a leading concept for the future.¹⁸ Adopted by alternative economies and their *transformatives* as a principle of ethical life, it is, *nolens volens*, also finding its way into the corporate narratives and product designs of various industries. Slowly, much too slowly, sufficiency, as the basis of alternative economies of life, is transforming the system from within.

Submission received 2 March 2016

Revised version accepted 20 September 2016

¹⁷ These fictions show the world where the processes that now have only begun are much further advanced. Not only does the climate appear changed, ocean waters covering parts of the continents, and petroleum having run out, forcing people to abandon big cities where large quantities of food can be no longer transported, but also the economy and culture have developed further along the lines that today are only possible scenarios.

¹⁸ Princen, 2005, Augenstein and Palzkill (2015)

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