A MESSAGE FROM THE FUTURE:
THE STEADY STATE ECONOMY AND THE INCOMPATABILITY OF CAPITALISM

Talk given by Geoff Mosley,
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INTRODUCTION

I want you to imagine that I am a time traveller coming back from the future to tell you
about our steady state economy. I am not going to explain how it was achieved, or when.
That is up to you and following generations. Hopefully though it will help you with your
goal setting and give you some idea of what will need to be transformed and disposed of
and I will comment on one of those - capitalism.

When I have explained how we live I think you will conclude that every major facet of
our lives is completely different from yours. The biggest difference though is that ours
has a good chance of survival. That is because we have a way of life that is in every way
in close harmony with the environment. It is important I believe to also let you know that
the way of life I am going to describe extends across the whole globe.

Above all we live within the earth’s means. This means first, we have fitted ourselves into
the environment in a manner that utilises natural processes providing food, water and
energy in a non-disruptive way. Second, we also live in harmony with each other in a
fully cooperative way and this is essential because there is none of the competition, greed
and dominance of some over others that is a major cause of environmental depletion and
social disharmony in your way of life.

In the brief time and space I have I will describe the main features of our steady state way
of life: our values, our food, water, energy and transport systems, and our social
organisation including our settlement patterns and governance arrangements.

VALUES – A NEW ETHIC

Our main aim is to live sustainably and cooperatively. We seek and enjoy a good life
rather than material accumulation and privilege. We see ourselves as belonging to the
earth rather than the earth belonging to us and do not see ourselves as superior to other
living things. Similarly, our attitude of non-superiority applies to our view of other human
beings. In our society all people are regarded as equal and treated equally throughout their
lives and this has brought obvious benefits in terms of health, education, satisfying work
and involvement in governance. The community not individuals own and regulate the
land and its resources. Private ownership of land and resources has been fully replaced by cooperative ownership and organisation at the local community level.

SUPPLY OF FOOD, ENERGY, WATER AND HOUSING

The underlying principles concerning our access to food, energy, water, housing and other materials are those of sustainability and self-sufficiency. Every community is responsible, to the maximum extent possible, for supplying themselves with the basic necessities of food, energy and water and for providing health and education services from the places where they live. This means of course that being in direct contact with their environments people have a very close understanding of their character and potential and how to use them sustainably and also, as a result of that, have a great respect for them. The kinship between people and their environment has been re-established. The people who have the most to lose from resource depletion are now in charge. Water is drawn from within the catchments where people live. Fruit and vegetables are major crops and as a result of reliance on local production and permaculture type practices such as use of legumes for nitrogen production and waste from humans and animals there is no industrial scale agriculture and no use of industrial fertilisers and pesticides. Energy supply is from local renewable sources and being decentralised we do not have the vast energy grids of your day. Goods are designed to have a long life and be capable of being recycled. There has been major recycling of materials left over from the huge abandoned cities of the past. Needless to say we did not arrive fully at our steady state destination until we had repaired the serious environmental damage of the past and adjusted our populations and their consumption to sustainable levels.

TRADE

With communities being largely self-reliant there is little need for trade in commodities. Where it does occur it is largely between adjacent regions of the same country and on an exchange basis. Exploitation of resources and labour by means of international trade and competition are things of the past.

POPULATIONS, SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Population levels and settlement patterns are largely determined by the character and carrying capacity of the different localities in which people live. Hence most settlements are small in scale. The alienation of people from the environment that was created by living in large cities is a thing of the past. People work where they live. We have a settlement hub in each region for the purposes of technology development, manufacturing, governance, health, education and the arts. In these larger but not large towns we have cooperatively-run community gardens. In our non-hierarchical classless society all people are treated equally. There are no superiority distinctions made with regard to the nature of the work people do and there is a considerable amount of job
sharing. Cooperation in performing tasks and in creative activities is normal but there are no private companies for this purpose. Overall people live more simply than they did in the economic growth driven societies of the past. With all basic needs met people and cooperation having replaced competition as a major goal people have richer and more creative lives. In addition, because we no longer have an economy based on the goals of endless economic and population growth and because we do not have economic and social inequality, the world’s overall population and consumption of resources is massively reduced compared with what it once was (roughly a quarter of 2000 AD levels). It took a long time for this adjustment to be made.

TRAVEL AND TRANSPORT

With most communities and regions being self reliant in terms of the supply of the basic necessities there are no major longer distance supply chains for the transport of commodities. People work in their local area and public transport along with cycling and walking are the main forms of transport and the connections between localities and regional hubs are largely by these means. Air and sea travel is by means of publicly owned planes and ships. There is a considerable amount of human travel both within and between countries for a number of purposes including recreation, education, health, governance, libraries and creativity. People travel to learn and take pleasure from the differences between places, the wonders of the natural world and the way in which different communities relate sustainably and creatively to their environments. Internships in different regions and countries are common and usually on an exchange basis.

GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY

Our governance is based on the fundamental principles of self-government and participatory democracy. Every person has a voice and a say in the planning and management matters that concern him or her. At the local community level people assemble and vote on measures and issues and choose delegates for regional assemblies. The same approach of voting and choosing delegates is used for representation at the national and international assemblies. Any national issue is put to a vote of the whole national population after discussion in the various assemblies. The scope of the assemblies at the various geographic levels has been determined so that they only deal with relevant matters. For instance at the international level the matters discussed relate to global scale environmental changes and threats and include the management of the global commons. The universal acceptance of the sustainable use of resources on a self-sufficiency basis eliminated the resource struggles between communities and nations including the use of the military to secure access to resources and territories that was diverting major resources into the manufacture and sale of armaments and causing major social disruption.
THE ECONOMY

Private ownership of land and resources has been replaced by community ownership and the communities through their individual and collective efforts are responsible for the supply of all goods and services. People do not aspire to accumulate wealth and to live in better conditions than their fellow human beings. In our steady state economy all people are guaranteed the same standard of living. As a result when we made these changes there was no need to continue the past practices of allowing private individuals or groups to either make investments for profit (creating additional costs) or taking out of loans and creating debts. Money and the market in our world are purely for their original purpose of facilitating transactions and we have no private banks making money out of the interest on loans.

CAPITALISM

This brings me to the final question – why was capitalism found to be incompatible with our steady state economy? In fact nothing illustrates so well the difference between our and your systems. Capitalism, as you know well, was an integral facilitator of the economic growth driven system of the past. It depended on economic growth, competition and the making of profit for its very existence. In the capitalist market people exercised enormous power, and it helped to create and maintain social inequality. Since it depended for its very existence on never ending economic growth it could not survive in a steady state economy. Capitalism was a beneficiary of the globalisation of trade involving the foreign ownership and development of resources such as fossil fuels in distant places, destroying the nexus between people and their lands. The capitalist owners of land and resources themselves had little or no feeling of responsibility for the long-term future of the lands and inhabitants of the places they were exploiting. Their overriding objective was maximisation of production. Capitalism placed a money value on things of intrinsic value resulting for instance in the deforestation of water catchments and the destruction of the habitat of indigenous wildlife to supply distant markets. Capitalism was in effect economic colonialism and seriously obstructed efforts to move to the sustainable use of land and resources and to self-sufficiency by interfering with local and national control of resources. Short-term profits were viewed as more important than the future. We decided that it was far better for control of the land and its resources to be exercised by the people who live there and who have a better knowledge of it and have a greater stake in its future. Also, just as the economic and social class system was closely interlinked with capitalism, it was realised that full equality was an essential necessity for our steady state economy. Finally, capitalism did not make a good bed-fellow with our system of participatory democracy, Hence, for all these reasons, capitalism had to go.
CONCLUSION

If we had not made this change to a steady state economy the prospects for the survival of humanity would have been bleak. We have readapted our way of life to the biophysical limits of earth and its dynamic equilibrium and in doing so produced an altogether more sustainable and more satisfying way of life.

Finally, when our historians looked back at how the steady state economy evolved in your time they found several works that were prescient in terms of describing what our steady state economy would look like. The pioneer of course was John Stuart Mill who in his 1848 book *Principles of Political Economy* described an alternative “stationary state of population and capital”. More recently Samuel Alexander in his 2013 book *Entropia: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation* wrote an imaginary but far-sighted account of a flourishing simple way of life on a small Pacific Island. Then of course there is Herman Daly, a winner of the 2014 Blue Planet prize who was described in the nomination as “the preeminent exponent of the steady state economy the main alternative to the prevailing economic growth paradigm”.