Against the Common Good: the role of capitalist consumer culture

Kate Soper

Introduction

The Western consumerist lifestyle is now the main driving force of global warming with all its potentially disastrous consequences. Reliant for its continuation upon a neo-colonialist transfer of labour, resources, products and services from the poorest nations to the richest, it perpetuates global exploitation and inequality. Though it remains the model of the 'good life' for less developed communities, it is better seen as an engine for the enrichment of a corporate elite at the expense of the health of the planet and the well-being of most of its inhabitants. The consumerist lifestyle, in short, is pursued against the common good.

This assessment of it forms the core of my 'alternative hedonist' critique. But to date, I have not pressed the case for this critique to be conceived as a contribution to thinking about the commons, nor much considered where it coincides or departs from the outlook of commoning theorists. This is in part because much of the focus until recently in degrowth and commoning studies has been on the potential contribution of social movements or on the already existing forms of social activism within specific commoning projects around the world (especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia). But there is now a growing and important literature on the overall project of a cosmopolitan commoning as the desired sequel to and replacement for neo-liberal capitalism, and this is a body of work with which my own has much affinity. This article, then, is intended as a contribution to that project but with a notable shift of focus. Instead of dwelling on already existing campaigns and anti-capitalist activism, I here concentrate on the need for transformed thinking on prosperity and the 'good life' within affluent capitalist societies themselves as a condition of creating more serious support for radical renewal on a global scale. I also reflect on the pressures that are currently discouraging this needed revulsion against the hegemony of ' (over)developed'

ways of working and consuming while also noting some more encouraging signs for post-consumerist renewal. Much of this discussion is speculative. It is submitted – like all my writing on 'alternative hedonism' - in the hope of helping to promote a cultural revolution in the 'politics of prosperity' rather than claiming any extensive evidence for its emergence.

Since the other intention of this article is to add to the tributes paid in this journal issue to the work of the late Couze Venn, I begin by commenting briefly on the relevance of his contribution to the case I want to make for a green renaissance. I then reflect at some length on the obstacles to making any progress with that project, but also note some more encouraging developments that can be sited in support of a turn towards new thinking on pleasure and the 'good life'. I conclude with a discussion of progress and how it might be rethought, taking note of the ways in which alternative hedonist and commoning perspectives coincide on this. In a final section I briefly discuss cooperative forms of provision and consumption as instances of such progress within a transitional period.

Couze Venn on degrowth and the post-capitalism commons

Couze Venn's research and writing have greatly improved our understanding of the Western neo-colonial impacts on commoning in the peripheral economies, and the varying responses to those attacks from indigenous communities and social activists. They also contain much that is relevant to recent concerns within the metropolitan centres: the digital commons, reclamations of space, their legality, and so on. But where, perhaps, his input has had, and will continue to have, most impact, is in its bearing on the all important current debates on degrowth politics and economics and the role of a post-colonial and post-capitalist commons in global green renewal. Venn has been among the first to explore the imbrication between the growth project and financial capitalism in the North with debt and environmental degradation and suffering in the South.[i] He has been alert to the ways in which environmental constraints are undermining the capitalist growth agenda and its established assumptions

about development and human welfare He has refused to endorse occidentalist technologies as necessarily more 'progressive', and, indeed, criticized 'the hegemony of technocratic rationality' as fundamentally dehumanizing and indifferent to human suffering (Venn, 2006: 6-12, 35-8). He has also shed light on the extent to which growth-driven 'development' projects pursued on the pretext of improved welfare or human rights, may contribute to the further pauperization and oppression of the already poor (Venn, 2006: 130-131). But he has at the same time, indicated how central new practices of commoning must become in any transition to a post-growth economy. Venn, indeed, has distinguished his own critique of neo-liberal capitalism from that of more reformist thinkers such as Joseph Stiglitz or Michael Mann, by virtue of its focus on the post-capitalist commons as the space essential to resolving inequality and checking the encroaching privatisation even of non-profit organisations. In doing so, he is one of a group of commons oriented theorists who have insisted on the rupture with capitalist values and ways of living essential to the realisation of any post-capitalist order (Amin and Howell, 2016; Caffenzis and Federici, 2014; Dardot and Laval, 2019; De Angelis, 2018; Gilbert, 2014; Mignolo, 2011; Terranova, 2015). Emancipation from capitalism, De Angelis argues, is not simply a matter of resistance to it, but of 'constructing systems that actualise an aversion to its goals, that have alternative goals' (De Angelis, 2018: 116). '"Decolonials,' Mignolo tells us, 'are not looking for alternative modernities, but for alternatives to modernity'(Mignolo, 2011: xxviii). These theorists have also laid considerable stress on the transformations of subjectivity required to realise these alternatives. As Venn himself put it in *After Capital*, 'critiques of capitalism must target existing ways of life, socialities, subjectivities and the unequal relations of power inscribed in and sustained by them' (Venn, 2018:4; cf. 2006: 77-121). We need, he writes, to 'question so much of what we have come to take for granted as "natural", inevitable, "modern", "progressive", desirable or right' (Venn, 2018: 15).

But Venn has said less on the ways in which this radical transformation or 'gestalt switch' might come about or on what constituencies it might need to work upon if it were to become more generalised. Nor does he consider what might trigger transformed thinking on prosperity, progress and the 'good life' in the most affluent Western societies, or its possible (and I would argue essential) role in promoting greater solidarity with the most exploited global communities, more pressure for debt cancellation and other commoning supportive measures.

It is in this area that my own arguments on 'alternative hedonism' and post-growth ways of living would seem to align most closely with those of Venn and other commoning theorists.[ii] Like them, I am calling for a reconceptualization of 'progress' that has affinities with earlier romantic antipathies to modernity, but which avoids the puritanism and social conservatism associated with traditionalist cultures of resistance. Like them, I am arguing for 'transformations of sociality and subjectivity' insofar as I view a cultural revolution in thinking on welfare and prosperity as essential to the 'revaluation of values' through which any transition to a post-colonial and post-growth order can alone be carried through. But my main focus has been on the dialectic of such changes in rich societies, and especially the ways in which affluent consumer society may – in virtue of its own more negative aspects and the discontents engendered by them – be contributing to its own demise, or, at any rate, to a socio-economic reconstruction that proves to be both more eco-benign and more open to new commoning practices.

Inequality: the major obstacle to green renaissance

Clearly, the most scandalous, but also intransigent, obstacle to any commons based greening of the economy is inequality, this being both a major cause and an ongoing consequence of environmental breakdown. Between 1990 and 2015, the richest ten percent

of the global population accounted for over half the emissions added to the atmosphere. The richest *one* percent was responsible for 15 percent of emissions during this time – more than all the citizens of the EU and more than twice that of the poorest half of humanity (7 percent). Over the same period, annual emissions grew by 60 per cent, and the richest 10 percent blew one third of our remaining global 1.5C carbon budget, compared to just 4 percent for the poorest half of the population. If this wealthiest ten per cent were to reduce their emissions to only the average for the EU, total global emissions would fall by a quarter.[iii] But if the poorest third of the world population were to raise themselves above the $3.2 dollar-a-day poverty line, emissions would rise by a mere five per cent - about one third of the emissions of the richest one per cent (Chancel, Bothe and Voituriez, 2023).

Statistics of this kind, improbable as they ought to seem, are already such a staple of commentary on the current global condition that they risk becoming more glazed over than boggled at. They do, however, starkly reveal the inequalities of the current global order and the immense disparities between richer and poorer nations and peoples in the contribution to climate breakdown and environmental degradation. They show, as the historian, Adam Tooze, has put it in his contribution to the recent *Guardian* major series on climate breakdown and inequality, that

> half the world's population, led by the top 10% of the income distribution – and, above all, by the global elite – drive a globe-spanning productive system that destabilises the environment for everyone. The worst effects are suffered by the poorest, and in the coming decades the impact will become progressively more extreme. And yet their poverty means they are virtually powerless to protect themselves. This is the triple inequality that defines the climate global equation: the disparity in responsibility for producing the problem; the disparity in experiencing the impacts of the climate crisis; and the disparity in the available resources for mitigation

and adaptation (Tooze, 2023; see also Stiglitz, 2013; Klein, 2014; Venn, 2018: 9-12, 2006: 122).

These statistics also indicate that 'commoning' conceived in the most abstract sense of wresting control of wealth and material resources from the grip – and accompanying ecological dereliction - of a relatively small corporate elite will be essential to any fairer and therefore more effective green renewal.

At the same time, if only in the absence to date of any serious consumer revolt or boycotting, they also indicate tolerance if not collusion on the part of a considerably larger number of the relatively affluent population. That Elon Musk is one of the richest on the planet is in part due to the very extensive and continuing support for a car culture that, even when electrified, is likely to prove unsustainable (as also dangerous and massively constraining on access to and use of space).[iv] That Jeff Bezos is likewise amassing his millions is due to the countless purchasing decisions of those who have so readily cooperated in the maintenance of Amazon's gigantic fulfilment centres: a form of compliance that - comparably, perhaps, to those who, we are told by the Egyptologists, gave their labour voluntarily over decades in the creation of the Giza pyramids[v] - we do not know whether to view as emancipation or alienation; as freely conceived and realised desire or abject enthrallment to false fetishes. (Obviously there is a gaping difference in the *ease* with which these respective support systems have been provided !).

It is true that the power of Amazon, Tesla and the IT giants is very insidious, and to use online media at all is almost always to be party to it (Birch, 2020; Birch and Bronson, 2022; Bremmer, 2021; Galloway, 2018; Moore and Tambini,2021; Srnicek, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). There are also (as I discuss below) now growing numbers of disaffected consumers, including among them those who for ethical and environmental reasons resist conventional shopping practices, and are loathe to buy from Amazon. But it is also true, that it is mistaken

to project the environmental troubles of our times as entirely accountable to the providing industries and their merchandising manipulations. The appetites and priority given to convenience of many customers in the richer nations, and the influence they exercise, have a major role in them, too, and any advocacy of transition to a degrowth and fairer and more sharing economic order will need to recognise that. There has been a tendency for some left critics of commodity society to emphasise the 'unfree' and manipulated quality of consumer desire, and to portray shoppers as 'dupes' of the capitalist market and its 'culture industry' rather than acknowledge their degree of autonomy and accountability.[vi] Hugely important as their campaigns are, something of this tendency lingers on in the outlook of movements such as Greenpeace, Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion – where the summons to action is primarily addressed to government to forswear fossil fuels rather than to consumers to forego driving or flying. Governments, of course, are alone in a position radically to transform current patterns of working and consumption, and are certainly to be condemned for their clamp down on environmental protest and persistent investment in fossil fuels. But consumers do also continue to expect to fill their tanks and fly to their holidays, and to treat 'us', the general public in affluent societies, as simply victims of 'their' entrepreneurial activities, is to provide too much of a cop out. To offer here but one recent example: without the take-up by consumers of ever bigger SUVs, global emissions from the motor industry would have fallen by 30% between 2010 and 2022, road accidents and pedestrian fatalities would also have been reduced (Global Fuel Economy Initiative, 2023; Horton, 2023; Hurst, 2023).[vii] The numbers, at any rate, who in polls will readily deplore the environmental horrors perpetrated by corporate power and government hardly seem matched by changes in individual consumer behaviour – or indeed in voting patterns.

Alternative hedonism: an immanent critique of consumerism

It is for this reason, that in my argument for alternative hedonism I emphasise the cultural revolution in thinking about personal well-being and collective prosperity that will be needed as a prior condition of the emergence of any meaningful electoral support for a new national and ultimately global economic order. An ‘alternative hedonist’ politics of prosperity views our so-called ‘good life’ as not just environmentally disastrous but also in many respects undermining well-being rather than promoting it. It is a major cause of stress and ill health. It subjects us to high levels of noise and stench, and generates vast amounts of junk. Its work routines and commercial priorities mean that many people for most of their lives begin their days in traffic jams or overcrowded trains and buses, and then spend much of the rest of them glued to the computer screen, often engaged in mind-numbing tasks. A good part of its productive activity locks time into the creation of a material culture of ever faster production turnovers and built-in obsolescence, which pre-empts more worthy, enduring or entrancing forms of human fulfilment. It is therefore hardly surprising that some people even in the more affluent areas are now beginning to regret what has been lost in the pursuit of the dominant model of prosperity. Implicit in contemporary laments over lost spaces and communities, the commercial battening on children, the vocational dumbing-down of education, the ravages of ‘development’, the 'cloning' of our cities, and so forth, is a hankering for a society no longer subordinate to the imperatives of growth and consumerist expansion. Diffuse and politically unfocussed though this may be, it speaks to a widely felt sense of the opportunities squandered in recent decades for creating a fairer, less harassed, less environmentally destructive and more enjoyable way of life. To defend the progressive dimension of this kind of yearning (or what I term ‘avant-garde nostalgia’) against the exigencies of growth-driven 'progress' is not to recommend a more ascetic existence. On the contrary, it is to highlight the puritanical, disquieting, and irrational aspects of contemporary consumer culture. It is to speak for the forms of pleasure and happiness that people might be

able to enjoy were they to opt for an alternative economic order. It is to open up a new 'political imaginary': a seductive vision of alternatives to resource-intensive consumption, centred on a reduction of the working week and a slower pace of living. By working and producing less we could improve health and well-being, and provide for forms of conviviality which harried and insulated travel and work routines make impossible. A cultural revolution along these lines would challenge the advertisers' monopoly on the depiction of prosperity and the 'good' life. (Even if it is not wholly determining of consumer choices, this monopoly comes at the cost of any alternative – and potentially more compelling - images or narratives). It would make the stuff that is now seriously messing up the planet – more cars, more planes, more roads, more throwaway commodities – look ugly because of the energy it squanders and the environmental damage it causes (Soper, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2020 esp.54-76); Soper, Ryle and Thomas, 2009; Soper and Trentmann, 2007).

In line with Venn's appeal to look beyond the entrenched habitual ways of living, my alternative hedonist approach is thus challenging all those who would 'naturalise' the consumerist lifestyle. And where I differ from those sounding the knell for the planet, is in seeing the crisis not just as a disaster looming but as an opportunity for breaking with many of the currently unpleasurable aspects of affluent ways of working and consuming.

My argument also highlights what people are beginning to experience themselves about the 'anti' or 'counter' consumerist aspects of their own needs and preferences; and draws out their implications for the consolidation of a broader systemic opposition to the existing order. I have claimed some legitimacy for this approach by reference to what I term, following Raymond Williams, is an emerging 'structure of feeling' - in the emergence, that is, of an incipient critique of consumer culture and support for other greener and more pleasurable ways of living (Williams, 1977: 132, cf.128-136; cf. Gilbert, 2014: 151-3). The aim is to avoid moralizing: in its appeal to an already existing if relatively latent disaffection

with the shopping mall culture alternative hedonism is a form of immanent critique of consumer society that does not impute feelings to people, but seeks to respond to those already emergent within them.

This approach departs from much earlier opposition to commodification and the shopping-mall culture in resisting the idea of the 'manipulated' consumer and its grounding in an essentialist distinction between 'true' and 'false' or more or less 'natural' needs. Such views fail to register the reflexive and contradictory structure of contemporary consumer responses and tend to ignore the democratic importance of anchoring claims about 'true' needs or 'objective' interests in some emergent experience on the part of consumers themselves. The related presumption that the 'excesses' of modern consumption can be corrected through a return to a simpler and supposedly 'truer' or more 'natural' modus vivendi is also rejected. The main focus is neither on consumption as a bid for personal distinction or individualisation, nor on consumption as a relatively unconscious 'form of life', but on the ways in which a whole range of contemporary consumerist practices are being brought into question by reason of their environmental consequences, their impact on health, and their distraints on both sensual enjoyment and more spiritual forms of well being.

I have compared the forms of enlightenment and personal epiphany this revolution will demand to those required in the case of other major historical movements for emancipation such as feminism, or the campaigns against slavery and racism (Soper, 2020: 185). Until very recently, however, our shopping habits have barely been challenged, nor has the work-and-spend way of living been provided with any countering ideal on our billboards and prime time TV. Contested though it may be in many respects, consumerist imagery of the 'good life' predominates, with minimal opposition expressed in the more influential media outlets to its narratives (Lewis, 2023; Schor, 2004). That Bill Gates, travelling around by private jet, can find his half-baked recommendations on countering the climate emergency

reported in the main news outlets while less monied but more thoughtful advisers have so little clout by comparison, is indicative (Shiva, 2019). He and other magnates, fearful for the impact of environmental devastation on their empires, encourage us to think that only mammoth capitalist investments in their futurist fantasies (new generation nuclear power, gargantuan geoengineering projects, terraforming Mars, mass tourism to the lunar lakes, etc.) can save the world.[viii] Mainstream politics prefers for the most part to attend to the counsel of billionaires and advocates of growth rather than initiate more democratic debate on the objectives of all our economic activity, and whether it can really count as progressive or environmentally redemptive. (On the dominance of capitalism and its plutocratic influence see Domhoff, 2021; Milanovic, 2019; Philips, 2018). Under Jeremy Corbyn's brief spell as leader, the Labour Party promised to make climate change a central focus of policy on health and well-being, and expressed support for a citizens' assembly on the issue. But even so, the dominant message from the Party was largely about growth, jobs and the raising of living standards as conceived within consumer culture. Little was said about the Party as a pioneer of an alternative politics of prosperity.[ix] In the UK, politics is thus still dominated by bi-party dispute over the *means* to a commonly agreed set of *ends* (economic growth, technological development, increased standards of living as defined by current consumer culture). The electorate has not been invited to reconsider the wisdom of those ends themselves nor their consequences for more peripheral societies. Nations with the least sustainable environmental footprint have long continued to be held out as 'good life' models for the developing nations, even as they imperil planetary life and cause the social disruption and migration that could end in ecological barbarism and even terminal forms of warfare. As Alf Hornborg has rightly noted, the notion that growth equates with progress

> seems to lead some people to think that the issue of whether the planet will be inhabitable a hundred years from now is subordinate to indications that an increasing

> share of the world's population is modestly improving its health, education, and purchasing-power. In this view, in other words, it does not seem to matter so much if we are generating changes that will lead to the extinction of our species, if increasing numbers of people today live somewhat longer, spend more years in school, and are able to consume a bit more than their parents (Hornborg, 2018: 42).

Environmental consultants and political economists have, of course, offered more qualified assessments. But many focus either on statistical details of the climate emergency and depletion of nature or on the alternative technologies and global institutions needed to limit or adapt to the damage; and in much of this argument, there is a presumption either that green technology, if implemented fast enough and on a large enough scale, will secure a future in which we continue to live and consume much as before (Soper, 2020: 2, 40-1; Hickel, 2018, 2021: 126-145). Or, if it is accepted that affluent societies cannot continue in their former ways, it is often with regret - with a sense that the more austere consumption required of us will be to our disadvantage (for some exemplification, see Soper, 2020: 12). To add to all this, we have been witness of late to some more extreme forms of hostility to any green agenda: Bolsanaro's destructive rule in Brazil, Milei's electoral victory in Argentina, the now serious prospect of a second Trump Presidency in the US, and the general hardening of late of rightwing resistance to the green policy notably in the UK under Sunak's leadership of the Conservatives. The ideas of prosperity and well-being associated with developed consumer culture remain to this extent hegemonic. Nor is the climate emergency viewed as an opportunity for evolving more relaxed and enjoyable ways of living.

Fracturing the consumerist consensus

In the most recent period, however, some signs have emerged that this hitherto broadly shared agreement on the life-style we want to preserve may be coming under more scrutiny. The post-consumerist arguments of previously disregarded groups such as the Degrowth network or the Next System in the US are finding more of a register in mainstream media. So, too, are those of the Parties and NGOs and supportive theorists campaigning not only for new forms of commoning and a more participatory economic order, but also for the revised thinking on well-being and consumption that would provide its politico-cultural support.[x] Scientists are likewise giving higher profile in their addresses to the public to the need for an alternative politics of prosperity. In a message from over 11,000 of them emphasising the urgency of 'major transformations in the ways our global society functions and interacts with natural ecosystems', they claimed that such changes, together with social and economic justice for all, promise 'far greater human well-being than does business as usual'(World Scientists' Warning, 2019; IPPC, 2020). Even among capitalism's devotees, there is now some concern being voiced across the political spectrum over its neo-liberal dynamic.[xi] And despite the intense culture war efforts on the right in the UK to disparage 'woke' greens and their eco-benign projects, some progress has been made – and made with significant support from the general public. A majority in London, for example, still approve the extension of ULEZ (Mayor of London Assembly, 2023), 62% would support their local authority adopting a target to make their area a 15 minute neighbourhood (Road Safety GB, 2023), and around 70% want government to stand by the commitment to net zero emissions by 2050 (YouGov Poll, 2023). Attitudes have to this extent been changing in recent years, and they are now meeting up with the more long term, if still minority, concerns noted above about the downsides of the fast-paced, acquisitive lifestyle for consumers themselves.

In this context, a cultural politics emphasising the rewards of moving to slower-paced ways of working, rather than a wholly work-free existence; to fewer cars and more provision

for bikes and public transport; to less tech-dependent and more humanly oriented systems of caring and education; and to providing intrinsically valued sources of well-being rather than more material acquisitions is, I suggest, more likely to meet with approval. Recourse to automation in some areas will certainly free up time, spare us of some of the more laborious tasks, and help to further breakdown the gender division of labour.[xii] But we could also explore the potential of a less intensive work culture for introducing more job sharing and gratifying forms of work, evolving new skills and reverting to some earlier ways of doing and making (Autonomy 2019; Bunting, 2004; Coote, 2014; Coote and Franklin, 2013; Frayne, 2016a, 2016b; Gorz, 1999; Hayden, 2013; Hester, 2017; Weeks, 2011). Such ways of working are compatible with communally owned enterprises and cooperatives in which labour is not subject to the imperative of maximising profit by reducing labour time. They could also draw on hybrid production practices that combine the most advanced green technologies in such fields as medicine, transport, energy provision, with older methods, more craft-based labour processes and slower mobility. This would allow more time to people to provide for themselves, and more space could be made available to them for gardening, workshops, cultural activities and recreation. Artisanal production could expand, and many more – including many who may be currently excluded by reason of illness or disability - would be able to benefit from the particular skills and forms of concentration in work and self-fulfilment it can provide (Sennett, 2006, 2009). A post-work order along these lines, supported by some form of UBI or citizen's income, could well prove popular with the electorate and should be made central to the political imaginary of all campaigns promoting a green renaissance (BIEN 1986-present, Great Transition Initiative Forum on Basic Income, 2020; Autonomy interviews on UBI, 2019; Moulier-Boutang, 2004:152-166; Gorz, 1999: 100-110; Purdy, 2007).

As the American economist, Juliet Schor, has put it, defending her view of cooperative 'plenitude' against 'business as usual':

> We are circling back and plenitude is a synthesis of the pre- and postmodern. From the former it borrows the vision of skilled artisans producing for their own use as well as for the market (…). From the postmodern period comes advanced technology and smart, ecologically parsimonious design. It's the perfect synthesis. Technology obviates the arduous and back-breaking labour of the preindustrial. Artisan labour avoids the alienation of the modern factory and office (Schor, 2010: 127).

This prospect for the future is at odds with the tech-utopian vision of a post-capitalist world in which automation will have largely freed people from the need to work and the Marxist promise of communist abundance for all would be realised (Bastani, 2018; Mason, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2016).[xiii] It is therefore liable to be dismissed as overly limited and parochial – as belonging within a 'folk politics' of the kind that Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have claimed embody 'strategic assumptions that threaten to debilitate the left', lead to failure and are incapable of transforming capitalism' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 10-11). The critics of 'folk politics' are understandably frustrated with the ineffectuality of anti-capitalism activism over the last two decades, and the failure of the left to maintain a more concerted and systemic movement of opposition is surely in part to blame. But there are also many factors that have come together over the same period to render it almost impossible to sustain that kind of movement and have ruled out any imminent supplanting of capitalism in the current context. My own, if somewhat more pragmatic, view is that such progress as might be made in that direction will now depend on a prior, and probably quite extended period, of cultural change in attitudes to prosperity, consumption and the 'good life'. With that in mind, I would therefore defend alternative hedonism as itself offering a strategic vision for the future – and one that might prove more effective precisely because of its

humanist grounding in already experienced discontents and anxieties, and appeals to emergent appetites for alternatives ways of living and working.[xiv] If it is still objected, as it may well be, that it remains unclear who will be the main agents of this cultural revolution or how it will attain any widespread support for its strategic vision, I would readily agree. But much the same is true of any counter-capitalist vision for the future at the present time, and perhaps not least that of luxury communism.

A reworked conception of progress: where commoning and alternative hedonist approaches coincide

In calling for a conception of prosperity that rejects endless growth while also resisting cultural regression, I echo critiques of Western ideas of progress and modernity developed in postcolonial and commoning studies. As already indicated, however, I do so with particular reference to the destructive impact of the consumerist model of the 'good life' and its baleful influence around the world. Nations whose citizens' consumption grossly exceeds the planet's carrying capacity, can no longer be held out as aspirational models for the rest of the world (Latouche, 2009; Hornborg, 2009: 237–262). Indeed, those societies with less industrialised but more sustainable methods of production and modes of consuming must surely begin to count as more progressive (Hickel, 2015, 2021: 251). And these nations themselves might begin to reposition themselves, and to be perceived, as in the vanguard by comparison with the overdevelopment of the imperial powers or metropolitan centres who have rendered them marginal and premodern.

A reworking of ideas of progress and development would offer new forms of representation of the relationship between tradition and modernity. In place of a stadial and evolutionist conception of history, a degrowth understanding committed to social justice and a fairer distribution of environmental resources requires a more complex narrative on the old-

new divide, a transcendence of the current binary opposition between uncritical progressivism and elegiac nostalgia. A green renaissance along these lines would be based in the recollection and endorsement of the eco-friendlier practices and pleasures that are being swept away by capitalist 'progress' and its most recent neo-liberal attempts to eliminate such institutions as mutuals, credit unions, co-operatives and other forms of common ownership and management (Venn, 2018: 120; cf. Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010: 252-254). By reflecting on past experience in ways that highlight what is pre-empted by contemporary forms of consumption , an 'avant-garde nostalgia' would recast certain forms of retrospection as potentially progressive, and thereby stimulate desire for a future that will be at once be less environmentally destructive and more sensually gratifying. This is not to endorse a simplistic 'back to nature' ethic through which modern 'excesses' can be corrected by return to the 'simple' way of life. But it is to resist the chronocentrism that refuses to look to resources in the past that could help us in the formation of a more viable and enjoyable future. This chimes with Venn's critique of the idea of temporality as a 'linear progression towards an anticipated future' (Venn 2006: 6-10). Or as De Angelis has put it, one wants 'not to replace new by old, but only to let the old speak to us in new terms' (De Angelis, 2018: 17).[xv] The aim is to open up the prospect of an eco-benign politic that is neither overly committed to technology, on the one hand, nor overly retrospective in outlook on the other, but grounded in new ways of working and spending leisure time and the sensual and spiritual pleasures they can provide (cf. Venn, 2006: 138f.).

Alternatives to growth: collaborative consumption

One manifestation of this alternative to growth-driven capitalism is already being realised in the interstices of the mainstream market through the expanding culture of what has been termed 'collaborative' or 'connected' consumption: networks of sharing, recycling,

exchange of goods and service provision (including of banking and other financial services) that by-pass conventional commerce. Prompted in part by the financial crisis of 2008, these have helped to reduce carbon emissions and waste while at the same time creating more eco-sensitive communities and cooperative ways of living (Schor, 2010, 2013, Soper, 2020: 126-130). In a transition period, such initiatives are acting as a check on the individualisation of consumption and finding ways of circumventing the obstacles it places in the way of shared and more collective use of goods and forms of transport. They also help to subvert the reach and intrusion of the increasingly personalised address of internet advertising. More generally, they check the dominant consumerist aesthetics of 'newness' by shunning high street led fashions and mass production in favour of clothes swopping, remakes and homemade goods. They might also in the process prove the hubs for exerting pressure on corporations to end reliance on sweat-shop labour and ever faster turn-over times, and to render them accountable for the pollution incurred in production: in short, to add significantly to the obstacles confronting continued accumulation (cf.Klein, 2014b).

Although most of his own discussion relates to instances in Latin America, such forms of collaborative withdrawal from mainstream markets in the US and Europe exemplify what De Angelis refers to as commoning 'adapting, redeveloping and recreating new social connections' wherever other forms of collaborative actions have been displaced (usually by market forces). And as such, it is both non-quixotically embedded within capitalism, and contributing to its subversion. It is, he writes,

> a form of social cooperation that resists the dominant paradigm of modern life, that operates outside the code and protocol of capitalist-dominated social cooperation; it is a form of social cooperation in which profit for profit's sake, expropriation and competitiveness are not the dominant drivers of the

> forms and goals of cooperation, and that thus provides fundamentally different meanings and sustenance for life in common (De Angelis, 2018: 207-8).

Such collaborative ways of providing for needs also rely upon, and help to promote a more communally oriented and republican spirit. Whether the pandemic will prove to have reinforced this spirit in any durable way, remains to be seen, but in the forms of reflection it has encouraged it may prove to have opened up a somewhat more receptive milieu for shared forms of consumption. Forced temporarily to loosen its hold on people's time and activity, the work-and-spend existence gave way to a less acquisitive and pressurised way of living. Private preoccupations yielded to altruistic concerns to help out. The citizenly self that had seemingly been seen off after decades of ideological affirmation of the consuming self, staged a surprising comeback – and was welcomed by many as a pleasurable shift in outlook. In the UK, the state, for its part, was also forced to give evidence – despite all the neo-liberal insistence to the contrary – of the essential forms of help and provision it is alone in a position to supply. The Prime Minister had grudgingly to admit, when faced with the evidence, that, pace Margaret Thatcher, something called 'society' did after all exist.

Of course, together with any resurgence of the republican ethos, comes the risk that notions of the 'common interest' and 'collective good' will be appropriated ideologically in problematic and politically partial ways. Something of this has already been seen in the peri-pandemical 'culture wars' and it is likely to continue into the post-coronaviral era. Nonetheless, the reassertion of the common good and revaluation of citizenship and public ownership, will be critical to the promotion of an alternative politics of prosperity. What needs emphasising here, as Venn has noted, is the *disinheritance* of a commonwealth and public *impoverishment* that has followed from the ever increasing privatisation in neoliberal times:

> …public works and amenities were the aggregate product of a whole community's labour, paid for by means of general taxation, and should be regarded as forms of common pool resources, enhancing the capabilities of the people as a whole and conditioning the wellbeing of all. Their status as common wealth, that is, as collectively held goods and resources, should grant them the quality of an inalienable inheritance. Their increasing privatisation in neoliberal times is thus a process of disinheritance that impoverishes everyone (Venn, 2018: 22).

This has been particularly true of a society such as the UK, where the ideological collapse of citizenship into a form of personally empowering consumption has provided the rhetorical cover for encroaching privatisation of services, depletion of them, and capitalist exploitation of increasingly individualised forms of commerce. Conversely, however, the consumer needs now to be recognised as a relatively autonomous agent whose self-interests can also extend to and encompass collective goods.

We must also accept, as consumer-citizens, that all of us alive today, but especially the more affluent, have a special responsibility to the up and coming generation and to all those who have yet to be born (cf.Krznaric, 2021a, 2021b). In the light of this accountability to the future, it is unclear why wasteful and vandalising forms of personal consumption, and the systemic encouragement of those, should remain exempt from the kinds of exposure and criticism that we now expect to be brought against racist, sexist, or blatantly undemocratic attitudes and behaviour. That thought may be discomfiting, even highly objectionable to many, and calls to curb individual consumption are still routinely rejected by liberal defendants of the market as authoritarian. Yet the growth-driven capitalist market has acquired its own totalitarian tendencies. Bent on marginalising whatever is not commercially viable, it dominates the time expenditure of the vast majority, monopolises the conception and aesthetic register of gratification, and is licensed to groom as many children as it can

reach for a life of consumption. Indeed, it might better be seen at this stage in its evolution, not as a guarantor of universal freedoms and self-expression, but as a means of further extending the global reach and command of corporate power at the expense of the health and well-being of both the planet and the majority of its inhabitants. Confronting it will require, as Venn rightly claimed in *After Capital*, not only

> opposed visions of a just society, but quite incommensurable understandings of what it means to be human at all, implying a struggle over conflicting perceptions of what is possible and what is equitable, thus a struggle over disjunct political philosophies and imaginaries. Equally, it is a struggle about defending hard-won political spaces and protecting socio-cultural common wealth such as free public libraries and spaces, as well as about opening up new spaces for inventing ways of being which have not and, indeed, could not have existed before, since the technical, environmental and cultural conditions of possibility for such a future were absent (Venn, 2018: 18).

How the conflict between these contrasting world outlooks unfolds over coming decades will be critical to the experience of all future generations.

(8,731 of which bibliography is 1,540)

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[i] Most notably in his last book, where he points out that the identity between prosperity and growth 'has made it possible for growth to stand in for the general interest, an approach that has since become paradigmatic for economic policy, and endlessly and mindlessly repeated in political rhetoric by both the right and the conventional left' (Venn, 2018: 112).

[ii] Although not so clearly with those of Walter Mignolo, who appears to view Western growth-driven society as more or less unreformable, and shows little interest in shifting its values, or in drawing on decolonial ideas to transform the subjectivities and habitual ways of living in the 'over-developed' nations. Nor it seems does he much recognize the potential role in 'dewesternising' of disaffected Westerners themselves (Mignolo, 2011: 7-23; 131-138; 320-323).

[iii] The carbon budget is the amount of carbon dioxide that can be added to the atmosphere without causing global temperatures to rise above 1.5C – the goal set by governments in the Paris Agreement to avoid the very worst impacts of uncontrolled climate change. See: Oxfam press release (2020).

[iv] Cars are 50% plastic, and dominate urban space. (On the electricity needed, how it is to be generated, and the less than green nature of the batteries see Clarke, 2017).

[v] Admittedly, we cannot know how to construe the idea of 'voluntary' labour in ancient Egyptian conditions. But the labourers were not slaves, and the argument on their voluntary labour (Lehrer, 1997) is now quite widely accepted among his fellow Egyptologists (cf. Van de Mieroop, 2021: .58-61, 74-76; Tyldesley, 2011). On opting to shop with Amazon see the *Guardian* article by Mark O'Connell (O'Connell, 2021).

[vi] This was the tendency of the Frankfurt School thinkers, notably Adorno and Marcuse (see, for example, Bernstein, 1991; Marcuse, 1964). For further illustration: Haug, 1986; Leiss, 1978; Lodziak, 1995. Ulrich Beck's indictment of the environmental impacts of modern society is also predominantly addressed to the victimization of its collective client-consumers and says very little on their collusion in maintaining the system (Beck, 1992, esp. Part I). Foucault and his commentators have also emphasised the normalisation, regulation and governance of subjectification in accounts of the power/knowledge networks (for example, Foucault 1982, 2008; Lazzarato,2009; McNay, 2009; Rose,2001, 2009).

[vii] Such figures are all the more sobering given how clear it became at Cop 28 that the end of the fossil fuel era will not be delivered by its suppliers (Carrington, 2023).

[viii] I exaggerate – but not that much!

[ix] The Green Party, it should be said, has called for alternatives to GDP growth as the measure of prosperity and has placed sustainable consumption and revised conceptions of prosperity at the centre of its campaigning. But given the UK electoral system, its impact remains marginal. (For further discussion on this, see Soper, 2020: 167-169).

[x] Venn himself, of course, as already indicated. But see also De Angelis for examples of the struggle for commoning within the contraints of capitalism, and his view of it as an organic emergence (rather than a 'Leninist seizure of power') – as a process for finding solutions to problems capitalism cannot resolve, because

it has created them (De Angelis, 2018:141-198, 255-276). See also Mignolo, on the new ideas of 'living well' ('buen vivir', 'viver en plenitud') in Latin America (Mignolo, 2011: 304-312).

[xi] A recent report (Dasgupta Review, 2021) for the UK Treasury has floated the idea (already adopted by the Green Party) that GDP should be replaced as a measure of prosperity.

[xii] On the pros and cons of home automation, see the thoughtful study by Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek (Hester and Srnicek, 2023).

[xiii] The position has been much discussed, and subject to widespread criticism (for example, Lowrie, 2016; Mariqueo-Russell and Read, 2019;Cruddas, 2018; see also Soper, 2020: 89-96).

[xiv] Cf. my fuller discussion of the issue (Soper, 2020: 165-7).

[xv] Elsewhere (2018:208), he writes, 'To be resilient, commoning must depend on an open attitude that embraces traditions and projection into the future, history and contemporaneity, memory and immanence. We are not just discovering the commons – we are (re)inventing them as well'.

Kate Soper is Emerita Professor of Philosophy at London Metropolitan University. Her books include: *On Human Needs*; *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*; *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human; To Relish the Sublime? Culture and Self-Realisation in Postmodern Times* (with Martin Ryle). She has been involved in a number of research projects on climate change and sustainable consumption, most recently as a Visiting Fellow at the Pufendorf Institute, Lund University, Sweden. Her *Post-Growth Living: for an Alternative Hedonism* was published by Verso in 2020.

Kate Soper