

# An Anarchism for Today: The Simpler Way.

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(These are brief notes on the full document at,  
<https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/YOURDAY.htm>)

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A sustainable and just world cannot be achieved without enormous structural and cultural change. The argument below is that when our situation is understood in terms of resource and ecological limits it is evident that a satisfactory alternative society has to be built on anarchist principles, and that the transition to it can only be achieved via an anarchist strategy.

## 1. THE GLOBAL SITUATION

Before the connections with anarchism can be explained it is necessary to make clear the global situation we are in, and why this means that we have to transition to The Simpler Way.

Consumer-capitalist society cannot be made ecologically sustainable or just. The accelerating global problems now threatening us with destruction cannot be solved in a society that is driven by obsession with high rates of production and consumption, affluent living standards, market forces, the profit motive and economic growth. The only way out is via a huge and radical transition to The Simpler Way.

The well known “footprint” numbers show that it takes about 8 ha of productive land to provide water, energy settlement area and food for one person living in Australia. So if 9 billion people were to live as we do in Sydney we would need about 72 billion ha of productive land. But that is about 9 times all the available productive land on the planet. Even now footprint analyses indicate that the world is consuming resources at 1.5 times a sustainable rate.

There are even worse multiples for minerals. The top ten iron ore and bauxite consuming nations have per capita use that is around 65 and 90 times respectively the rates for all the other nations. Mineral ore grades are falling. There is obviously no possibility of all people ever rising to anything like present rich world levels of mineral use.

These facts only describe the grossly unsustainable present rich world levels of production and consumption. But we are determined to increase present levels of output and consumption, living standards and GDP as much as possible and without any end in sight. In other words, our supreme national goal is economic growth. Few people seem to recognise the absurdly impossible implications. If the expected 9 billion people were to rise to the “living standards” Australians would have in 2050 assuming 3% p.a. economic growth, the total global amount of producing and consuming going on would then be about thirty times as great as it is now. We’d need to harvest natural resources from about 45 planet earths.

It is difficult to see how anyone aware of these basic numbers could avoid accepting that people in countries like Australia should be trying move to far simpler and less resource-expensive lifestyles and economies. The decreases might have to be around 90%, so they

could not be achieved without dramatic reductions in the amount of production and consumption and therefore economic activity going on. This is what the “limits to growth” literature has been telling us for decades, but most economists, politicians and ordinary people totally fail to grasp the point. The required reductions are far greater than plausible assumptions about conservation and technical advance could make possible while we maintain present levels of affluence and GDP.

## **2. THE ALTERNATIVE – THE SIMPLER WAY.**

If this limits analysis is valid we have to shift to ways that enable all to live well a small fraction of present resource consumption. “The Simpler Way” is the term some of us are using for the kind of society in which we could easily make these huge reductions, while actually liberating ourselves to enjoy a far higher quality of life than we have now ... if we wanted to. But we could not do it without historically unprecedented radical structural and cultural changes.

Following are the basic elements in The Simpler Way. (For the detailed account see TSW: The Alternative.) It will be evident that these embody basically anarchist principles.

### **Material lifestyles, levels of production, consumption and GDP must be far lower.**

This is the most important element, but it emphatically does not mean hardship and deprivation. Groups such as the Simplicity Institute are trying to show how rich quality of life benefits derive from living in materially simple ways and gaining enjoyment from community involvement, personal development, gardening, arts and crafts, and from the many skills involved in running a self-sufficient, sharing, productive and frugal household. (See TSW: Your Delightful Day.)

### **Local economic self-sufficiency.**

A society in which resource consumption is dramatically reduced must be mostly made up of settlements, which are small and highly self-sufficient, producing most of the basic things they need from local resources. This means far less trade within and between nations, and far less movement of goods within nations. It means households, neighbourhoods, suburbs, towns and surrounding regions producing for themselves as much as they reasonably can.

This is most easily done with respect to food. Suburbs can be crammed with gardens, commons containing orchards and woodlots, fish tanks, and mini-farms. Many home gardens and mini-farms throughout suburbs would enable all nutrients to be recycled back to the soil through animal pens, compost heaps and garbage gas units. This would largely eliminate the need for a fertilizer industry. Grain and dairy products would be brought in in bulk from areas as close to towns as possible. Meat consumption would be greatly reduced but could mostly come from small animals such as poultry, rabbits and fish, rather than cattle. Food quality would be much higher than it is now. There would be almost no need for fertilizers, food packaging, moving food long distances, or marketing and little need for fridges.

There will be far less need for transport. Most people could get to local workplaces on foot or bicycle. We could dig up many roads, greatly increasing city land area available for community gardens, workshops, ponds, forests etc. Most of your neighbourhood could

become a Permaculture jungle, an "edible landscape" full of long-lived, largely self-maintaining productive plants. We should convert one house on each block to become the neighbourhood workshop, including a recycling store, meeting place, craft rooms, art gallery, tool library, surplus exchange and library. Local sources of leisure would reduce travel for entertainment and holidays.

An extremely important element would be the many "commons" we would develop throughout neighbourhoods, the community orchards, herb beds, clay pits, sheds, craft rooms, windmills, ponds, animal pens and woodlots providing free food and materials. These would be built and maintained by the voluntary community working bees, which would also carry out many services such as helping to care for old people, mind children, assist teachers, maintain the parks and the (few remaining) roads.

It would also be a leisure-rich environment, full of familiar people, small businesses, common projects, drama clubs, animals, gardens, farms, forests and alternative technologies. People would be less inclined to travel for leisure or holidays, reducing the national energy consumption. The local leisure committee would organise a rich variety of concerts, festivals, mystery tours, visiting speakers and other activities.

### **More communal and cooperative ways.**

We would be on voluntary rosters, committees and working bees to carry out most of the orchard pruning, child minding, basic educating and care of aged and disabled people in our area. A strong sense of cooperation, solidarity, responsibility and empowerment would be built by the voluntary community working bees. The situation would encourage us to contribute, cooperate and share, and be involved in decision making because we would know that our welfare depended on all doing these things, and more importantly we would experience the intrinsic rewards of collectivism.

### **The new economy**

There is no chance of making these kinds of changes within the present economic system. The new economy would have to enable rational collective application of the limited available resources and productive capacity to providing the basic things needed for all to have a good life. It could have no growth and it could not be driven by market forces.

Towns and suburbs will be in control of their economies so will be able to completely eliminate unemployment, poverty and homelessness. They will simply set up small firms and cooperative gardens and workshops whereby those without jobs can contribute to producing goods and services the town needs, being paid in their own local currency.

Most people would need to work for money only one or two days a week, because they would not need to buy much, and many of the things they need would come freely (such as fruit from the commons) or could be paid for by contributions to community working bees. (In consumer-capitalist society we probably work three times too hard!) We could spend the other 5 or 6 days working/playing around the neighbourhood.

Surrounding the town or suburban economy there would be a regional economy in which more elaborate items would be produced. Few items, including steel, would be moved long

distances from big centralised factories. Very little would need to be transported from overseas.

Most of the real economy would function without money. Most of our daily goods and services would come via household and neighbourhood gardens, workshops and kitchens and the swapping of surpluses and giving and helping. We would get many things free from the commons, and many services would be free, such as the concerts. Most of us would not need to earn much money. The town would have its own bank and its own local currency, enabling it to set up enterprises to “employ” homeless etc. people and to pay them with IOU’s enabling them to buy things produced by other firms in the town.

Note that these changes would be made gradually, as the global economy deteriorates and local communities grope their way to providing more for themselves. They cannot be made quickly, because they have to be made by ordinary people slowly shifting to new ways where they live.

### **Government and politics.**

This is where the significance of anarchism begins to become more apparent. Viable and satisfactory communities of the kind described would have to be largely self-governing and independent of any state or centralised authority. They simply could not work if they were not free to run their own affairs. The people who live in the town are the only ones who understand the local conditions, know what will grow best there, what people there want and how they think, what the traditions are, and what strategies will and won’t work there. They will have to do the planning, make the decisions, run the systems, turn up to working bees and do the work. They are the only ones who can monitor, maintain and adjust the social machinery that has to be in good shape or the town will fail. The right decisions for the town can only be decisions the town’s discussion and thinking has led it to believe are right for it. The townspeople must be conscientious, energetic, innovative, responsible, keen to make things run well, proud of what they have built and how they do things, and they must feel empowered and able to run their own affairs. These elements cannot exist if distant politicians and bureaucrats govern people. Responsibility has to lie with them, not some external authority. These conditions have to be in place or the most important element will not be there, i.e., the spiritual attitude, the morale, the sense of empowerment, the recognition that responsibility is required, that the collective welfare must be top priority, the satisfaction that comes from community and caring, and the pride that comes from knowing that we run our town well.

Thus the appropriate form of “government” must be a thoroughly participatory democracy, not a representative democracy. Most of the decisions that mattered will have to be taken at the level of the town assembly at which everyone has the right and the duty to speak, serve on committees, work out the best option, and vote. Without this participatory process the best technical decisions for the town will not be arrived at, and the town will not have the necessary worldview and spirit. Obviously centralised governments cannot do these things.

Our situation of dependence on the local ecological and social systems will generate a more cooperative outlook, more concern with the public good and the welfare of others. It will be obvious that we as individuals would only live well if our town thrived. Our real wealth and welfare will be due to public factors, such as a caring community around us, the beautiful

landscapes we have planted, the high quality free fruit and the great concerts. Our personal incomes and property will not be important. The situation would require and reward good citizenship and concern for the town's welfare.

So most "government" will take place at the very small-scale level of the town and it will take place informally, almost without thinking about it. Groups will see things that need doing or fixing and just get together to do them. This is the anarchist principle of "spontaneity", the belief that people can come together to do what's necessary without guidance or orders from any authority. The overt and deliberate decision making will mostly take place through discussions in kitchens and on working bees as people consider the pros and cons and implications of options and grope towards agreement about what's best for the town.

Thus the norm and at least the goal will be consensus decision making. Taking a vote at the town assembly will usually at best be a formality, or a way of seeing whether agreement on the best option for the town has been reached.

This political situation therefore illustrates another important anarchist principle, that of self-regulation. Kropotkin pointed out that in nature no overarching authority decides what is to be done. Those elements involved in an ecosystem adjust to each other through their interactions, often cooperating and shifting in mutually beneficial ways. In The Simpler Way most of the processes and changes will be worked out by mutually beneficial discussion between those affected, and the whole town will mostly exhibit self-regulation at a level below that of the town assembly.

Because the new communities will be highly dependent on their local ecosystems for food, resources, water, leisure, security and wellbeing there will be strong "earth bonding", sense of place and of belonging, and feelings of appreciation and respect for nature. Thus The Simpler Way is likely to remedy what Bookchin saw as the readiness to dominate nature as well as other humans. When your welfare depends heavily on how well you treat your local ecosystems you will probably care for them. This is an "eco-anarchist" vision.

## **Stage 2 of the revolution**

But all this has only been about the political situation within the local neighbourhood, suburb and town. Towns cannot be perfectly self-sufficient. They will always need (a relatively small amount of) crucial inputs from the wider economy. The wider regional and national economies outside the town must be radically restructured to have as their overriding function the provision of basic inputs to the towns, the corrugated iron, poly-pipe, chicken wire netting, boots, cloth rolls, soldering acid... Achieving this enormous restructuring is Stage 2 of this revolution, discussed in more detail below. The point here is that this new "state" level economy must also be organised according to anarchist principles whereby the power and authority remains with the town assemblies, enabling every person to have an equal say in those aspects of government that have to be more centralised. Thus towns will send delegates to committees and conferences dealing with for instance the water management of a big river valley, to think out what the best plan might be, but these ideas will be taken back down to all the town assemblies to be approved. "State" level agencies will only manage (and organise and research and report...) and will have no power to make decisions. Thus the

remnant “state” would be very small, and powerless, and even major national decisions would be made by everyone.

Note that this is a different and stronger case for anarchism than anarchists have typically put in the past. We can now see that in the coming era of severe limits and scarcity a sustainable and just society cannot work well unless it functions according to the basic anarchist model of self government via thoroughly participatory democracy.

### 3. THE TRANSITION.

Marxists and Anarchists seem to have quite similar ideas about the form that society will take in the long term (a stateless “communism”), but they differ sharply on how to get to such a goal.

To summarise crudely, Marxists (more accurately Leninists) believe that getting rid of capitalism requires the leadership of a strong, centralised and determined revolutionary group, and that it will involve violence because dominant classes never voluntarily give up their privileges. Marxists criticise Anarchists for failing to accept the need for direct confrontation, to see that it will be necessary to be ruthless and violent, and to accept that strong top-down rule will be essential to establish the new ways. Marxists tend to say that a leadership group should take state power and push the big changes through but that in the long run when people have come to see that the new ways are better state power can be wound back and people will be capable of self government (with little and possibly no role for a state as we know it.) The argument below is that this puts the cart before the horse. It might have been the right order of events in all past revolutions, in which the goal was to take control of a existing socio-economic system basically geared to producing increasing wealth and run that same basic economy for the benefit of all, more efficiently and productively.

But that worldview has been totally disqualified by the advent of the era of scarcity, by the fact that we have run into limits to growth and the goal now has to be a society which not only has no growth but functions at a much lower level of GDP, industrialisation, production and consumption. This revolution is vastly more extensive and complex than just replacing the capitalist control of the affluence machine. The biggest and most problematic element in it is not even economic, it is the cultural reversal. We cannot get anywhere unless all interest in gain is abandoned and life purpose and satisfaction are sought in other than material goals. Thus the essence of this revolution, its absolutely crucial pre-requisite, is the development of that radically new set of ideas and values.

This is a core principle in the thinking of some of the most important Anarchists, notably Kropotkin and Tolstoy. They realised that if we got state power tomorrow we could not force or entice or bribe people to do run their own communities in cooperative, self-sufficient (or frugal) ways.

Yes of course eventually we will (have to) “take state power”, because the national economy will have to be radically reorganised to provide the towns with the inputs they need. That’s Stage 2 of the revolution. But a) Stage 2 cannot ever begin unless Stage 1 has been very effective in developing the required consciousness, b) working for the Stage 1 goals described above is by far the best way to contribute to that consciousness, c) when we have done that

well radically restructuring at the level of the state will be easily done! Only if and when people in general have come to see that their towns cannot survive let alone thrive in an era of severe and lasting global resource scarcity unless the national economy is geared to serving the towns will they push these Stage 2 changes through.

It should be stressed that it is not being assumed that just building more and more alternative things like community gardens will eventually result in a radically new society having been built (This is a major fault in the Transition Towns movement; See Trainer, 2014.) As has been explained there will have to eventually be a Stage 2 process which will be about making those huge and difficult structural changes. But they won't be achieved unless powerful and widespread grass roots support for them has developed and that's what we have to try to build up during Stage 1.

In Stage 1 we will be doing what the Anarchists call "prefiguring". That is, we will be building elements of the post revolutionary society, here and now within the old. Whereas the Marxist or socialist view is that it is necessary to fight against and eventually defeat and get rid of capitalism before you can start to build the new society, The Simper Way strategy involves beginning to create, live in and enjoy elements of it long before the revolution will come to a head. Doing this is the most effective way activists now can help to bring people to the new world view.

### **What are the weaknesses in and criticisms of this view?**

1. This view takes for granted the basic limits to growth analysis. Those who do not think that analysis is sound would not think there is any need to take The Simper Way seriously.

2. Anarchists are open to the criticism that they assume humans are much nicer and more sensible than they actually are. Certainly the new communities described within The Simper Way could not function well unless most people were fairly strong on cooperation, social responsibility, sharing, and caring. But what is easily overlooked here is that the conditions we would experience in these new communities would powerfully evoke and reinforce these dispositions. We would all be acutely aware that our fate and welfare as individuals depended entirely on how well the town was going, not on our individual wealth, talents or effort. More importantly we will find it a delight to live in these communities. Good citizenship, helping, giving, turning up to working bees will be enjoyable. In these conditions it is likely that people will indeed behave well.

3. "Too slow". There isn't time for that gradual development of the necessary dispositions." But there is no other way; a sustainable society in the coming era of severe scarcity cannot be achieved unless the ways indicated above are established, and that is not possible unless and until most people have come to the ideas and values outlined. We have to work as if there is time.

4. "The capitalist class will eliminate you as soon as they see you as a threat." Again the coming conditions of scarcity and breakdown will make it very difficult for the dominant class to control large numbers of towns all over the world moving to develop their own arrangements, especially when the petroleum they need to run their equipment will be scarce.

## Further Reading:

### [The Simplicity Institute](#)

Trainer, T., (2010), [The Transition to a Sustainable and Just World](#), Sydney, Envirobook.

TSW: [The Alternative](#).

TSW: [Third World Development](#).

<https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/ThirdWorldDev.htm>

TSW: [The Transition](#).

<https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/TRANSITION.Thoughtson.htm>

TSW: [The Case Against the Market](#).

<https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/MARKET.htm>

TSW: [Remaking East Hills](#).

<https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/EASTHILLS.htm>

TSW: [The Spanish Anarchists](#).

<https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/Spanish.html>

TSW: [Your Delightful Day](#). <https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/YOURDAY.htm>

Trainer, T., (2014), "Transitioners, we need to think about transition." [Alternative Society](#), and <https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/transitioners.htm>

Weidmann, T., Schandl, H., and D. Moral, (2014) "The footprint of using metals: New metrics of consumption and productivity", [Environ. Econ. Policy Stud.](#), 26<sup>th</sup> June.

World Wildlife Fund, (2013), [The Living Planet Report](#), World Wildlife Fund and London Zoological Society.

TSW: [The Alternative; Long version](#).

<https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/THEALTSOCLong.htm>

TSW: [Your Delightful Day](#). <https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/YOURDAY.htm>