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Turning Around from the Wrong Road Taken

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This essay is based on Doug's acceptance speech for the 2015 Global Economy Prize, awarded to Kristine and Douglas Tompkins by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. It has been titled and lightly edited by Eileen Crist.

Kris and I are certainly flattered that our conservation, land restoration, and agricultural work have been recognized by the Kiel Institute. So we thank the jury or the committee that decided on awarding this prize, and hope that we live up to expectations. I would like to start out by saying that whatever we have been doing and continue doing with our work in South America and around the world in the areas of conservation, agroecology, ecological restoration, and activism, Kris is 60 percent of the team. Just so you know.

Today I feel a bit like the fox in the chicken house. I'm not a cheerleader for the standard definition of progress, but I hope you will listen to me and allow the images of the slideshow in the background to wash over you and sink in. These are images from a book that our foundation just published, a photo-format book with a few pertinent essays, titled *Overdevelopment, Overpopulation, Overshoot*.¹ The images give a completely different view of what is called progress—of the condition we find ourselves in today. And while these pictures are disturbing, they provide a context for the remarks I will offer in the next few minutes.

What I propose in its simplest and broadest terms is nothing less than to imagine, as a thought exercise, that the present economic worldview that underlies our now global techno-industrial, free-market, infinite-growth capitalism is, briefly put, entirely bankrupt. It is taking the world to the brink of the precipice, into the virtual abyss of history. We resemble a runaway train speeding toward a massive rock wall, and we are bound to hit that wall in a relatively short time. Perhaps you are thinking to yourselves that you are about to hear some kind of doomsday scenario, versions of which you have heard many times before. To a certain extent you would be right, as doomsday scenarios abound. But I'm asking that you consider this first as a mental exercise, leaving aside all judgments for the moment—especially your most cherished assumptions, because as author Neil Evernden often liked stating, the real authorities in a culture are the unquestioned assumptions.²

¹ Tom Butler, ed., *Overdevelopment, Overpopulation, Overshoot* (n.p.: Groff Books, 2015).

² Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

I would like to start by reminding everyone that it was less than 500 years ago that people believed the Earth was positioned in the center of the universe. Copernicus came on the scene in the middle of the 16th century, proving that the Earth was not the center of our solar system. And so the Copernican revolution and heliocentric theory were born. His perspective was enormously resisted, of course, especially by entrenched interests. It was a revolution in thinking that upset the status quo, and it took a very long time to become accepted as a fact of life. Today, no one questions the way the planets orbit. Paradigm shifts are always like this: they take a long time to happen and demand agonizing shifts in thinking.

Now imagine the perspective 100 or 200 years out from now. The myth of progress has become just that: a deposed myth. The notion of ever-developing megatechnologies—including global capitalism as an economic megatechnology indispensable to development—has fallen from grace. We have made that paradigm shift to an eco-local, highly-diverse, healthy, and lightly-populated economy. The Earth has recuperated from its dark times of biodepletion, the climate is now stabilized, beauty has returned everywhere, wildlife populations are recovering, and the evolution of much complex life has jump-started itself after being stopped dead in its tracks in the bleak times of the 20th and the 21st century.

Engaging our imagination is often helpful in dealing with the seemingly unimaginable idea that our present way of life could change so radically. It is useful in calling forth a bright and glorious future ahead of us, and envisioning light at the end of the long, dark tunnel that we find civilization in today.

In particular, I would like to flag a stubborn mental block that needs to be removed from our thinking—namely, the idea that “you cannot go back.” While this notion is rubbish, it works as a persistent excuse to wave aside the idea of devolving the techno-industrial culture that we have constructed, and setting off in another direction altogether. Consider an analogy: If you’re driving somewhere and find yourself lost, on the wrong road or having made a wrong turn, there are several options. One is to keep going, the hardheaded option of one unwilling to admit his mistake. Another tactic is to ask directions, which often results in turning and going back the way you came. Yet another possibility is to decide to make a U-turn, go back to where you were, and start over on known ground. That is a sensible alternative which many of us choose when we find ourselves lost. The analogy is intended to loosen our resistance to the notion that we cannot go back. On the contrary, it is often by far the smartest thing to do.

Now, I’d like to introduce a macro-question: Does anyone here believe that the techno-industrial culture, of which we are all offspring, is a successful development model? I know that there may be many who’d promptly point out a number of benefits and successes that this mega-tech society has delivered. And also insist that we are so committed to this trajectory that

it is impossible to turn around. My point here is that we are now back in the situation of the car-lost-on-some-unrecognizable-highway, and we have paused to check our bearings. If we maintained that we were now so far along that we had no choice but to continue, and we explained that to our spouse next to us, he or she would be giving us a lecture on our own stupidity. As one of the sharpest environmental thinkers today, John Michael Greer, writes “there is nothing inevitable in the way we do things in today’s industrial world: our political arrangements, our economic practices, our social institutions, our cultural habits, our sciences and our technologies all unfold from industrial civilization’s distinctive and profoundly idiosyncratic worldview. So does the central flaw in the entire baroque edifice: our lethally muddleheaded inability to understand our inescapable dependence on the biosphere.”³

A question I want to raise is that if we are on the right road, if the techno-industrial culture is moving us in the right direction, and so highly successful—then how is it that we are immersed in the worst environmental crisis of the planet in 65 million years? We find ourselves in the midst of the Sixth Mass Extinction event, and according to climate scientists we have derailed the climate dangerously. What could be worse than this? I submit that these are clear indicators that we are lost. And what lies at the base of being lost, of having gone down the wrong road, is our model of development. After all, what else was it that drove us to this point? And the question is: How could we have gotten things so wrong? In my opinion, to invoke “the wrong road” metaphor, we should turn around and get back to a place of which we are surer.

This imperative, of course, poses any number of problems, for we are already immersed in and dependent upon the techno-industrial juggernaut that shapes our daily lives. Agriculture now depends on an industrial brew of chemicals and complicated machinery. Gigantic confined animal feeding operations provide enormous quantities of chickens, eggs, hogs, beef, and milk products. Land, especially agricultural land, is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands—many of them gigantic corporations—and managed from financial centers far from the farms themselves, bringing all kinds of problems to soils, to human and nonhuman health, and to biodiversity. Communications are now dependent on satellites while unhealthy electromagnetic fields saturate our lives. Travel and trade are plugged into huge modern transportation networks of roads, airlines, trains, and ship lanes—all beholden to a complicated infrastructure not at all easy to change. Urbanization has redistributed once-rural populations into megacities and sprawling slums of dimensions never before seen in human history. The internet—at first touted as a miracle network of information that would liberate the underclass and democratize information—has turned out to be, more than any other invention in human

³ John Michael Greer, “The Era of Dissolution,” *The Archdruid Report*, June 10, 2015, <http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.com/2015/06/the-era-of-dissolution.html>.

history, the most centralizing mega-technology ever devised, primarily serving the interests of transnational corporations, crime syndicates, the extractive economy, drug traffickers, porno-purveyors, and a mass-consumer culture. The internet has served to ramp up, on every front, the economic activity that is pillaging the planet and driving climate change and the extinction crisis.

Roll the clock back and you will easily see that without the internet we might not be at the 400-plus parts per million of atmospheric carbon dioxide that we are today, setting in motion dangerous chemical processes in the biosphere and unhinging the global climate. The list of Earth grievances could go on and on, from antibiotic resistances, to acidification of the ocean, to overfishing by industrial fishing fleets, loss of primary forest cover, and dire water problems, including aquifer depletions and exhausted river systems. All exacerbated, if not propelled, by the accelerating force of the internet, whose most significant contribution to civilization has been just that, acceleration: like a giant flywheel ready to come apart as it is spinning too fast for its size and construction.

In my view, systemic analysis—and I emphasize *systemic*—of megatechnology is the weakest link of today's social movements and disastrously absent in the thinking of economists and other purveyors of "progress." It would be healthy for society's leadership—that is, the business class, politicians and other authorities, academics, the press, all professionals, churches, NGOs, union leaders, architects, urban designers, and so forth—to become far more critical of megatechnology, and to recognize that all technologies introduced into the culture come with inherent characteristics. And these characteristics oblige society to comport itself according to the dictates of that technology.

We can see it clearly, for example, in nations that embrace nuclear power. The embrace of nuclear power requires society to be structured in a specific way: it is transfigured into a centralized society needing narrow specialists who lose touch with the larger picture. Nuclear power also calls for a high-capital society, a military of some sort, and a constantly-growing market. It demands the entire "scaffolding of civilization" as Wes Jackson has called it: the mining, the machines that do the mining, the machines that make the mining machines, the smelters, the roads to the smelters, the roads to carry the metals to their markets, the trucks needed to do that, the communications systems to support it, the list goes on. That scaffolding of civilization is *exactly* what is destroying the world: wiping out biodiversity, making the world ugly, taking the climate off known charts.

Does that not give anyone with a few grams of commonsense the incentive to reconsider whether we are on the right road or not? Dismally, the bottom line is that we have ruined the climate and instigated the extinction crisis, the Mother of all Crises. We are thus called to

rethink the notion of so-called progress and figure out an entirely different development model: one in which nature is the measure and not the reductionist Cartesian logic that puts human cleverness ahead of the workings of nature. We need to reinstate an organic model of the world and reject the machine one. We must rethink the worldview that humanity has foolishly adopted—the rampant sense of entitlement and arrogance that allows us to transmogrify the planet with our technologies.

Somewhere, some number of centuries ago, we took the wrong road, forging on with false certainty and bullheadedness. We have driven countless species to extinction and continue to do so every day: extinct forever—because of our hubris. That does not seem at all intelligent. Economists along with the rest of the world’s leadership need, in my opinion, to reorient toward another worldview. One in which the primary ethical and ecologically intelligent position is to share the planet with all other creatures, and set our goals for a fulfilling life using different objectives than the format of the techno-industrial consumer culture.

Let’s look for the right road—recognizing that we find ourselves lost and need to turn around in order to go forward. It is a big challenge, first to our thinking and intellect. But as Greer wisely points out, there is nothing inevitable about the future. We have made a mess, but we have the abilities to make it right again. To that end, I want to read a poem that was composed 2500 years ago by the great Taoist sage Lao Tzu. I find it an amazingly prescient and a pithily distilled reminder that we can have wonderful lives free of the things that are undoing our world. Note how the poem’s subject matter of technology, population, meaningless consumption, vanity, war, peace, beauty, and simplicity remain our principal concerns today:

Better to keep your
Country small
Your people few
Your devices simple—
And even those for
Infrequent use.

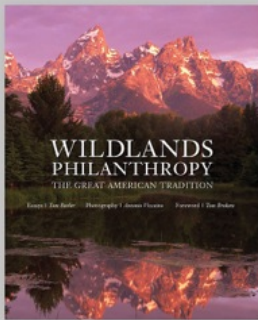
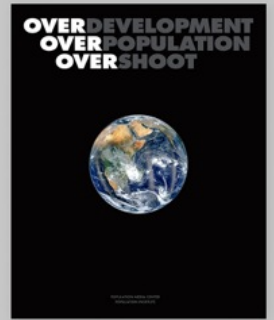
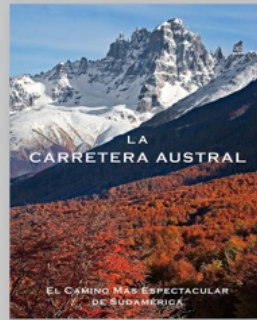
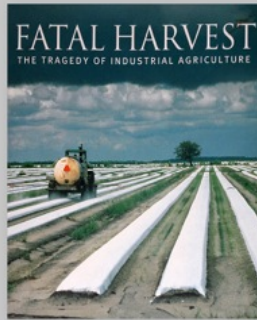
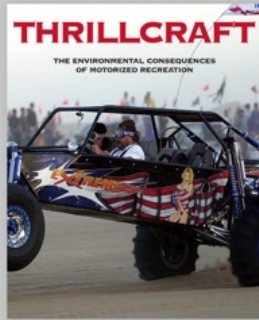
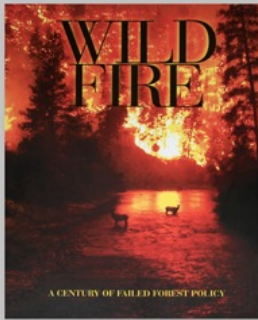
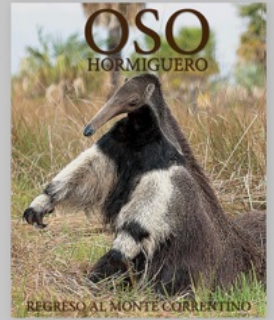
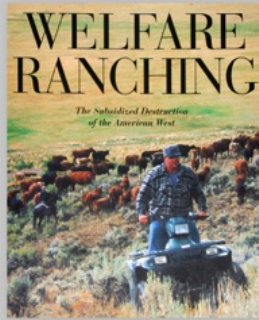
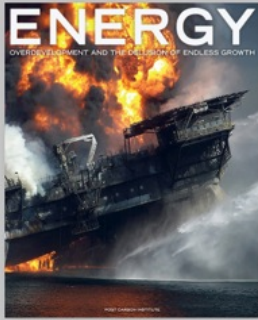
Let people measure life
By the meaning of death
And not go out of their way
To visit far off places.
With nowhere to travel
And little care for the display,
Great ships, fine carriages,
And shining weapons become
Mere relics of the past.

Let people recover
The simple life:
Reckoning by knotted cords,
Delighting in a basic meal,
Pleased with humble attire,
Happy in their homes,
Taking pleasure in their
Rustic ways.

So content are they
That nearby towns—
So close, the sound
Of dogs and roosters
Forms one chorus—
Folks grown gray with age
May pass away never having
Strayed beyond the village.⁴

Thank you.

⁴ Lao Tzu, "No Place to Visit: Or the Diminished Returns," in *The Power of Peace: New Perspectives in Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching*, trans. Thomas Early (Arcata, CA: Wild Earth, 2011), 55-56.



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