SYSTEMIC ACTIVISM
IN A POLARISED WORLD

DISCUSSION PAPER
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INTRODUCTION

We created the Smart CSOs Lab six years ago with a thirst for knowledge and for finding truth and wisdom. Many people in activism and beyond hold strong and diverse views about how to achieve change and what solutions and visions can make life on Earth better for everyone. When theories of change appear to be dogmatic and stand in contradiction to each other, not all of them can be right. Our aim since the very beginning was to provide clarity on theories of change, strategy and visions to tackle global systemic problems like climate change and inequality and to create greater understanding about effective leverage points for systemic change. We apply a complexity science perspective, connecting state-of-the-art knowledge about dynamic systems from a variety of disciplines and scientific fields.

We have translated our findings into tools and learning formats and have connected civil society leaders and activists to spur learning about how to work in ways that are supportive to catalyse a Great Transition and tackle systemic crises. Our success is that these ideas and new practices have spread widely.

But a fundamental shift at the level of the global economic system cannot be planned due to its complex and dynamic nature. The Great Transition is a possibility and not a prediction. It is a big action experiment, a continuous learning process. The journey continues. Currently, as part of the Pathways to the Great Transition project, we are developing new knowledge via experimental practical projects in order to show how civil society actors, funders and grassroots activists can apply knowledge about complex systems in more concrete ways and become more successful in catalysing systems change.

Moreover, we aim to continue unpacking current activism approaches and strategies — especially those that explicitly aim at achieving deeper systemic change — and assess if the assumptions behind theories of change and visions stand up to scrutiny.

For this, it is as important to develop a good understanding of the political context as it is to learn about the dynamics of activism and its role in the changing political climate. The world has changed dramatically over the last six years (since the Smart CSOs Lab began to operate). The rise of nationalism and authoritarian governments poses a threat to liberal democracies, and the possibility of a regression into dark times can’t be excluded.

Part of this political dynamic is the rise of social media as the primary source for news and information for many people, including activists. It exacerbates a phenomenon that isn’t new: “our tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms our pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities”. This results in ideological echo chambers. The less we engage with the arguments of our political opponent, the less we understand them and the less likely it is that we can agree on something with the opponent. The space for democratic compromises and agreements shrinks, while polarisation and extremism increase and might ultimately give way to authoritarian regimes.

But the Great Transition cannot take shape inside an ideological echo chamber in this increasingly polarised world. If at some point systemic activists want to become politically successful, their ideas need to appeal to and be shared by people who are different from them. The current polarisation has to be stopped, and new spaces for democratic dialogue focussed on our common shared challenges have to emerge. These have to be spaces of reason where good ideas from across the political spectrum are listened to and taken into consideration.

To be faithful to the Smart CSOs Lab’s original purpose of finding wisdom and truth, we have to break out of our own ideological echo chambers.

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With this spirit in mind, with this gathering we want to revitalise Hannah Arendt’s idea of the agora, a public space where people come together, talk, listen, argue, agree, compete, show, and see the world they share. We need to come together as people and evolve culturally to create a flourishing future within the means of our planet.

Many people from across the political spectrum share a sense that the world as we know it is coming to an end. Most people understand that tackling climate change will mean big changes to the way we live and how our economies are run. Globalisation is under attack from the left and from the right — few would disagree that the economic system has to change to tackle inequality. And to quote a recent article in the largely libertarian magazine Quilette, “few people find a world of impersonal cities connected by finance and run by decaying municipalities to be inspiring. If the entire world is being sculpted through capital to reflect the West, we must reconsider our priorities — the West is in a state of stagnation and atrophy, as unlimited global capital has in many ways taken our culture as far as it can go. The annual reiterations of Star Wars and an increasingly niche literary scene reflect repetition, exhaustion and pretentiousness as our main outlets of creative expression.” The dogmatic attitude that people we dislike and disagree with are incapable of contributing to the future will only cripple our ability to engage with reality. Instead, can we be open to questioning our long-held beliefs and truly listen to diverse points of view and perspectives about systems change?

The ambition for the Agora is to learn from the best ideas and truths from women and men across the political spectrum and from the best knowledge and wisdom in science, history, and cultural heritage.

A puzzle of the next system and the pathways to get there will start to emerge from the complementary and converging elements of our individual imaginaries of the future and theories of change. Questions and tensions will provide for further exploration and learning.

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The Agora is based on two premises. The first is that there are different visions about the future we want to live in, that there are different understandings about how change happens, that there are different moral preferences and that there are different ideologies and belief systems that shape our thinking. The second is that it is worth listening to and trying to understand these different ideas and perspectives and be open to learn from them. Holding on to an ideology in a self-righteous way doesn’t lead to progress. Being open to engaging in dialectics with people we disagree with might help us to learn something we didn’t know or hadn’t thought about. It is the way to approach truth and wisdom and to find common ground based on shared interests and values.

As a way to give some impulse to the Agora discussions, we have made an attempt to identify a number of tension points and questions that might deserve some more attention and focus. The assumption is that these are crucial issues to clarify for the design of strategies and approaches to systems change, especially in the current political climate. The hope is that among the participants at the Agora there will be different views, knowledge and perspectives about these questions and that there will be enriching dialectics.

1 SHAKE UP THE SYSTEM AND START THE REVOLUTION?

Before and after the last US elections, leftist Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek declared that if he had been able, he would have voted for Trump. “In this situation in which we are now, only some kind of a shake-up can save us,” he said. Similarly, before the Brexit vote British writer and intellectual Owen Jones sympathized with the idea of a Lexit, a left version of Brexit, as a way to shake up the EU. These were only two voices of many who believed that the status quo of politics needs such a radical shake-up that it would be worth taking on the risks inherent to these political choices instead of continuing with the current neoliberal establishment. These voices are quieter now that the negative impacts stemming from the Trump administration and the Brexit process are clearly visible. So far it looks more like a strong wave of authoritarianism and nationalism is on its way rather than the beginning of a socialist revolution.

And still more recently, during the Catalonia crisis of October 2017, there were narratives diffused by leftist activists who supported the secession of Catalonia from Spain in order to become another step towards the (desired?) breakdown of the EU and of the Western liberal model of democracy altogether.

QUESTION FOR THE AGORA

From everything we know in 2018, can such narratives and strategies aimed at system collapse in any way be part of a portfolio of strategies for the Great Transition?

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3 | Žižek: Electing Trump will ‘shake up’ the system” (16 Nov 2016)

4 | Owen Jones, “The left must put Britain’s EU withdrawal on the agenda” (14 Jul 2015)
   http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/14/left-reject-eu-greece-eurosceptic
Since Brexit and the election of Trump there has been an on-going discussion about the origins of the rise of authoritarianism and nationalism in most Western democracies. Despite much analysis there is no consensus about the deeper causes. So which are the root causes of this situation? Here are some possible explanations:

THE STAGNATING MIDDLE CLASSES IN ADVANCED ECONOMIES

On a global level, the rise of the middle class over the last three decades has been unprecedented: 3.2 billion people, or 42 percent of the total world population, are now in the global middle class. Whereas in advanced economies like the US and Japan, the middles classes have practically not benefitted at all from global economic growth during this time span (also known as the elephant curve, see graph). In many cases their standards of living have declined. They are the losers of globalisation mainly because manufacturing jobs moved to countries with lower wages. For many scholars, Donald Trump and Brexit were only two visible manifestations spurred in part by the revolt of the middle classes in rich countries.5

Many people fear the consequences of globalisation without necessarily being hit by it economically. Many feel rather pessimistic about the future. Especially in smaller towns and villages, neoliberalism has led to the loss of shops, the local post office, the savings bank and other institutions, and young people leave in search of work. Local communities lose their collective rhythm and their rituals. Many people who live in these places value stability, order and being rooted in a local community and fear losing much of what they value. They also fear that high levels of immigration might mean further change that they see won’t be for their benefit. They yearn to regain a sense of stability, identity and home. British journalist David Goodhart calls them the somewheres. “The anywheres are the metropolitan, well-travelled, better-educated elite; somewheres are the harder folk from the provinces who have never lost their sense of place or identity, whose decent concerns have been ignored.”6 The somewheres are the people who voted for Brexit and for far-right parties in many European countries.

FEAR AND DISORIENTATION IN A GLOBALISED WORLD


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To say that political correctness played a major role in Trump’s victory is often dismissed as a phantom of the right. But according to a recent poll, “71% of Americans believe that political correctness has done more to silence important discussions our society needs to have.” To “Trump won because he convinced a great number of Americans that he would destroy political correctness.” One phenomenon that has certainly contributed to this perception is that words are increasingly seen as violence and that the perception of which words or ideas constitute violence is constantly expanding. This so-called concept creep describes how, for example, what today is perceived as racism goes far beyond the original meaning of racism. Today it’s common among leftists to call someone racist if they express an idea that would formerly just have been seen as conservative. According to recent polls in the US, “when asked how they feel about talking politics, […] every single conservative respondent raised the issue of being called racist.” Similarly, in Germany, voters of the rising far-right AFD party often express feeling stigmatised as xenophobic for even raising the slightest concern about the many refugees that entered the country in 2015.

Professor Mark Lilla from Columbia University believes that identity politics played an important role in Trump’s victory. Identity politics focuses on respecting one another in our differences rather than asking us to cease noticing those differences. In his much discussed article, “The End of Identity Liberalism”, he argued that the identity politics on the left “has encourages white, rural, religious Americans to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored.” Instead, he suggests that “we must relearn to speak to citizens as citizens and to frame our appeals — including the ones to benefit particular groups — in terms of principles that everyone can affirm.”

Social media, its filter bubbles and the amplifying effect these technologies have on individual extreme incidents from the other end of the political spectrum contributes to the growing polarisation and extremism on both sides. This is the age of outrage according to moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt.

Is the above a good summary of the deeper forces that drive political polarisation? And if so, to what extent are current activist approaches a force for better or for worse in this situation?

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3 IS INTERSECTIONALITY A SOLUTION OR A PROBLEM?

These days there is clearly an increase in narratives on systemic change that go along with terms such as fighting power, fighting patriarchy, fighting white privilege and fighting intersectional oppressions.\(^1\)

Advocates of intersectionality argue that oppressions of race, sex and gender etc. often overlap (multiple forms of discrimination) and need to be thought through and fought together. According to the scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw\(^2\), who originally coined the term in 1989, it is important to understand that historical inequalities and oppressions that discriminate against women overlap with historical injustices against black people and therefore hit black women hardest. Accordingly, it was important to link the fights for justice, to join forces. This seems to be the reason that the concept became so successful. It became a strategic argument for movement building across issues.

The proponents of intersectionality are also deeply influenced by critical theory (with its origins in Marx and the Frankfurt School), which maintains that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation. The founders of critical theory developed the notion that by identifying the distorting effects power had on society’s beliefs and values, they could achieve a more accurate picture of the world. And when people saw things as they really were, they would liberate themselves. *Theory*, they suggested, always serves the interests of certain people: traditional theory is uncritical towards power and automatically serves the powerful while critical theory un-masks these interests and serves the powerless. Critical theory underpins most thinking in today’s gender, feminist and race studies. Intersectional theory argues that the systems we live in were shaped and are still controlled by Western white men, by systems of patriarchy, systems that continue to oppress women, people of colour and other marginalised groups.

Many critics of intersectional movements don’t deny the value of discussing and understanding overlapping discriminations and inequalities. Nor do they deny the existence of oppressions and injustices among women and people of colour or that it can be useful to see society and its belief systems through the lens of power. However, some strong concerns have been brought up against the ideas and the culture that unfolds in movements that take intersectionality into their hearts:

**DIVISIVENESS**

There is the oversimplification of dividing the world between good and bad people, between oppressors and oppressed, thereby ignoring that the world is much more complex than that. Historical injustices and oppressions due to colour or sex cannot be resolved by reversing the situation and collectivising the blame and responsibility again based and colour and sex. It creates new divisions instead of bringing justice and creating healing.

**POST-MODERNISM/ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM**

Intersectionality bears the — not always explicit — assumption that all hierarchies and inequalities are the consequence of persisting systems of oppression. This is dogmatic, and it refuses to even consider the possibility of other factors coming into play.

Intersectionality movements see the world through a lens of power and privilege. They are highly influenced by a post-modern perspective

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based on the conviction that science is a socially constructed ideology of the dominant classes, colonizers, and hegemonic interests.

No doubt, social construction is real, and where science is dominantly created by Western white men, implicit biases in scientific outcomes can be expected. More diversity of gender, race and cultural background in science is needed, and the perspectives of those who suffer from discrimination are important to defining the problems and finding socially robust solutions.

But the academic method of judging claims by the strengths of their arguments cannot be substituted by the view many social justice activists hold, that knowledge about all ethical questions pertaining to oppression is accessible only through personal experience. For them the members of an oppressed group are infallible in what they say about the oppression faced by that group. But people who belong to oppressed groups are just people, with thoughts ultimately as fallible as anyone else's.

To believe that the scientific method can be substituted by something like an oppressed person’s truth is a tragedy because scientific knowledge can be very useful for creating a better and more just world. For instance, research in psychology and evolutionary biology can help debunk the idea that differences between the sexes are mainly the result of persisting patriarchy and domination. For example, in the most gender-equal countries like Sweden gender differences in occupational choices are higher than in less gender-equal countries, and that fact is difficult to explain using a lens of oppression. Instead, the research here points towards differences in psychological traits between sexes that lead to different interests and career choices. With an understanding of the role evolution has played in our current reality, we might conclude that equality of opportunity is often a better goal than equality of outcome. We could have a more useful conversation about how we want to retool our culture in an evolutionarily aware way.

Similarly, a historical analysis of racial inequality in the United States and other countries would help us to focus more on the long-term consequences of slavery rather than assuming that all remaining racial inequalities are a result of systemic racism and oppressive power structures. It could help us to see it as an important societal responsibility to identify solutions to this historical injustice. The focus could shift towards solutions like big government investments (e.g. infrastructure and schools) in historically deprived African American communities with the ultimate aim of creating equal opportunities for children in these communities.

**CONFLICTING MORALITIES**

The theory of intersectionality and critical theory bear the implicit assumption that the values of social justice and liberation from perceived oppressions are universal values. However, this is not entirely true. Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt developed a theory based on the moral diversity found across many cultures. This theory proposes that the wide variety of moral systems governing human societies are all based on a common set of six moral foundations shared by all humans. The research shows, for example, that for people on the left, empathy for those who are suffering and the willingness to help them is the highest moral good. Conservatives also value care and compassion, but they value respect for authority and loyalty for their own group just as much. In simple terms, a conservative will share the universality of the values of social justice as long as the proposed changes don’t endanger the social order. Haidt believes that all moral foundations have been essential tools that enabled the success of human civilisation.

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For a summary of these ideas and links to further reading, visit http://www.moralfoundations.org
QUESTIONS FOR THE AGORA

To what extent are intersectionality narratives and strategies supportive of a positive deep transition to a peaceful and ecologically sustainable world with high levels of wellbeing and higher level of equality?

Is the type of liberation that intersectional movements pursue exactly what is needed to liberate the world from oppressive ideologies and structures, thereby giving positive impulses to the Great Transition?

Or are the above valid criticisms? Does intersectionality increase polarisation and divisions in our societies?

Are there more useful and accurate ways to analyse power structures in the system, which types of power are important, and what all this means for our theories of change and strategies for the Great Transition?

4 ARE TODAY’S MOVEMENTS MAKING THINGS WORSE?

Today’s movements are becoming ever more sophisticated. Supporting organisations like NEON, Movement Generation or Rhize offer training and advice to activists who are keen to develop stronger movements. They help them to use state-of-the-art techniques to develop strong strategy, powerful collective stories and empowering participation and leadership. Blue State Digital, the company that helped run Obama’s 2008 digital presidential campaign, more recently supported the Catalan grassroots organisation Assemblea Nacional Catalana (ANC) in creating a movement that has brought more than a million people to the streets of Barcelona each of the last 5 years to campaign for Catalan independence, leading to a major political crisis in the EU in autumn of 2017. A major success of a certain kind.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is often cited by progressives as an admirable case that we should learn from for systemic change strategies. But is this true? According to Mark Lilla, it isn’t: “Black Lives Matter is a textbook example of how not to build solidarity. There’s no denying that by publicizing and protesting police mistreatment of African-Americans, the movement mobilized supporters and delivered a wake-up call to every American with a conscience.”16 Yet, Lilla believes, BLM built a general indictment of the American society and strongly played the identity card and thereby played into the hands of the Republican right.

This is the general problem with enemy narratives. If, as the case may be, Black Lives Matter contributed to polarisation, then the same is true in the case of the Catalan ANC. Catalan society is now more divided than ever, with most of the population positioned on the extreme sides (for/against independence) in almost equal proportion.

Human evolution offers a good explanation for why these enemy narratives work so fantastically well and are at the same time so destructive: we’re programmed for tribalism. Intersectional movements at US campuses are a striking example of almost cult-like tribalism. According to Jonathan Haidt, “a funny thing happens when you take young human beings, whose minds evolved for tribal warfare and us/them thinking, and you fill those minds full of binary dimensions. You tell them that one side of each binary is good and the other is bad. You turn on their ancient

16 Mark Lilla, The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics (2017)
tribal circuits, preparing them for battle. Many students find it thrilling; it floods them with a sense of meaning and purpose.”

Hannah Arendt believed in the importance of people joining forces for political goals. It was a crucial element of her vision of democracy and her positive concept of power. But she was also wary of the potentially destructive power social movements can have: “A characteristic of totalitarianism [...] is the assimilation of process and movement into the very fabric of social and political life.”

In the US, the Civil Rights Movement was ultimately successful because Martin Luther King and his fellow activists framed their goals on the basis of equal rights and opportunity that ultimately most people could identify with. You can’t win people for your project by calling them racist.

Questions for the Agora

To what extent are enemy narratives in movements creating more harm than good?

How can movements become more evolutionarily aware and sensitive about the destructive elements of tribalism?

What characteristics make movements become a constructive part of the Great Transition and which are counterproductive?

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18 | Finn Bowring, “Hannah Arendt and the hierarchy of human activity” (7 Sep 2017)
   http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/hannah-arendt-hierarchy-human-activity
How can truly systemic activist strategies for our times look like?

In 2017 we already saw a number of initiatives emerging that all aim to work against political polarisation and social divide. Maybe the most prominent one is More in Common, an organisation co-founded by Brendan Cox, the husband of the late British MP Jo Cox who was murdered shortly before the Brexit vote and who was passionate about promoting more societal solidarity and cohesion. The organisation works to continue the issues close to her heart and does so in several countries: the UK, Germany, France and the US.

In June 2017, the German weekly paper Die Zeit connected thousands of people in Germany with opposing views on hot issues like immigration and helped them organise physical meetings to have a conversation and listen to each other. For this, they always selected two people with different views who lived near each other and helped them arrange a meeting. This helped to create a better understanding.

The Echo Chamber Club is a British initiative that wants to help people get out of their ideological echo chambers, where they only hear viewpoints that already agree with their own opinion. It does this by compiling a weekly newsletter that contains articles from news sites with diverse viewpoints that they would usually not read.

So what more can campaigning organisations and activist networks do to advance their agendas without contributing to societal polarisation?

Here are a few ideas:

- We urgently need to reduce our moral certainty and cultivate generosity of spirit. “The ancients knew that we don’t react to the world as it is; we react to the world as we construct it in our own minds. They also knew that in the process of construction we are overly judgmental and outrageously hypocritical: ‘Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.’ (Matthew 7:3–5)”

- In order to advance big social change, we have to convince people different from us, which includes people who don’t necessarily share our same moral intuitions. This is where it is so fundamental to understand the moral intuitions of others that you need to bring on board. It is important that we not exaggerate the claim we make, that it’s based on a fair and accurate assessment so that others who are not necessarily sharing the same passion as oneself can see the value of the call and can develop trust in our ideas and political proposals. This also includes the need to acknowledge the progress made on the issues we care about. Much activist rhetoric on feminism, anti-racism or gender rights sounds like there hasn’t been any progress on these issues since the 1950s, which obviously isn’t true and which most people know.

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We should promote critical thinking and show openness for learning. The best solutions and ideas will emerge through continuous critical thinking and dialogue. If we allow for opposing ideas to be voiced rather than shutting down debate, it is much easier to enter into dialectics and convince others if our argument is better. This is where excessive political correctness and too much ideological cohesion of your movement can be counterproductive. Dogmatism won’t lead anywhere good.

All these are important initiatives and actions, which if applied more widely can help reduce extremism and create a better, more democratic world. But none of these actions really tackles the first two root causes of polarisation discussed earlier in this document: the negative economic and the cultural impacts from a global economic model that has many losers and, most importantly, that destroys the very natural foundations life on Earth is depending on.

This is where truly systemic activism has to come in.

An important way to get started on this agenda is at the very local neighbourhood level via community organising. Bringing people together, identifying everyone’s concerns and starting to explore the systemic connections can be an important first step within the spirit of Hannah Arendt’s idea of the agora. The process in itself can already be a great cure to one of the biggest illnesses of our time: loneliness. Most people in cities don’t know their neighbours anymore. Community organising is a way to get to know each other, maybe the most important step towards healing.

A promising version of community organising is what transformation researcher Davide Brocchi and others first started in 2013 in a neighbourhood in Cologne, Germany. It is now spreading to other cities in Germany and beyond. It’s called Tag des Guten Lebens (Day of the Good Life). It’s basically a long-term process of community organising but with a yearly hook of one day where residents come together to create a future-oriented neighbourhood. It’s a day of encounters and togetherness. The streets are closed from traffic and neighbours, and associations and initiatives as well as artists use the space as laboratories for ideas and joint action. They listen to music, test their plant knowledge, plant trees or discuss local development plans. As a result people start to organise politically and they get to know many of their neighbours.

**QUESTIONS FOR THE AGORA**

**Is there a chance to see the dissatisfaction of the so-called somewheres as an opportunity for a progressive systems change agenda?**

**Is there untapped potential in people who are currently attracted to authoritarianism and nationalism to become part of a progressive systems change movement of the Great Transition?**

**Can the concepts of home (Heimat in German) and the desire to preserve tradition and rituals be reconciled with a progressive universalist agenda?**

**What narratives (beyond us vs. them) can speak to us of renewal and restoration and help us navigate the Great Transition?**

21 Website for Tag des Guten Lebens
http://www.tagdesgutenlebens.de
In a recent essay Paul Raskin wrote: “In our time of unprecedented interdependence and existential risk, we face a common predicament and an uncertain destiny. As the global quandary deepens and awareness spreads, the conviction that root-and-branch social change is needed to circumvent perils and seize opportunities draws more and more of us. Reaching a flourishing future requires the revitalization of the basis of planetary civilization, a Great Transition in culture and institutions.” The Anthropocene requires an effective governance system for the global commons: the Earth’s atmosphere, the oceans, the forests, biodiversity etc. The UN institutions are ineffective on this matter because national governments continue to put their short-term national interests first rather than developing the notion of shared human interest as a primary lens. One core element of the vision of the Great Transition is that humanity has to evolve and develop some level of shared identity of planetary citizens, a much stronger sense that we’re all in the same boat and that we need to decide our destiny together.

While that is still a valid and urgent task, at the same time we’re seeing a strong desire in many places to regain a sense of cultural, local or regional rootedness, of collective rhythm and home. Based on the reality of the planetary boundaries, a next economic system will also have to prime more regional economic exchange of goods rather than continuing on the current path of globalisation. A transport system fuelled 100% by renewable energy will carry less people and goods around the globe, with unknown consequences on relationships and communities.

**QUESTION FOR THE AGORA**

How to resolve the tension between the desire and need to regain local rootedness and the need to develop some degree of planetary identity and come together as humanity, acknowledge that we are in the same boat and tackle our global problems together?

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MUNICIPALISM, A KEY LEVERAGE POINT FOR THE GREAT TRANSITION?

Cities are the place where democracy was born, where citizens can discuss politics in physical meetings and where mayors and city governors are more likely to be in touch with the real problems people have and try to solve them rather than being focused on ideological battles marked by party lines. Many cities have shown leadership in reducing carbon emissions where most governments have been slow or inactive. Cities have also developed alliances with other cities around the world (UCLG, ICLEI, C40 etc.) to share best practices and together learn how to confront shared challenges.

In 2013, the political theorist Benjamin Barber argued that mayors should rule the world. Barber’s bold statement is based on the idea that modern cities are the incubators for problem-solving while national governments are doomed to fail, locked in the old national paradigm unfit for our age of global interdependence. An informal parliament of cities, perhaps several hundred strong, would in effect ratify a shift in power and political reality that, he argues, has already taken place. It would lead to a miracle of civic glocality promising pragmatism instead of politics, innovation rather than ideology and solutions in place of sovereignty.

More recently, activists around the world have felt inspired by what happened in Barcelona, where a group of activists and progressive academics built a citizen platform called Barcelona en Comú in order to compete in the local elections in May 2015. The citizen list came out first in the elections and their leader Ada Colau was elected mayor of Barcelona. Similar platforms won the elections in other Spanish cities including Madrid. Before, during the severe economic crisis in Spain, Ada Colau had gained wide respect when she led a movement that fought for justice for thousands of Spanish families who had lost their homes due to their inability to pay the mortgage and a legal framework that favoured the banks and left the families literally on the street. The PAH movement (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca) gained major public and political attention and led to improved protection of mortgage holders.

Barcelona en Comú won the elections due to people’s frustration with wide-spread party corruption, high levels of (especially youth) unemployment and rising inequality and the hope for a new leadership from a woman (Ada Colau) who had already proven her commitment and integrity. In the run-up of the elections they also successfully combined an open participatory process with a skilful negotiation where several existing parties integrated themselves into the new platform. Barcelona en Comu’s fresh style and support from well-known academics from the city’s universities helped them win many votes from people whose political views were more centrist. These people also hoped that the activist platform would be committed to working against the selling out of the city to the global tourism industry.

The fact that a group of activists with a leftist alternative vision came to power in Barcelona quickly created an unprecedented excitement among activists across the world. It inspired many activists to try similar processes in other cities and places. Barcelona en Comu has since then been invited to give countless talks in many countries, and in 2017 it organised the Fearless Cities summit where progressive leaders and representatives from many cities around the world shared experiences and discussed ways to create a global municipalist movement.

The potential of cities to provide impulses to tackling systemic problems at the local level should not be underestimated and the collaboration of cities across borders in accordance with Barber’s vision seems to be a valuable contribution. However, if funders and activist networks want to truly learn from the Barcelona case study, they should do so with a critical lens.

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On the positive side, at the beginning of her term of office, Ada Colau’s government demonstrated a high level of professionalism. Had they been less experienced and had they been ideologically dogmatic, they might have turned the city into chaos, which was what many on the right expected or hoped for. Instead, they were able to negotiate compromises with other parties to move forward a progressive agenda on city planning, cycling, the promotion of solidarity and proximity economy and other areas. They also made steps to at least slow down the increase of tourism, a major concern of most citizens. But much of this is not so different to what former social democrat city governments would have done or had already initialised.

Barcelona’s economy is highly dependent on global tourism. Air traffic is increasing dramatically. It is clear that changing this completely unsustainable business model and trajectory is very difficult and cannot be done by a city alone. Nevertheless, it seems Barcelona en Comú has so far missed the opportunity to start a conversation about what a future with reduced air traffic would mean for the city’s economy.

But what seems most problematic is that Barcelona en Comú has not managed to create a more inclusive discourse that might attract more people to their politics. Instead of pursuing Barber’s idea of municipalist pragmatism, too much time and discourse has ultimately been wasted in politics of symbolism and ideological warfare, for example, by removing the bust of the Spanish king from the town hall or renaming streets named by former royals. A sharp anti-elite and anti-central government discourse that was successful during the election campaign was maintained since then, but it seems outdated when one is in power and has in fact become the new elite. A strong narrative of identity politics is also increasingly part of the discourse of Barcelona en Comú and other actors from the emerging global municipalist movement (with the potential negative effects discussed in this paper).

Finally, Ada Colau and her fellows also navigated badly through the Catalan crisis and lost a coalition partner. They stand now without the necessary allies and majority in the municipal parliament to be able to continue implementing their programme. A re-election seems increasingly unlikely.

**QUESTIONS FOR THE AGORA**

To what extent is Barber’s vision of a global informal government of cities a solution to the global governance problem or is there something missing?

Emmanuel Macron recently laid out his vision for the European Union, which attracted much attention. Is there a need for systemic activists to constructively engage at that level as well as a way to promote local/municipal action in harmony with stronger European governance? How compatible is such a vision of city leadership with a vision of a European Republic with equal rights for all European citizens?

To what extent are Barcelona en Comú and the emerging municipal movement striking the right tone with a sharp anti-elite, anti-central government and identity politics narrative? Should that be a narrative to follow by other municipal platforms or does it require a more inclusive and pragmatic discourse and politics (as Barber suggests)?

What is a realistic vision of more participative democracy at the municipal level? What exactly defines the new politics that distinguish actors like Barcelona en Comú from ‘old politics’?

How should municipal actors like Barcelona deal with core issues like their economic dependence from global air traffic? Or is this not an issue that local actors can get involved in?
The majority of systems change agents agree that the idea of *homo economicus* does not correspond to how human beings evolved biologically (genetically and culturally). There is also little doubt that our obsession with economic growth and consumerism are social constructions that evolved over the last century and are unfit for our era of ecological crises.

A range of alternative proposals for economic systems that would create human wellbeing within ecological limits exists in the niches of academia and activist circles. For instance, prominent are the proposals branded with the term *degrowth*, which focus on a decline of economic production and consumption in the Global North while maximising wellbeing within ecological limits. Many proposals within *degrowth* promote localised economies and a shift from individual autonomy towards collective economic models like consumer and producer cooperatives. Proposals also include a maximum for how much people should be allowed to earn and consume.

Another set of ideas gathers around the term *commons*. The activists and researchers in this movement promote a form of self-organisation and cooperation (*commoning*) between people to regain or protect free access to cultural or natural resources (the commons). Currently, these *commons* (e.g. knowledge, internet or land) are often *enclosed* by market and state actors and so cannot be freely accessed. Enclosure increases and perpetuates inequality. The *commons* are about a future economy where self-organised production and consumption substitutes the current capitalist corporate economy.

No doubt, many ideas and experiments around *commons*, *degrowth* etc. are important contributions to the Great Transition. However, the best solutions and ideas will always emerge through continuous critical thinking and dialectics. Therefore, the premises that a new system should be based upon should be put under further scrutiny and should be discussed without dogmas. Here’s a start:

**QUESTIONS FOR THE AGORA**

There is a powerfully positive story to be told about capitalism, unique in human history in its dynamism and creation of wealth (and also wellbeing). So, are there positive elements in the current capitalist market economy that we risk losing if we move towards a non-capitalist economy?

Capitalist economy has encroached on many previously non-market-based spheres (and continues to do so). Are there domains or sectors where a capitalist, market system makes sense and others where it makes less sense?

Do we risk losing the positive entrepreneurial spirit and dynamism but also stability and resilience of the current system?

There is much innovation in the current economy that doesn’t produce net value but that we probably want to keep and even spur. How can this work?

Are there inherent characteristics in cooperative enterprises, non-competitive models like commons-based production and other non-capitalist non-market based cooperative / collaborative economic models, that lead to less (good) innovation, or is this a non-legitimate and non-evidence-based myth created by the defenders of the current system (the incumbents with vested interests)?
If we want to preserve institutions like the public health system and the pension system in a post-growth economy, do we have a coherent theory and plan for how this will be possible?

If the market and its highly efficient mechanism to allocate resources is something we should keep, how would a market-based system look like that is entirely focused on fulfilling human needs without crossing the planetary boundaries? And where can markets create value, and where do they create more harm than good?

In the current system human needs are met through market-based transactions, through state-citizen interaction and (simply) through human-to-human transaction without money being paid. A common element may be (expected) reciprocity. What could a system look like where reciprocity is not money-based?

What role does human biology play in this? We have evolved biologically (genetically and culturally) and have a precondition that cannot be ignored. According to moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, humans have evolved to cooperate in teams and to compete with other teams. We’re both competitive and cooperative. Is there a case to be made that we need to search for a system with a new balance between the individual and the collective, between the competitive and collaborative and between self-interest and the work for the collective good, a system that acknowledges our stage of evolution with a view on the next stage of evolution?

Is it important to avoid ideological warfare like the one between capitalism and Marxism/communism? If so, how?

Or in other words, what non-growth, non-
\textit{homo-economicus}, non-consumerist models can democratic majorities find comfort with?
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