

Communal and ecological practices to achieve degrowth housing

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Abstract

Drawing on personal experiences and case studies of four residential eco-communities, this paper discusses the potential and limits of collective living to drive the environmental, cultural and political developments necessary to achieve degrowth. Twin Oaks (Virginia (US) <http://www.twinoaks.org/>), Ganas (New York City (US), Commonground Cooperative (Seymour, Australia — <https://www.groupwork.com.au/commonground.html>) and Round-the-Bend Conservation Co-operative (<http://www.roundthebend.org.au/>) case studies illustrate different types of governance and ownership models. The most radical and collectively sufficient, Twin Oaks, shows greatest potential for achieving degrowth. A main theme is the extent to which using money limits capacity to degrow.



Left: Take some Twin Oaks’ berries — <https://funologist.org/category/sharing/>

Right: Commonground — <http://www.common-ground.org.au/community>

Presenter

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Everyone needs to live somewhere. Everyone needs some place to call home. 'Home' is a niche in the built environment but, more particularly, a set of place-based relationships. The household and neighbourhood community are integrated socio-material frames for living.

I am an Australian who has lived mainly in rural areas, in the south-eastern state of Victoria, and for extended periods in the state capital Melbourne. I have lived in many types of household arrangements: a child in a nuclear family and with extended family relatives; in a boarding school; as a young adult with a working aunt and her two adult children; for short periods in different joint ('share' or 'cooperative') households; and for very long periods with two different partners as a couple household without children. I have been party to numbers of informal and formal tenancies and six instances of home ownership. Most of the housing was below average in real estate value and condition, and household members followed modest anti-consumerist household practices. However, the households were in consumerist and market-oriented neighbourhood communities. It was possible to live simply in these socio-material environments without having many positive influences on wider degrowth practices; my living conditions and living styles were considered a matter of choice.

Unusually, I spent several years living in a tin shed in the middle of the bush with a partner who was more connected with the 'real' capitalist world than I at that time. I had become 'allergic to the twentieth century', exquisitely sensitive to chemicals and had severe food intolerances. I became semi-comatose when a car came within 50 meters of me simply due to the petrol fumes. I was forced to seek refuge in extremely basic living conditions that socially isolated me. Some of that story is told elsewhere (Nelson 2004, 2005), suffice to say that no one saw it as a matter of choice, least of all me. Yet, having survived that experience, I am living proof — along with many others — that living extremely simply isn't harmful.

I came out of ten years in the wilderness thinking I had missed out and would never catch up. It only took a year or two to realise that the experience had proved many things to me that most people living in advanced capitalism still have not realised. Another world is urgently necessary. Another world is feasible. A totally different world. A better world based on social and environmental values, on degrowth principles and conduct. My experience living beyond capitalism made me convinced that another world was possible and that we could achieve such a transformation. I felt strong. I re-entered a world where capitalism makes people feel weak. They do not believe that they can manifest anything without the system that dominates them to their very core. I concluded that people often need to be able to observe and experience what a changed world might be like before they will support change.

Consequently, I spent one decade in non-traditional housing arrangements. In this paper, I discuss the potential and limits of collective living to drive the environmental, cultural and political developments necessary to achieve degrowth by drawing on these personal experiences of collective living in four residential eco-communities. All illustrate different types of governance and ownership models. I argue that the most radical and collectively sufficient Twin Oaks community in rural Virginia (US) has greatest potential for achieving degrowth.

First, I set out the challenge facing us if we want to be conventionally housed through the capitalist market. A home mortgage often means life-long indebtedness and high house prices can adversely impact on rents and stock for rent. Second, I discuss experiences living at the anarcho-communist and feminist Commonground Cooperative in rural Victoria (Seymour — <http://www.common-ground.org.au/community>), an all-under-one-roof living-working collective. Commonground was more focussed on social than environmental change. Third, I describe living at the less radical, more

environmentally-concerned Round the Bend Conservation Co-operative on the peri-urban fringe of Melbourne CBD, a 45-minute commute by car (<http://www.roundthebend.org.au/>). Fourth, I sketch the Ganas community of around 80 people who live in eight communally connected households in New York City (Staten Island — <http://www.ganas.org/>) where I spent three months in 2012. Fifth, I analyse working and living, in 2012, at Twin Oaks community (<http://www.twinoaks.org/>), which had inspired the establishment of Commonground. In conclusion, I argue that this final case most closely approximates where I think we need to go in terms of a degrowth future and how we might get there.

Mortgage debt and growth

This paper highlights the extent to which the dominance of monetary arrangements in our society limits our capacity to degrow in practice. The best place to start this argument is with the residential mortgage. Most people borrow money to buy their home. Owing hundreds of thousands of dollars, and tied to regular repayments of the principal debt and interest on the amount owing, means that people need a regular income to service their mortgage. Today, such debts often take in the order of 30 years to repay. Generally, that means that mortgagors are tied to work for a substantial monetary income for the best part of their working lives. People who work under such conditions are likely to become conservative, such debt drives growth, and home ownership is a crucial cog in the wheel of capitalism.

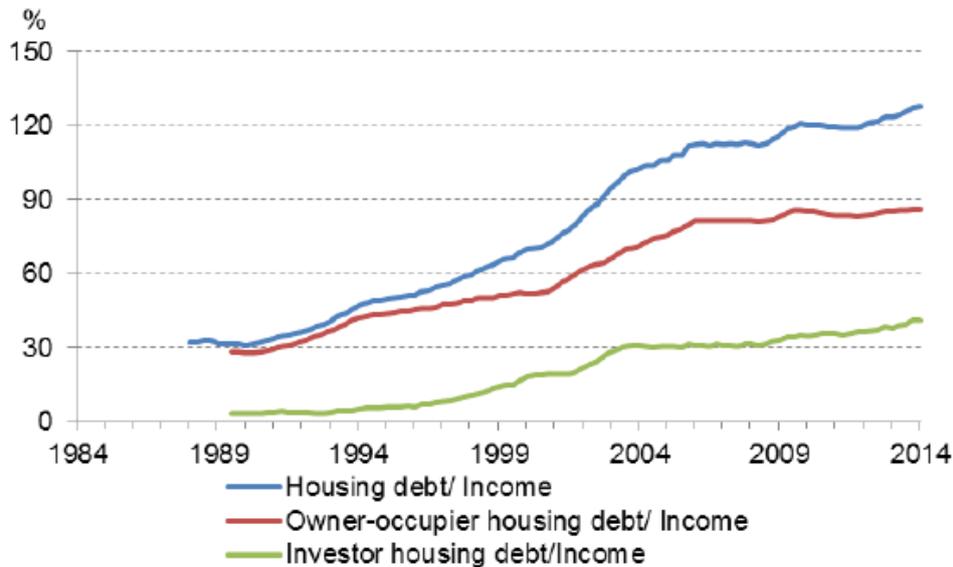
Furthermore, in most capitalist countries home ownership has become the major form of tenure and most owner-occupiers are mortgagors. Their impact on the real estate market, specifically the amount of credit they are prepared to borrow has a major influence on the level of house prices. Indeed, the collective impact of individual home purchasers' decisions are likely to be more significant than that of investors who purchase property to rent it out (Figure 1). Levels of rent tend to be a function of house prices, which can include mortgage costs (specifically interest rates), and associated costs such as house maintenance and council rates. In short, the housing market, the production of housing as a commodity, a housing industry that determines the style, size, quality and the environmental sustainability of housing and the role of established housing as an asset all make home ownership a potent force within capitalism. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was the housing debt triggered Global Financial Crisis in 2008, the aftermath of which we are still experiencing.

Indeed, household debt challenges have become worse during the recent decades of neoliberal reforms that reduced social housing and other affordable housing schemes and increased home ownership in many countries. In Australia we find that, in 1989, the average ratio of owner-occupier housing debt to disposable income — mainly attributable to home mortgage debt — was barely 30 percent whereas 25 years later, in 2014, it had tripled to almost 90 percent (Figure 1). This burden developed as a result of: a slowdown in the growth of wages (affecting the disposable income denominator); growth in demand for urban land increasing real estate values across the board; increased construction costs as standard dwellings increased in size and featured more 'smart', sustainability, convenience and leisure amenities; and rises in house prices well out of proportion to true costs as access to increasing amounts of credit drove up demand. All these factors are attributable to the play of ordinary market forces.

Even if we are not a capitalist and just want to get by as a worker, this example of how the capitalist system of production for trade works shows us how increasingly hard it has become to delink from the market and all the impacts of growth implicit in market economies. Even those of us who chose to live simply are influenced by the market through the minimal amount of work we chose to do and the modest housing we need to inhabit. At the same time the growth in production for the market uses a

dizzying quantity of resources, polluting and wasting and intensifying damage to Earth.

Figure 1: Household debt ratios in Australia (% Household disposable income)



Source: RBA statistics, Table E1; ABS 5206 Table 20

Source: Atalay et al. (2016, 7).

Where are we going? How might we get there?

There is a history of resistance and solidarity against this system. The degrowth movement is just one of the most potent examples of anti-capitalism in our contemporary world. Housing for degrowth is a very significant area for activism because it gives people an opportunity to develop more environmental practices in a supportive household where the politics of solidarity operate to support holistic change. Do not underestimate positive communal experiences in contributing to resistance.

My other presentation at this conference (Nelson 2016) argues from a theoretical perspective that the most direct and efficient form of degrowth requires us not only to go beyond capitalism but also to dispense with using money. Given that this paper serves as a practical illustration of the theoretical arguments in the other paper, it is relevant to briefly summarise those arguments. As-local-as-is-feasible production focusing on people's basic needs implies that future distribution is decided simultaneously with collectively agreeing on productive goals and ways of achieving them. Money has no place in such a degrowth strategy because grassroots political decision-making replace production for trade and market exchange. In non-monetary degrowth, reward for work is the security of having life-long basic needs met and continuous input in making decisions on local production and the terms of exchange (compacts) with as-local-as-feasible neighbour-producers. With personal but no private property, the entire Earth is commons with clear, efficient and universal principles and terms for commoning. Such a vision suggests that advancing non-monetary degrowth, consciously breaking with monetary production and exchange, is of crucial strategic significance.

Commonground

Commonground was established in 1984 by social workers who were disillusioned with patching up victims of our present system. They came to believe in system change and wanted to show that relationships and living practices could be beneficially different (<http://www.common-ground.org.au/about/>). The cooperative gained freehold title of 95 acres of rural bushland where the founders, friends, WHOOFs (Willing Helpers on Organic Farms) and other volunteers constructed simple and sustainable mud and corrugated iron buildings. Their legal arrangement meant that they could never sell or profit from re-selling the site and buildings on it. The site design for the 95 acres was created by co-ordinator of permaculture, David Holmgren (2009) who remained on as an advisor. Building plans were drawn up by a sympathetic Fitzroy-based architect with a view to affordable, communal and environmental criteria. Much of the building was supervised by a member of the famous Crystal Waters ecovillage in the north-eastern state of Queensland, which continues today with around 200 members (<http://crystalwaters.org.au/>).

Their vision was ‘one roof, one table and one purse’ (ANIC and SEACG 2001, 45) and they based their outreach work on offering a range of empowerment, financial, organisational and conflict resolution training and services to support and enhance social change organisations. During the time I lived there the Australian Non-Violence Network functioned from the cooperative. I assisted in delivering intensive weekend workshops on women’s empowerment. People and government, private and not-for-profit organisations paid for these courses, workshop spaces, facilitation, accommodation and meals on a sliding capacity-to-pay scale. Similarly, anyone could join the cooperative as a resident member or long-term visitor regardless of their financial status; their skills, values, relationship with current members and approach to everyday living were the key eligibility criteria. The process and conditions of joining and exiting were customised to each individual.

When I started living at Commonground, there were around 15 full-time residents mainly all members of the cooperative. All adults, whether they had partners living there or not had their own personal room for sleeping and other activities. Three children born on the commune were home-schooled but, during the time I was there, elected one-by-one to attend a local school instead. A baby was born while I was there. There was a modicum of collective sufficiency from potable water collected off the roof and filtered, the fruit and vegetable garden and chooks. But, partly because of all the workshops and other visitors, Commonground relied on supermarket shopping as well as a range of ad hoc arrangements with local farmers, say to buy fresh milk. We served vegetarian meals but fresh road kill of kangaroos and some other exceptions were made for those who ate meat, though non-vegetarian food was eaten privately and rarely. We shared a car that had been given to us free, we had a commune truck and some others had old bombs for personal use but freely shared them.

Commonground was governed through decisions made at a Monday morning assembly. With a comparatively small household it was relatively easy to set up the work schedule at that meeting. The work schedule covered buying, preparing, cooking and serving food, washing and drying the dishes, cleaning all the collective space — everything except for personal bedrooms, gardening, gathering and cutting wood, looking after children in and out of school hours and running the outreach operation, which sometimes meant dozens of people staying overnight for a few days at a time. Everyone was obliged to work four days a week. The other three days they could stay at Commonground or go somewhere else. While there was a principle of everyone doing a particular task in rotation and all being equally skilled at all the jobs, if you preferred one kind of activity over another — for instance, I liked cooking — you could often negotiate to be scheduled to do that more often.

The latter part of the Monday meeting was devoted to medium and long-term future proposals and plans. Commonground still runs big festivals. Sometimes there were frictions or tensions and controversial proposals made that would take a while to sort through. Like most collective living, Commonground ran on a basis of consensual decision-making with clear and fair protocol ruling discussions. Every effort was made to manifest a solution with maximum benefits for all concerned. Commonground has always been open to suggestions from interested non-members too. Short and long-stay visitors would part-take in the general assembly although some other meetings on certain topics were closed to all but full members.

In short, I found governance and work processes at Commonground a clear advance on other household and office environments that I'd experienced and enjoyed working collaboratively. The values stressed were quality of service, care of people, an affordable and modest lifestyle, tolerance and diversity, and care for the environment. Commonground won many visitors' and clients' hearts because they loved the meals and the vibrant community where free thinking and sound social values were respected. Most particularly, they liked the 'we can' attitude that Commonground represented and inspired, and found it infectious. They could dream and start planning to fulfil those dreams.

Thirty years ago certain sustainability features at Commonground were very hard to get through local planning and building regulations such as: a multi-household dwelling integrated with a hospitality, training and retreat venue organisation, mud pour infill walls, collecting rain water to use for drinking, and a hot water heating system connected to an old-style kitchen stove and laundry boiler. A composting toilet was constructed outside by university students as a demonstration project. Inside, bricks in toilet cisterns reduced water in each flush, there were big signs asking people to flush only as necessary, likewise to shower quickly. It is significant to list initiatives developed despite great resistance from bureaucracies back then are commonplace sustainability advice encouraged by council sustainability officers today. Thanks to the hippies and the communards of yesteryear, many of these developments happened despite the capitalist market and state not because of them.

However, there was a constant battle between those with socially-focused values and those arguing for: collective sufficiency; better networks and collaboration with organic farmers; more practical, environmentally-oriented crafts; zero use of chemicals for pests and weeds, in short, a heightened consciousness of environmental damage and immanent climate change. For instance, there was a temporary solution to bating mice of plague proportions when some volunteered, outside the ordinary work schedule, to set small wood and metal traps each night. Once caught — the tally ran to dozens some nights — we would drown them in a pail or our cooperative dam. The alternative risked baiting other kinds of wildlife, such as Tuans (tiny native marsupials), rambling in our roof cavity. Those worried about affordability had lots of concerns about the amount of time it took to do things like this in more environmentally sound ways and they perceived this time in terms of money. Use of organic food products that were more expensive and less affordable was another area of squabbling. Most conflicts ended up with the usual suspects divided into, on the one hand, socially affordable arguments and, on the other hand, environmental responsible criteria.

Round the Bend Conservation Cooperative

In the mid-1990s I moved to Round the Bend Conservation Cooperative, which started in 1971 when its founders bought 132 ha (325 acres) of Australian box-ironbark eucalypt forest to preserve it while

living there. The idea for a forest-based community evolved from discussions by campaigners of the 1960s who fought Country Fire Authority proposals to bulldoze their bushland and later, in the early 1970s prevented the Bend of Islands being flooded by the proposed Yarra Brae Dam. They were keen to demolish the myth that native forests were best kept as a pristine reserve — as then proposed by The Wilderness Society, still a prominent environmental organisation today. (Nelson 2001)

Cooperative ownership meant purchasing a share, which entitled a shareholder household to one of 32 sites. There are still just 22 sites built on today. I bought a share associated with a vacant site and built a small mud-brick house on it. Then, as today, there were around 50 adults and their children living there. The sites are small, enough for a house, a grey water system over which most develop a kitchen garden, and a water tank or more (there is no reticulated water or sewerage system to the property). The sites were decided on back in the early 1970s, along three tracks. The founders dug one-metre trenches and laid in communication and electrical cables underground along each of these tracks to service those sites. Later most of the dirt tracks were laid over with second hand household bricks in herringbone pattern and drainage ridges by a monthly half-day Sunday work parties.

The shares were well below market value for a comparable lot of land adjacent to the cooperative, and members had the benefit of jointly owning the 132 ha. However, members needed their own financial resources or compatible arrangements to purchase the land and cover building costs. This encouraged shareowners to self-build, often in stages. Most homes were made of mud-brick, timber and recycled materials. I managed to borrow \$20,000 from a fellow traveller who had a revolving fund for such purposes. Having gained a fixed term, part-time academic research position within a year or two, I then repaid that debt by borrowing a smaller personal loan at higher interest rates from the bank. The penalty forced me to madly save and pay it off within a few years. Often houses temporarily had tenants while owners were away but membership essentially committed one to home ownership.

The Round the Bend Conservation Cooperative is governed via quarterly assemblies, a board of seven, rotating, annually elected directors and a range of working parties that act in transparent and horizontal ways in managing internal and external work and relations. It is essential for householders to participate in six half-day working bees annually (or pay a levy in lieu) and abide by all policies. As a non-income-sharing cooperative without any enterprise, the cooperative is a much less onerous operation than Commonground — and less communal to the same extent. This is not to suggest that members are not as committed to one another, just that they are continuously free to select and vary their level of social and physical involvement with others and communal activities while they live there. This impacts on their household environmental sustainability in as much as cars in a remote area not serviced by public transport were rarely shared beyond a household though car lifts were encouraged. Sharing was a voluntary habit, rather than accepted practice, by members with certain other members along protocol of personal choice. Yet everyone was fairly free in offering use of say, special kitchen and gardening equipment and helpfully assisted with showing how it should be used.

The design of the house and other uses of each site had to pass cooperative regulations more stringent than local council regulations regarding, for instance, where a shed or woodpile might be sited, colours of painted house timber, house materials, overviews and protecting the forest from undue disturbance or damage. Fallen branches and trees were left on the ground as habitat for birds, marsupials and reptiles. However, the most controversial policy related to cool burns of 10 percent of the property every year, to prevent inhabitants and the bushland from intense and frequent natural or artificially started fires to which the state of Victoria and the Bend of Isles is particularly prone.

The formal policy was undermined by residents against it declaring themselves unavailable to engage in the work such cool burns required: clearing leaf litter and twigs on the bush floor beforehand, being available on the day of the cool burn to light and control the fire, including having Country Fire Authority tankers and teams ready to fight it. Furthermore, cool burns can only be lit on appropriately calm and cool days without forecasts for winds, rain or warmer conditions. In the nights and days immediately following such a burn, the whole area would need to be watched for underground fires that might burn for days using roots as fuel. Cool burns aim to eliminate easily burnable bark, ground litter and even low vegetation. Many Australian species also rely on fire for germination though others are fire sensitive.

Still, all the conservation policies of the cooperative's founders remain in place today. Indeed, rules to ban pets such as cats and dogs and preserve trees, other natural vegetation and animal species, eradicating weeds, and other conservation efforts were so impressive to private property neighbours surrounding the cooperative that they agreed to adopt many of the cooperative's environmental and building practices and regulations. In 2000, the State of Victoria gazetted special legislation covering 635.4 ha, embracing the cooperative and its immediate surrounds to become the Bend of Islands Environmental Living Zone. Anyone living and buying into the zone is advised by real estate agents and the Bend of Islands Conservation Association (<https://bendofislands.wordpress.com/>) to abide by all regulations. The association informs, trains and skills residents, and runs working bees that assist in applying their policies on public and private land in their area. The environmental living zone is a singular achievement of the cooperative's influence as a role model. It is remarkable, however, that the model has not subsequently spread, despite the apparent ease with which similar communities living in bushland could adopt such a model.

Ganas

Ganas is an urban intentional community of around 75 residents on Staten Island, a borough of New York City. Community members live in eight mainly co-located two-storey houses, some rooms with views of Manhattan, and situated in a racially-mixed working class area. Many residents work either in the community doing domestic and management tasks or at one of the Everything Goes 'recycling' businesses that the community owns and manages: a second-hand book store-cum-cafe, a second-hand clothing and a second-hand furniture store — '3 stores full of unique and beautiful items at incredibly affordable prices' (<http://www.etgstores.com/>).

Ganas was started in 1979 by activists disillusioned with leftist politics, parties and other organisations. They experienced these as either 'closed systems', paralysed in bureaucratic inertia and ideologically bound, or fragmenting in conflicts, both states working against radical social change. The founders of Ganas wanted change and wanted it now. In highly conscious and conscientious ways they established a community focusing on collective personal relationships. Decades on, four core principles guide a flexible structure and processes that seem unique to Ganas. The first three are self-explanatory: non-violence, no free-riding and no illegal activities. The fourth principle is no 'non-negotiable negativity'. Non-negotiable negativity prevents people from addressing challenges and blocks in interpersonal relationships and results in typical mainstream habits of blaming, shaming and punishing. These practices go hand-in-hand with repressing a joint and frank exploration of how we feel and constructive discussion of how we might feel differently about one another.

Ganas, then, is about deep community and its governance structures are quite time-consuming, with a general assembly each morning and a schedule of duties that is set relatively independently of the meeting although fine-tuning matters do arise there. Consensus rules but occasionally a vote is taken. Ganas's structure is three-tiered. There is a core group who income share, own and manage the community (five men and five women in mid-2016 — <http://www.ganas.org/#structure>). The core group share all their time, skills, knowledge, feelings and material belongings with one another. This intensity tends to detract new members but others enjoy living alongside the core group. Around two dozen mainly long-term residents regularly attend and participate in the morning assembly and other meetings where key decisions about the community and its business are made. Around three dozen residents are less involved but live at Ganas because they like its culture and environment. Non-core group residents pay a very modest rental for accommodation, food and many other basic needs. Those who work and reside there have their wages commuted accordingly.

In short, there is great openness and flexibility in residing at Ganas. Every night dinner is a smorgasbord in a room big enough for many resident diners and occasional guests. Dinner is available for others to take away. Ganas accepts temporary visitors, though arranging well in advance is the only reliable way to ensure a booking. Ganas is a very open community in its residential space and its businesses involve a lot of outreach and networking. Ganas has contributed to regenerating enterprise and community activities more generally around the ferry terminal area of Staten Island.

Ganas has a firm commitment to affordability. My observation staying there was that such social values won out to environmental ones in decision-making. For instance, insulating buildings was discussed more in terms of reducing bills than cutting carbon emissions. There were few, and then simply individual, attempts to establish productive gardens between houses and little organic produce bought in lieu of cheap goods from the supermarket. Although vegetarians (including vegans) were well-catered for, meat was regular fare and the environmental cost of meat-eating not given much priority. However, some individuals did dumpster dive for otherwise wasted food. Residents shared cars and coordinated trips to maximise passengers and benefited from a quality public transport system whereas the other communities I discuss were forced to use cars more with environmental and monetary costs for residents and visitors. The eight households bought most consumables and equipment in bulk and maximised use of quality second hand white goods found via their businesses.

My impression was that the reliance of the community on market-based businesses exaggerated the affordability priority, despite the second-hand content aligning well with re-use of resources. Like many sharing economy advocates, environmental benefits were mentioned but appeared mainly as a co-benefit coinciding with decisions made on the basis of affordability. Affordability is a great social value but is forced by capitalist market-based inequity and, given priority, tends to force environmental compromises (even sell-outs).

Twin Oaks

Established in 1967, Twin Oaks is an intentional community, to all intents and purposes a commune, in rural Virginia with 'values of cooperation, sharing, nonviolence, equality, and ecology' (<http://www.twinoaks.org/>). Since 2010 there have been around 100 members, some 15 percent of them children. They operate as an income-sharing commons, benefitting from past accumulation of farming land and forest, equipment for various businesses, housing and people skills and knowledge.

Their aim is collective sufficiency. They network with like communities but rely on some trade with the capitalist market. For US taxation purposes Twin Oaks is categorised with monasteries although they are not a religious organisation but rather harbour diverse beliefs and philosophies in a secular culture. Still, Twin Oaks does mimic the simple living and collective sufficiency of many traditional monasteries say during the middle ages of feudalism in Europe.

The governance of Twin Oaks is non-hierarchical with committees, managers and planners making certain everyday management decisions and responsible for carrying them out. There are notice boards for proposals, to start open discussion on improvements or new ventures and people can volunteer for all kinds of the regularly rotating positions. Those fulfilling such positions need to be transparent and responsible and are open to challenge.

Members work an average 42-hour week on communal domestic tasks and businesses once post-school or other training but when they reach 50 years of age their work load is reduced annually. In return all their basic needs are met and they each get around \$1200 per annum 'pocket money'. This might appear like a heavy workload compared with a 35-hour week but the 42 hours includes housework and say compared with Australian data for 1992–2006, the average man and woman works many more than 42 hours once paid employment, household duties and volunteer work hours are all in the total (Nelson and Timmerman 2011a, 227–28).

The Twin Oaks work schedule is determined each fortnight based on all the regular and particular work that needs doing, as submitted by managers in the various areas. Residents can notify schedule-makers beforehand of times or tasks they prefer not to do or cannot do. The draft schedule is reviewed by all concerned and then finalised, and can only be varied by mutually agreed personal swaps or arrangements with managers. Beside washing and cleaning, milking cows and making cheese, working with timber, gardening, childcare and preparing food to eat, there are tasks in a range of businesses producing cash for the community, mainly: making tofu, hammocks, indexing books and growing seeds for heirloom plants. What is scheduled and deemed 'work' includes certain of political activities; eligibility of work proposed is determined by the group as a whole. There is flexibility too. Say you have been allocated hammock-making, as long as the manager knows you know how to do it and a reasonable product is created, you can negotiate to do a couple of hours 9–11pm at night say rather than at the scheduled 2–4pm that afternoon.

There are seven large group houses, communal meals and various equipment (including a fleet of vehicles) and spaces shared with a big 'library' room of all kinds of clothes laundered as part of the work schedule. Bikes lie or sit in stands around the whole farm. You pick one up to get somewhere and leave it so someone else can use it. Bikes are procured second-hand, repaired and maintained in a communal workshop. There are lots of non-work activities at Twin Oaks, such as: musical groups; theatre, reading and film groups; coffee houses; yoga and other therapy workshops; sport, knitting and carpentry. Skills and knowledge are shared across leisure and recreational activities. Sharing activities and dedication to environmental practices makes Twin Oaks an 'ecovillage'.

The community collectively and organically grows a lot of their food on 3.5 acres of vegetable gardens and in two greenhouses. Tractors and other mechanical tools are used but there is a lot of direct human labour. Vegetables are harvested and walked to the kitchen so transport costs and refrigeration are negligible. A herd of cows provides unpasteurised milk, cheese, yogurt and beef (slaughtered on site). Chickens are kept for eggs and poultry and, intermittently, pigs or other animals

whenever individuals care to drive such programs. The orchard has apple and pear trees, blueberries and raspberries, grape vines and further plantings. Dumpster diving delivers other food too.

Heating Twin Oaks' buildings relies a lot on locally harvested timber, passive solar heat and solar devices. Hot water is supplied partly by solar systems also. One of the households, Kaweah, is particularly environmental and has an off-grid solar photovoltaic electric system. Other buildings benefit from a grid-connected array of solar panels. Energy efficient practices produce major savings.

Weekly half-day tours and a three-week visitor intensive is available regularly for educating interested people and prospective members in how the community works. Such visitors are listed in the work schedule to get to know what it's like to live and work there. It is a mandatory step for those considering applying to become members. Once they join, members can only bring as much personal property as will fit into a small bedroom space. Other things they bring will be shared so they lose any ownership rights to them. They can still own assets outside Twin Oaks but for the duration of their membership income earned from such assets will be shared with the rest of the community. This is probably the most straight forward and fair standard communal arrangement of which I know.

Comparison

These four communities share several characteristics that make them appropriate frameworks for advancing degrowth — interpreted as just social and political structures that aim to establish and maintain a balance in the interdependent relations between humans and Earth. That reading assumes that we conceive of degrowth in terms of 'use values' — the qualities, purposes and uses to which things might be put — and that we aim to use such natural and artificial resources as little as possible. Degrowth focuses on diminishing over-consumption of use values so that our central focus is not 'exchange values', monetary degrowth, but more particularly reduced consumption of Earth's use values to levels that Earth can naturally regenerate. For reasons of space, I simply compare two main areas of concern: governance and the satisfaction of basic needs.

Governance

If degrowth strategies conform with our vision, means need to parallel ends. We need to work with urgency because the state of Earth is dire and natural readjustments in train threaten the species existence of humans. Therefore, a bottom-up response is particularly appropriate and necessary; if people everywhere can work on similar principles locally we can achieve necessary change quickly. It means direct democracy with as-local-as-is-feasible production focusing on people's basic needs, implying that future distribution is decided simultaneously with collectively agreeing on productive goals and ways of achieving them. No money or financial sectors or capitalists are necessary just a vision that implies that the means of production are owned and controlled by popular power.

The focus in terms of comparing and evaluating the four cases here is the extent to which they challenge capitalism in all these ways and manage to establish alternative practices. They show concerted and successful community-based activism demonstrating that more socially and environmentally sensitive alternatives to conventional household and housing arrangements are feasible. These communities act not only as living models of such alternatives, that have been successfully maintained for decades and that people can observe and read about, but also as practical

demonstrations that people can visit, stay in and experience. These are important functions in and of themselves that belie the charge that such communities might be closed, selfish, insular and unworldly institutions (Tummers 2016). Not only do these communities work 24/7 as alternatives but they are generous in integrating opportunities for people to see and experience how they function.

Specifically, they demonstrate that collective action can act as a nursery for connecting all kinds of non-hierarchical techniques for communicating, relating and acting together, showing how governance can operate post-capitalism. Round the Bend Conservation Cooperative has the lowest ambitions of all four communities in terms of anti-systemic goals but was a community-initiated project that remains self-managing. The cooperative challenged, and occasionally subverted, state and local government institutions. Furthermore, if those settling new areas and residents of existing neighbourhoods pulled down the fences between their properties and respected the land as a joint responsibility and amenity under communally decided principles, we could develop environmental living zones in multiple locations with regulations appropriate to each biome or bioregion. Right now Earth badly needs this kind of nurturing. This model offers an easy but concerted neighbourhood action readily achievable within the current system that would be empowering to behold.

The other three communities all demonstrate more intensive and expansive techniques for collective governance. They focus on deep listening and fully participatory discussion in decision-making. No one is so much of a specialist that they usurp another's decision-making power to the extent that they do in capitalism. No one is elected to represent others in a one-way act that leaves electors with false representation as is the conventional case in state capitalism, where 'representatives' of the people often misrepresent even oppose in practice those who voted for them. Consensual decision-making, inclusive of resorting to voting occasionally for reasons of expediency, is successful. A broad array of solutions is sought and the successful solution finds the widest number of people content.

Because of the range of activities that Twin Oaks undertakes it faces the most complex challenges yet has developed effective forms of participatory direct democracy. These techniques merge workplace decision-making with collective decision-making over living together, from policies over nudity (where and when) and who gets which rooms for their personal space, to deciding on who to trade with and on what terms, and sometimes mediating personal disputes. Twin Oaks also has the most compacts with other communities, networking with labour swaps and product and service exchanges in non-monetary and monetary ways. Though seeming cumbersome and laborious, all these techniques are inclusive, simple and straight forward in terms of practice. Twin Oaks' level of collective sufficiency demonstrates that, especially if we concentrate on small appropriate technologies sufficient to satisfy our basic needs, direct democracy is a successful governance model.

Satisfaction of basic needs

Round the Bend Conservation Cooperative only collectively maintains its land, its natural environment, in as ecologically sensitive way as possible. Collective sufficiency, let alone self-sufficiency, is off the radar. This model is quite compatible with capitalism except in as much as residents constantly struggle against inappropriate developments in the area, 'inappropriate' read as 'environmentally insensitive'. Residents are permitted to establish and maintain private kitchen gardens over their grey and black water management sites, some of which are highly productive generally using permaculture practices. But, elsewhere they must allow the bush to function as naturally as possible, so any non-indigenous plants outside the kitchen garden are considered weeds.

Similarly, non-indigenous animals (pets) are not permitted, even if simply brought with visitors (such as a dog with a tradesman). Whereas horses can be ridden on other Victorian roads, they are banned from the environmental living zone. Still, their land is not ideal for growing food and husbanding any kind of animal. Rainfall is around 650mm per annum and the shallow soil is nutritionally poor so even native undergrowth is sparse.

However, there are still aspects of collective sufficiency, broadly understood, fulfilled by Round the Bend Conservation Cooperative. The collective intent and practice covers communal ownership of erstwhile private property fragmented in lots where people act in ad hoc ways only subject to council regulations that are weakly monitored so many illegal practices such as clearing vegetation can take place. In collectively conserving their woodlands, the residents of the cooperative are contributing to preventing and abating carbon emissions associated with other land uses (excepting a return to wilderness). This act can be seen as a gift to both present and future generations.

The cooperative also has collective fire prevention and response practices that offer residents greater security than individual private residents. Again qualifications need to be made: the phone tree and neighbourly support associated with bushfire alerts and emergency procedures is available to private residents of the environmental living zone and practiced in some other bushfire prone areas. However, the cooperative insists on inspecting each household's bushfire preparedness in annual fire response rehearsals — a unique practice, to my knowledge. In bushfire prone areas, such security can be listed as a basic need. Relevant to human safety and carbon emissions, in widespread fires that impinging on this area in 2009: 173 people died, many more were injured and left deeply traumatised, 2,133 houses were destroyed, along with other kinds of private and public buildings, basic infrastructure and agricultural resources (Teague et al. 2010: 1, 13). These circumstances emphasise the significance of conservation and bushfire measures pursued by the cooperative and wider environmental living zone for human habitation now and in the future.

Ganas is a successful three-tiered community with great social values, committed to affordable lifestyles and living modestly accordingly. However, arguably, the sufficiency that Ganas enjoys is limited by its use of, and engagement in, the market. Like many sharing economy advocates, Ganas sees the market as amenable to ethical practices such as non-profit-making cooperatives and uses its collective power to benefit from economies of scale through bulk purchases and sharing of utility services. Ganas does not advance collective sufficiency in terms of productive gardens and workers gain wages although, admittedly, many get much of their remuneration in kind. However, the Ganas property and businesses run on exchange-value principles without, of course, losing sight of the social and environmental values of the content of those second hand businesses. Nevertheless, in these circumstances, they are obliged to operate on weak green triple-bottom-line principles that commonly force market values or a monetary bottom line in practice.

Although founders of Commonground were influenced by the Twin Oaks model, it has always been comparatively small, which has limited its capacity to flourish in terms of collective sufficiency. Not unlike Ganas in this respect, Commonground has given a stronger priority to social values than environmental ones although the environmental sustainability of its buildings and land management are an advance on Ganas. In terms of environmental sustainability, Commonground buildings are closer to Twin Oaks. Justifiably, Twin Oaks claims an ecovillage status, listing various achievements in conservation of energy and use of renewable energy, local organic food production and a 'sustainable culture', including the pooling of all their resources, skills and knowledge (<http://www.twinoaks.org/culture-government-65/ecovillage-twinoaks>). It is impressively collectively

sufficient. When trade with the conventional market takes place and in certain exchanges with other like-communities, members make strongly ethical choices about with whom they trade and the conditions of that trade. This level of scrutiny is difficult at Commonground and near impossible at Ganas because of their levels of market-based trade as well as deeming it a lower priority. The relative autonomy of Twin Oaks allows for anti-market ethics impossible for many communities.

This brief comparison suggests that the extent of openness to the capitalist market and exchange value principles of the communities is in inverse proportion to the level of control, decision-making power over meeting of basic needs. The intensity and extensiveness of communal governance and relative autonomy relies on the scope of basic needs over which the community has control. All cases suggest that non-hierarchical decision-making can be successful in governing the whole range of residents basic needs indicating that people power can be a much deeper and more extensive force than expressed at simple street marches or even temporary occupations as a form of protest.

Conclusion

My experiences in relatively conventional households and in various communities intentionally established to honour more social and environmental values than capitalism enables us to — along with theoretical research into the monetary workings of capitalism conducted as my PhD examining Marx's theory of money (Nelson 1999) — led me to the political position of a non-market socialist. Non-market socialists argue that moving beyond money is a fundamental, first and final step of socialist transformation (Rubel and Crump 1987; Nelson and Timmerman 2011b). Significant socialist practices, such as non-monetary commoning in production and non-market sharing in exchange, must simultaneously drive socialist transformation and be the end point of socialist revolution. In short, revolutionary practices must substitute the decision-making role of money and market by direct control of planning, production and exchange by all the people — or it will not be socialism at all.

This paper integrates many of these non-market socialist themes but precluded relevant issues of 'how we get there', such as the necessary takeover of the means of production that a holistic revolution would involve, suffice to say that once the practicality of another way is clear and the relatively unethical and inadequate nature of capitalist practices is more clearly drawn, a non-violent surrender and/or take over appears more feasible. A significant point to make here is that there are many industries and sectors that are vibrant and expanding but serve little or no purpose in a degrowth future, posing more of an issue as to what do with them in terms of recycling and re-use rather than leaving them to waste. But, what is 'necessary' and what is 'unnecessary'? Twin Oaks, in particular, offers a hybrid model, stained by this world but prefiguring another. Experiencing it might enable you to explore where we are going, and provide a strategy for how we get there.

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Left: The Twin Oaks approach — <https://funologist.org/category/sharing/>

Right: Commonground gardeners — <http://www.common-ground.org.au/community>