

Hope Is A Verb ***By Kees Klomp***

It will not have escaped your notice. It is crisis. In fact, there is so much crisis that we need new words to express the seriousness of the crisis situation. And so these days we speak of the polycrisis; an intimately interwoven, complex set of ecological and social crises affecting all aspects of human society.

Let me go one step further. By now, the crisis is so advanced and all-encompassing that, as far as I am concerned, it has become a permacrisis. It has become unrealistic to solve the many, large, connected and complex problems any more. The crisis is permanent.

Let me substantiate this position. There are three crisis approaches:

First. If we want to solve the ecological crisis, we must immediately end the ecologically-destructive (mass) mode of production and consumption. However, this radical intervention is disastrous for the economy and will inevitably cause it to collapse.

However, if we leave the current mode of production and consumption unchanged, it may be good news for the economy in the short term, but will inevitably cause society to collapse ecologically in the slightly longer term.

To avoid this catch22, international politics is therefore betting on a third path involving transition. Through technology and innovation, the ecologically-destructive way of life is changed - in stages - into an ecologically-constructive way of life. We try to simultaneously green the economy and make it grow further.

Creating new, green business and new, green jobs sounds great, of course... but there is a but...

This is because to truly green the economy requires a decoupling of ecological footprint and economic growth. Additional economic activity is normally accompanied by additional environmental pressure. Hopes are pinned on the development of green technology that will enable decoupling. But there is so far no scientific evidence for its success. Positive results have been achieved with relative decoupling (economy grows faster than environmental pressures), but that is something fundamentally different from absolute decoupling (economic growth with decrease in environmental pressures). So for now, techno decoupling is an illusion!

We also have the Jevons paradox at play (named after the 19th century British economist William Stanley Jevons), which teaches that efficiency reduces production costs, that reducing production costs reduces consumer prices, that reducing consumer prices increases sales, and that more sales increases environmental pressures. Thus, the benefits of technological greening are immediately reversed.

Thereby; to end ecological degeneration and destruction requires a lot more than just reducing CO2 emissions. We also need to halt the collapse of biodiversity. According to biologists, a mass extinction is underway for the sixth time in Earth's history. They attribute this 6th wave of extinction to humans. Pollution, acidification, growing world population, deforestation, mining and warming are wreaking havoc on nature.

And the time pressure is growing. A poll of hundreds of climate scientists by UK newspaper The Guardian (to be read in its 8 May 2024 edition) found that 80% of those climate scientists expect a 2.5-degree Celsius warming by the end of the century, and 50% even a 3-degree Celsius warming. Stronger and faster warming is accompanied by greater concerns about so-called climate tipping points. These are critical thresholds that irreversibly disrupt parts of the Earth's ecosystem. Several of these climate tipping points (including the melting of Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets, the stoppage of the Labrador Sea current, the thawing of permafrost) are already in full swing. Climate scientists therefore describe the 2.5 - 3 degrees Celsius scenario as semi-dystopian and society-disrupting with famines, geopolitical conflicts and mass migration due to heat waves, and devastating forest fires, floods and storms.

A worrying prospect, not to mention the economy...

The renowned science journal Nature published a study calculating the economic damage of climate change on 17 April. The results are startling. Even with warming of only 2 degrees Celsius (i.e. with successful climate mitigation), the researchers arrive at an international income loss of 19% over the next 26 years. That's \$38,000 billion. Per year. And that's not temporary, but structural. Indeed; the researchers calculate that the international income loss could rise to as much as a 60% reduction in the event of further warming.

Here, it is not only the loss of income or increase in costs that is problematic, but especially the impact it will have on the financial system. This is because the capitalist economic system is inextricably linked to the financial system. The economy runs on capital created by banks in the form of loans. For loans to pay off financially, economic growth is necessary. Climate disruption is going to make this growth imperative impossible. Even if economic growth is achieved, it will be negated by climate damage. The economy cannot possibly bridge a structural gap of 19% or more with growth. The financial system is fine at absorbing temporary shocks (economic recessions are an inherent part of the economic system), but cannot possibly function with a structural economic downturn. Banks may pass a stress test just fine in a temporary recession, but are unable to maintain a healthy capital position in a structurally contracting economy. And with the ecological permacrisis there is no prospect of economic recovery, only further deterioration!

Biodiversity loss shows a similar trend. Renowned ecological economist Robert Constanza has calculated that nature is worth \$125 trillion; an amount significantly higher than the global Gross Domestic Product. The World Economic Forum has calculated that about half of all global economic activity depends on nature. And among the 10 largest European banks, at least 26 cents of every dollar appears to be

highly dependent on 'ecosystem services' (Banking On Ecosystem Services research by Mundaca and Heintze in Volume 224 of Ecological Economics in Oct 2024). With ecological degeneration and destruction in full swing, these 'ecosystem services' are in serious jeopardy. The Oxford University-affiliated Green Finance Institute recently calculated the economic consequences of ecological degeneration and destruction for England. In their report presented in April 2024, they concluded that England's Gross Domestic Product will fall 12% in the coming decades due to the loss of ecosystem services. To put that in perspective, the reduction in UK GDP due to the financial crisis in 2008 was 5%. The reduction due to the COVID crisis was 11%. Both were incidental crises. The permacrisis, however, is not a temporary inconvenience but a new reality.

And finally, environmental pollution (water pollution, soil pollution and air pollution) also creates an economic path of destruction. The renowned British journal The Lancet presented a study in 2017 that put the global financial damage due to environmental pollution at \$4600 billion a year.

Just to be clear; the amounts and percentages just mentioned come from studies with different inputs and therefore cannot be simply added together. However, they do show that climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental pollution will cause long-term and far-reaching economic disruption!

For now, business seems unwilling to really adapt its operations to the demands of climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental pollution. For example, the Carbon Majors Database shows that the 57 oil, gas, coal and cement companies, which account for 80% of global CO₂ emissions, have actually increased their emissions by 55% since the Paris Agreement in 2016. Oil Change International presented research in the UK daily The Guardian in May 2024 showing that none of the major oil companies are on track to meet their climate pledges. Perhaps even more confronting is the development at the Science Based Target Initiative. Here we see that after a period when more and more companies committed to Net Zero-in-2050 targets, companies are now pulling back en masse. Recently, more than 200 companies have scaled back or even reversed their sustainability targets altogether, and only 4% of all registered companies currently meet Net Zero-in-2050 guidelines. Although any legitimacy to do so is lacking, the business community is thus sticking to business as usual and there is no real sense of urgency and no real willingness to transition.

All in all, I cannot help but conclude that the transition road is also a dead end. Given the ecological-economic data, I consider it impossible for the pillars of our current welfare society and welfare state (banks, insurers, pensions, investments, distribution infrastructures and economic growth) to remain intact! As far as I am concerned, a collapse is therefore inevitable. Again, just to be clear: this is not a prediction of the future but an interpretation of the current situation.

I am well aware that the term collapse is heavily loaded. We associate collapse with apocalyptic imagery, as we know from Hollywood disaster movies. However, this collapse looks different: it is not a sudden event, but a progressive, worsening process. There is an ecological-economic Verelendung. In the coming decades, increasingly

redder Gross Domestic Product figures create a downward economic spiral of inflation, loss of purchasing power, falling stock markets, bank and corporate bankruptcies, mass layoffs, infrastructural infarcts and resource scarcity. This economic deterioration then causes social impoverishment in the form of injustice, inequality, insecurity, unrest and unease. It is to make one despair...

But is that justified? Is the crisis situation really hopeless?

There are quite a few misunderstandings about hope. Hope is often associated with cherishing a positive expectation of the future, with confidence in a good outcome. In fact, this is wishful thinking. After all, how realistic is hope when the prospects are so overwhelmingly poor? Former Czech president Vaclav Havel has provided a description of hope that offers perspective. Havel says:

***Hope is not the same as optimism;
nor the belief that something will turn out well. It is the certainty
that something is meaningful
independent of the ending,
independent of the outcome***

It is a focus of the mind, a quality of the heart

Hope thus arises in the process of doing. It is a meaningful effort. It is a verb.

We can actively rethink the existential crisis, and discover new possibilities in it. For instance, it appears that more and more people - especially young people - are struggling with their mental health. Currently, 20% of adult Dutch people aged between 18 and 75 struggle with mental health problems, according to the Trimbos Institute's Nemesis. Depression and burnout have become popular diseases.

Scientists like John Vervaeke (psychology professor at the University of Toronto) and Jonathan Rowson (researcher at the University of Surrey) and renowned trauma doctor Gabor Maté establish a close relationship between this psychological epidemic and late-capitalist society. They argue that neoliberalism reduces our humanity to self-centred, extrinsic utility maximisation. We actually exist purely to make money and then spend it on goods and live as purses in the service of the economy. As a result, our social nature and our intrinsic, immaterial and meaning-seeking side have gone completely astray. And we suffer spiritually for that. The systemic collapse underway offers hope for existential recalibration. In the crisis, we can rediscover ourselves and each other. We can find the missed meaning of our lives again; after all, there is no higher goal imaginable than working together in the here-and-now to build a new society!

Another example of thinking around. Have you ever been to a climate protest? Then you will probably recognise the image of people holding up cardboard signs with the slogan: System Change, Not Climate Change. More and more people want system change. According to Karl Marx, system change required going to war against-and overthrowing-the power of the possessing bourgeois class. The hopeful news is that anno 2024 does

not require a violent power struggle. In fact, ecological disruption causes system disintegration; the system destroys itself. Initially, the ecological-economic Verelendung will mainly affect the capital-weak, but eventually the capital-powerful will also inevitably be affected. When the last tree has been cut down, the last fish caught and the last river poisoned, even the rich of the earth will come to the inevitable conclusion that money cannot be eaten.

Instead of putting our time and energy into overthrowing power structures, we can dedicate ourselves to dissolving power structures. I call this non-violent alternative to revolution: dissolution. Dissolution refers to the English dissolve meaning to dissolve. The current system exists by grace of cultivated and conditioned thinking and doing. We don't so much live in system, the system mostly lives in us. The internalised system has power over our thinking and doing. There is a story we believe in and act upon. This instructional story forms the basis by which we consider the world. Thus, the system is not a given. It is created on the basis of a worldview. And so we can also change it. All we have to do to do so is let go of its dominant logic!

I by no means want to trivialise or glorify collapse (after all, it involves suffering) and it is by no means a given that it will turn out positively (authoritarianism and anarchy lurk). The disintegration of the current modernist-materialist norm does offer real opportunities for real change! For the obviousness of the old, familiar systemic narrative is collapsing before our eyes. Because there really are no more solutions possible, we can really give up trying to overcome the predicament. Because there really is no more future prospect for the existing story, we can start imagining a really different system story.

What are the hopeful building blocks for that new story? What new system building blocks can we imagine?

The intervidual

The foundation of the current system is the individual. Courtesy of the Enlightenment thinkers, the recognition of the individual and the freedom as a human being to shape existence independently is a given. Ecologists study ecosystems in nature, and this shows that all life on earth is organised not individually but relationally. All living organisms on earth are in mutually dependent relationships. Life is intervidual.

Ecoliberalism

Liberalism is the political ideology of the individual. It protects civil liberties and human rights through social contracts, or voluntary submission to the rule of law and democratic representation of the people. Ecoliberalism is the liberalism of the intervidu and combines human freedom with natural responsibility. Ecoliberalism aims to bring about a symbiotic society in which all life forms on earth cooperate freely to improve each other's quality of life.

Commonism

Capitalism is the economic application of liberalist ideology; the translation of individual freedom into a free-market economy. Capitalism is so ubiquitous in 2024

that we perceive it as an immutable fact, but it is not. Allocation can also be done just fine through the commons, also called the commons. Commons are community assets managed collectively on the basis of democratically and horizontally organised civic participation. Citizens can jointly provide for each other's livelihoods through commons.

Existential Economics

In today's economy, there is a great dominance of material prosperity. This is an economic perspective on value that focuses on living standards or the ability to satisfy the need for goods. But there are three other perspectives on value that are equally legitimate. We can also approach value sociologically. This is called well-being. Well-being centres on the conditions of life. We can also take a psychological perspective on value. This is called well-ness and it revolves around life experience. Happiness. And finally, we can also consider value ecologically. This is called well-living. Well-living is about the extent to which natural ecosystems thrive. Well-being, well-living and well-ness are wrongly seen in the current economic system as derivatives or corollaries of prosperity. Existential economics is not material first but immaterial first. Man is not a utility machine but first and foremost a meaning seeker, and meaning is found in the balance between welfare, well-being, well-living and wellness!

Finally. How do we build a new system with these imagined building blocks? So how do we concretely manifest a new system?

The answer to that question sounds simple but is complicated: by living the new system before it. As the existing thinking and doing becomes increasingly stuck, more and more people feel increasingly insecure. More and more people are therefore looking ever more desperately for new footing. By living out a new story, we can show other people that collapse need not mean the end of the world, but the beginning of a new society. We need not harbour positive expectations about the future but only act constructively in the here and now. This is called prefiguration!

What are prefigurative activities? What can we do now to help manifest the imagined society? Give up on the current system. Tolerate its discomfort. Embrace the chaos. Let go of your material lifestyle. Start living place-based. Find your community. Strive for co-reliance with this community. Free yourself from the market as much as possible. Start a common! Make your economy as small and local as possible. Settle for enough! Enjoy simple things. Learn subsistence skills. Plant a food forest. Start a neighbourhood garden. But most of all: Take charge. Be the system change. Embody hope

By living a holistic prosperous life for yourself, you are actively helping in what is called amplification: reinforcing (amplify) the intended. The more and more massively we embody the imagined future story now, the more likely it will soon become reality. Means create Ends...

Let me conclude my Sustainable State of the Union Speech in this context with a perspective-giving quote from Prof Karen O'Brien who applies quantum science to social change: In every moment, we both passively and actively co-create structures

and systems that support or undermine a thriving society. If we embrace our complementary identities as simultaneously individuals and collectives, we can generate rippling and resonant patterns that scale. Our intentions and actions affect us all. Social change is therefore about being a different paradigm. You matter more than you think!