

Research Article

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## A Complete Act: Conservatism, Distributism and the Pattern Language for Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Linking Norbert Elias’s concept of the triad of controls, to Andrew Willard Jones’ analysis of the ‘complete act’, the paper outlines the relation between culture and personality and the implications of this for any project of localization and the re-embedding of the economy. Re-iterating the reality that degrowth cannot be a liberal project, the paper goes on to explore the relation between Western individualism and Judeo-Christianity. Shorn of the overarching ontology and orienting architecture of Christianity, individualism has become corrosive, unstable and, in the end, self-destructive. The socially conservative preoccupation with a decline in virtue is linked to eroding social capital, anomie, and unhappiness arising from a surfeit of freedom. Hyper-social and -spatial mobility is linked to the suppression of the domain of Livelihood, with its bottom-up, communitarian and family-based forms of social regulation; and a corollary expansion of both top-down collectivist regulation by the State and the transactional logic of the Market. Livelihood is a function of embedded individuals enmeshed in relations not only with other individuals and groups, but with God. In contrast, the materialist metaphysics of Market and State both depend on disembedded, free-wheeling citizen-consumers, severed from any relation to transcendent values. But these same phenomena are also the principal drivers of consumption and ecological degradation. On this basis it is argued that any culture of ecological restraint predicated on the re-embedding of markets must also entail an ontological re-embedding of the sacred conception of the individual (the Imago Dei) into a relation with the divine. Such a project implies a very different understanding of freedom predicated on an external, legitimate authority; a freedom that is ‘fullest not when it serves itself but when it serves truths freely held” ([1], Loc. 419). Applying Christopher Alexander’s theory of pattern languages, the paper goes on to explore what such a sustainability project might look like.

**Keywords:** Andrew Willard Jones; Christopher Alexander; Complete Act; Degrowth; Distributism; GK Chesterton; Integralism; Karl Polanyi; Liberalism; Livelihood; Norbert Elias; Owen Barfield; Pattern Language; Post-liberalism; Re-embedding; Sustainability; Triad of Controls; Virtue Ethics

### 1. Introduction

A decade ago, I advanced what I thought was a rather self-evident argument that ‘degrowth was not a liberal project’ [2].

It was self-evident because decades of ecological economics had demonstrated with great clarity the link between social complexity and energy throughput [3,4]. The very real achievements of liberal-individualist modern societies – in allowing

truly unprecedented levels of social and spatial mobility, individual freedom and personal autonomy – depend absolutely the massive throughput of energy and materials, made possible by the exploitation of fossil fuels [5–7]. Degrowth, if it means anything, must, in some degree, be synonymous with constraint. Even a levelling of growth trajectories would entail the re-embedding of economic and social life, an order of magnitude step-down in spatial mobility and a reduction in the autonomy and choices that have come to define late-modern societies. This autonomy is so taken for granted that even gender and sex have come to be construed as choices – without any regard to the kind of social complexity that makes such a conception even thinkable [8,9].

Despite the Newtonian simplicity of this proposition – that complexity is a scarce resource that comes with a price tag, and has therefore to be nurtured, husbanded, and allocated with care and parsimony – greens of all stripes, for the most part, have not got the message. Ecological modernists continue cheerfully to plot smart green futures, to be constructed by Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. Their Eeyore-antagonists in the degrowth movement, on the other hand, understand the need for an era of technological self-restraint and perhaps even look forward to re-embracing the simple pleasures of community. But they remain wilfully and obdurately ignorant of the implications of this vista for the kind of hyper-liberal politics that has gripped millennials of the BLM generation. Cosmopolitan, rights-based identity politics now functions as the lingua franca – not only on campus, but in the mainstream media and even the corporate board room. Incoherent genuflections to decolonization, paranoid incantations about ‘white supremacy’, a radically deconstructive anti-Western imaginary and a reflexive hostility to tradition have become the default common sense for new anti-capitalists – who somewhat bizarrely, count capitalist moguls and corporate HR bureaucrats among their number. At the intersection of woke politics and degrowth, the vista of unconstrained individual choice is knitted seamlessly but illogically with the embrace of ecological constraint. None of this makes much sense – but there it is.

In what follows, I elaborate the argument that any real pattern of ecological constraint must, in the end, entail a deeply conservative impulse. From a cultural-historical perspective, the unalloyed individualism, metaphysical materialism and ontological/epistemological relativism that have accompanied late-capitalism have been responsible for the triumph and spread of western modernity. But the same cluster of values and orientations has also facilitated and, in turn, been reinforced by a Promethean drive toward techno-social innovation and novelty and the culture of rampant consumerism. The sacred understanding of the individual that underpins the liberal conception of universal human rights emerged in the context of the Judeo-Christian *Imago Dei* [5,10,11]. Capitalist modernity has seen a progressive severing of this soteriological preoccupation with the individual as a locus of value and responsibility from both (a) the communitarian lattice of relationships and (b) a metaphysically grounded understanding of virtue. This severance was exemplified most famously by Descartes’ thinking statue with its insistence on a disembodied self, floating

aimlessly and only briefly in a meaningless and contingent universe characterized (in the words of Jacques Monod) by ‘chance and necessity’. In the society that has emerged – Elias’s *Society of Individuals* (1991) [12], Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’ (2000) [13] – the image of hermetically-sealed, closed individuals (*‘Homo clausus’*) underplays the extent to which human beings remain tied into complex and opaque relations of interdependency (*‘Homines aperti’*) as well as the psychological reality that the self is constituted relationally [12,14,15]. Nevertheless, it captures a reality – namely the unprecedented degree of freedom and under-determination in the human condition. The conceit of the age speaks eloquently to unique stage in human development characterized by a novel interiorization of consciousness, compelling a sense of self as separate; an agent free and alienated in equal measure [16–18]. It turns out that the disembedding of the economy in the early modern period described by Polanyi, had also the effect of disembedding human consciousness.

So far, so interesting, so what? What does this riff on the history of human consciousness have to do with sustainability? A great deal as it turns out. Not only are these features of late modern societies – i.e. mobility, individualism, freedom, and the ubiquity of the self as independent and sovereign – cherished and non-negotiable. To a very great extent they form the ontological and epistemological frame through which modern humans make sense of each other and of the world. It’s difficult if not impossible for such people to imagine a world in which the self is constrained, embedded and partially dissolved. It’s very difficult to understand what such a world would look like or how it would be experienced. It’s also difficult to imagine modern selves embracing such a reality voluntarily – even if that were possible. Owen Barfield once observed, rather presciently, that the only thing harder than learning how to ride a bike was unlearning how to ride a bike. If sustainability necessitates a re-embedding of economic life and the partial reabsorption of the self into a more communitarian pattern of life – this implies an equally difficult exercise in unlearning.

In this essay, I explore what a partial unlearning of modernity would look like. And I argue that, to the extent that such an agenda connects with modern ideologies and political philosophies (which is perhaps not that much), such an unlearning implies a kind of Burkean conservatism. In his famous riposte to Tom Paine on the likely consequences of the French Revolution (1790) [19], Edmund Burke codified what has become a consistent theme in the conservative response to modernity, namely the significance of familial and community associations (the ‘small platoons’) as intermediaries between the market and the state. It also resonates with the tradition of social catholic political economy of subsidiarity as developed by Luigi Taparelli in the 1850s, Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo anno* [20]. Distributism seeks to balance the excesses of both market individualism and state collectivism through a highly distributed political economy of households and cohesive families. And finally, moderating the surfeit of scientific rationalism, this train of argument emphasizes the unavoidable marriage

of faith and reason. In the language of Elias, processes of ‘involvement’ can’t be banished from social and economic life. The problem is of allowing the appropriate extension of detached models of both social life and the natural world, whilst acknowledging and retaining a shared religious frame of reference, structures of taboo and ubiquitously rehearsed ontological rituals of participation. With regard to political economy and associated ideologies, this frame of reference suggests a re-embedding of markets and the partial taming of capitalism not by the state but by family, community and the domain of livelihood. The structure of the argument is as follows. In Section 2 Elias’s concept of the ‘triad of controls’ is used to show the tight coupling between personality and psychological habitus on the one hand, and the underlying ecological and social regimes on the other. This coupling is further explored in terms of Willard-Jones’ understanding of the ‘complete act’ – an indivisible mode of categorisation, apprehension, valuation and acting in the world. This sets up the subsequent argument (2.3) that in any sustainability transition it is unrealistic to expect social-ecological regime change without a corresponding transformation of psychological controls, personality profiles and ethical-moral value systems. Section 3 summarizes the familiar conservative argument that Western modernity developed within the trammings of a moral individualism that derived substantially from Judeo-Christianity. Although transformational in driving economic and social innovation, the corrosive power of liberal individualism was contained by a non-renewable reservoir of shared values and virtues inherited from traditional society. As the restraining structures of traditional society have fallen away, late-modern consumer society has seen a wild hyper-individualism driven by the unprecedented extension of social and spatial mobility. Societal chaos that conservatives describe in terms of decadence is substantially the same phenomena that progressives understand as the problem of unsustainability. Section 4 elaborates this insight, arguing for an intrinsic but usually unperceived overlap between sustainability and the conservative impulse. Where left wing and progressive greens provide instrumental-rational arguments for the re-embedding of markets, a political-economy of individual and collective restraint is only plausible in tandem with the kind of deeply communitarian shared values that are an anathema to right wing libertarians, socialist collectivists and left-wing liberals alike. In Sections 4.2 and 4.3 it is argued that, in the West, historically it was a specifically Judeo-Christian understanding of public virtue and family values that constrained the otherwise amoral modern individualism that emerged from the early-Modern period ([10,21,22], see also [23,24]). As Macintyre has argued ([25,26] - contra [11]), in theory and practice, it has proved impossible to ground liberal ethics securely other than in a metaphysical schema of the sort offered by Christian/Aristotelian virtue ethics. And as (the atheist, liberal) Holland demonstrates convincingly, even the most radically anti-Christian and secular threads of hyper-liberal identity politics are rooted in the sacramental economy of Judeo-Christianity [27].

With this in mind, I argue that a resurrected Christian po-

litical economy and specifically the social-catholic vision of Distributism, offers the best (albeit remote) prospect for a new balance between moral individualism, communitarian care and ecological integrity. Drawing on Christopher Alexander’s pattern language theory, Section 5 concludes by drawing out what this Christian vision of subsidiarity and a political economy of households might look like in relation to the domains of brewing and the culture of drinking on the one hand, and education on the other.

## 2. The Culture and Personality of Ecological Restraint

In this section it is argued that psychological formation proceeds in tandem with social and ecological configurations. Cohesive societal, ecological and psycho-cultural ‘worlds’ are complete in themselves and difficult to unpack or disentangle. This problem of ‘completeness’ makes any vision of ecological transition that assumes change along only particular dimensions (jettisoning A, whilst retaining B) to be problematic.

### 2.1. *The Triad of Controls*

Drawing on Comte, Marx, Freud and Weber, Elias’s vision of long-term social development [28] is very much the last great statement of classical Western sociology. The theory of civilising processes though studiously non-normative is very much concerned with linear progression if not progress. In *What is Sociology?* Elias (1978) [29] described what he referred to as the ‘triad of basic controls.’ Ecological controls over nature, for which material and energy flows are a good proxy, have advanced over time through successive socio-technical regimes E.g. fire culture and ‘fire stick farming’; horticulture, pastoralism and agriculture; pre-industrial uses of solar and water power (Mumford’s ‘ecotechnic regime’ [30]); fossil fuel industry (Mumford’s ‘Paleotechnic’). The eco-genetic control over natural flows of energy represented by each such regime, developed in tandem, Elias showed, with social controls over and between individuals and groups (*sociogenesis*) and internalized controls over the self (*psychogenesis*). Elias’s magnum opus *On the Process of Civilization* [28] is an extended analysis of the relation between sociogenesis and psychogenesis in the emergence of Western modernity. Specifically, his analysis of the ‘civilising process’ focused on: the progressive ‘internalization of external constraints’; the moulding of a distinctive psychological habitus; the emergence of an interiorized sense of self and the emergence of every more complex ‘detour behaviours’ involving deferred gratification, self-monitoring and self-control. The resulting pattern of behaviour was, he argued, so ingrained, automatic and apparently self-regulating, as to appear wholly natural [31]. This ‘second nature’ was both produced by and in turn facilitated both the process of state formation and the emergence of price-setting markets. Elias’s account of the formation of markets, nation-states and psyches complements Karl Polanyi’s more narrowly focused account of capitalist modernization as ‘the great transformation’ – a process which centred on the ‘disembedding’ of price-setting markets from their social and

cultural contexts [32–34].

Although he is insistent on the possibility of fluctuating spurts of civilisation and decivilization [35], Elias greatly underplays the extent to which the processes of individualization, disenchantment, rationalization and functional democratization in complex societies, simultaneously undermine shared and taken for granted normative structures and patterns of ‘shared involvement’ that play an important stabilizing function. In the twentieth century, unprecedented growth, material welfare and consumption became central for political legitimation. Higher levels of detachment in everyday life have become interdependent with the irrationality of global markets, psychopathologies of individualism and narcissism, and mass consumption. An implicit dimension of the argument that follows is that Elias overstates the extent to which ‘involvement’ and ‘fantasy thinking’ can be banished to the margins of complex societies. Rather than the elimination of involvement, effective individual and social regulation requires the integration of scientific model-making with structures of meaning and signification that can only emerge from shared rituals of involvement associated with religion. Where secularism has tried to banish involvement in the name of rational humanism it has produced only warped and ‘bad’ religions.

## 2.2. The Complete Act

The ‘complete act’ refers to the integral nature of a societal complex in which a single set of principles activates and resonates through all the institutions and domains of a society at a particular time. As Henri de Lubac (1998 xix) [36] pointed out in his foundational study of the history and character of medieval biblical interpretation: “Something that existed long ago was, in its time, ‘a complete act,’ and it must be understood as such, in its totality.” Andrew Willard Jones (2017) [37] elaborates the concept with reference to 13<sup>th</sup> century France under the reign of Louis IX<sup>th</sup>. In this society the di-

vision between Church and State that seems obvious and common sensical to the modern mind, was not only not operative but would have been quite literally incomprehensible. ‘Church’ and ‘state’ as separate categories would have made no sense. Christian religion was the foundation, context, lens, affective-complex and cognitive-perceptual apparatus through and upon which all action, decision, interpretation took place. “If we insist on reading our understanding of the secular and of the religious back into this world, what we see is that the government of both kings and priests were thoroughly secular—of course, they were also both thoroughly religious. Our modern categories do not hold” [38].

In a sense this is a fine-grained iteration of the triad of controls. Lubac and Jones’ insistence that taken for granted modern categories are thoroughly misleading when applied unthinkingly to deeply coupled social-psychological regimes of a previous era, is substantially the same point made by Norbert Elias in *On the Process of Civilization* (2012) [28]: that for instance taken for granted modern expectations with regard to privacy, bowel control or the restraint of violent impulses are confounded by any close scrutiny of early-medieval society. The psychological, social, economic and ecological modalities were mutually conditioning and interdependent, developing in tandem. Not only would denizens of 13<sup>th</sup> century France not have understood the possibility of sovereign individual agents operating independently of family, community, church and the ascriptive locus of birth. But the more viscous and deeply relational understanding of the individual mirrored the taken for granted operation of a subsistence economy in which relationships of exchange were embedded in the warp and weft of very place-bound social relations, and genuinely price-setting markets (of the kind signified to any modern observer by ‘market’ or ‘supply and demand’) operated only to a limited extent, especially in relation to certain internationally traded commodities.

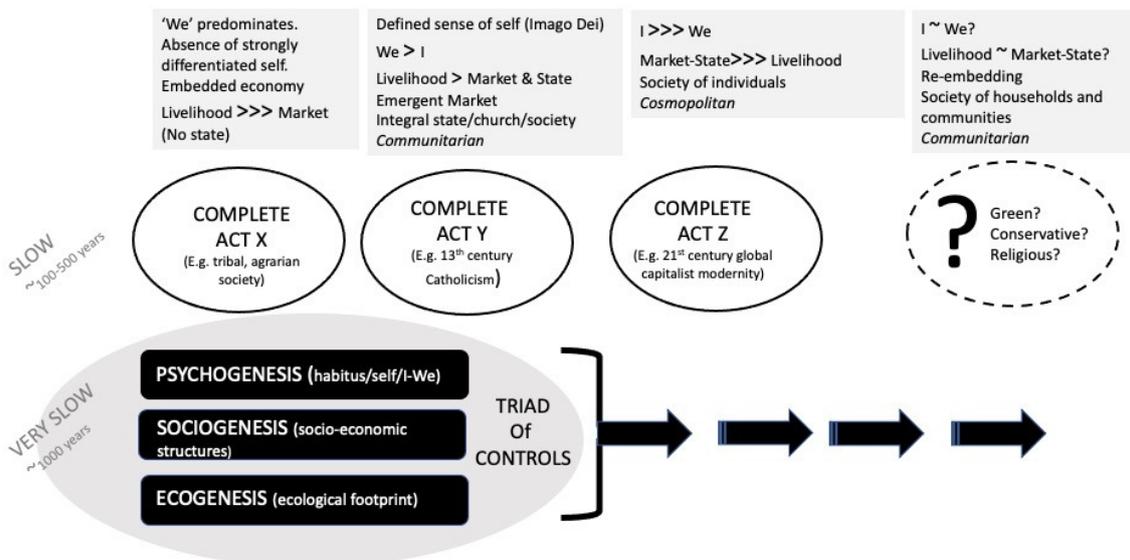


Figure 1. The Triad of Control conditions the Complete Act.

### 2.3. From Here to There: The Problem of Transition

Jones' conception of the Complete Act perfectly captures a central difficulty when thinking about paradigm change at the level of society. Individuals conditioned and socialized in a given society, by the parameters of a specific 'complete act' are neurologically distinct. Quite literally, their brains are different and have developed in close correspondence to the wider pattern of society. The universality of phylogenetic human nature notwithstanding, culture deeply constrains and conditions personality. This is what Elias means when he refers to 'second nature'. All humans have the same human nature *qua species* attributes of humanity. But second nature – which determines many of the more obvious patterns of ingrained response and action to the infinite variety of social situations and contexts – is specific and unique to particular societies.

This presents an intractable problem of interpretation. Ultimately, it is impossible for modern humans to comprehend let alone recover the muted ego and immersive, 'participating consciousness' that characterised early humans living in small bands or even that of polytheistic tribal societies that predominated prior to the 'axial age' [16,18,39].

The same difficulty presents when considering any prospective paradigm change in society – the transition from one 'complete act' to another. Almost by definition, it is impossible for a would be change-maker in the present to anticipate, let alone to direct, society towards the contours of a new complete act. It's possible to run thought experiments as to the organization of this or that facet of society. Nineteenth century socialists could *imagine* a non-market, centrally planned economy. But they had no access to the existential reality of Soviet society or the project of 'new soviet man' as it actually unfolded. And in the same way, contemporary greens have almost no insight into the culture and personality of a truly sustainable society in which ecological constraints are built into the architecture not just of institutions (markets, the state, religion, family) but of the psyche.

On the other hand, there is some wriggle room in the word 'almost'. We can point with some certainty, from our understanding of the triad of controls, to specific combinations that are, to all intents, impossible. It is possible to discern cherished values and institutions that would be incompatible with any profound pattern of relocalization, re-embedding and simplification. We can say with certainty that degrowth is not a liberal project [2,7].

At the same time, if the prospective change involves recovering, to some or other degree, the architecture of an earlier form of society, then the analysis is on slightly more solid ground. On the basis of work by historians (e.g. Andrew Willard Jones [37,38], Carlo Ginzburg [40]) sociologists (e.g. Norbert Elias [12,28,29]) anthropologists (Morris Berman [17,18]), philologists (Owen Barfield [16]) and political economists (Karl Polanyi [32–34]) – we do know what a more embedded form of economy and society looked like in the past, and what it might look like in the future. The difficulty is that these hazy contours point at a society that is markedly different to that envisioned by greens who self-consciously seek

out a path towards a re-embedded (post, alt., anti) modernity.

On close examination, any feasible 'small and beautiful' future is likely to be more conservative, more religious and less liberal. It is not an accident that Leo Tolstoy, E.F. Schumacher, Kenneth Boulding, Herman Daly and Wendell Berry were Christians, or that Gandhi was a practicing Hindu.

### 3. Decadence, Virtue and the Individual: Modernity on Steroids and the Decline of the West

In Section 3 it is argued that Western modernity developed upon a cohesive foundation of Judeo-Christian virtue and the shared imaginary of the *Imago Dei*. At the same time, the decline of liberal modernity – whether in relation to political polarisation, social incoherence, psychological disarray or a generalized failure of ecological constraint – is very much linked to the collapse of the overt Judeo-Christian imaginary and the unhinging or unbounding of liberal individualism.

For 21<sup>st</sup> century conservatives, the distinctive features of the West centre on a set of cultural values associated with family, national identity, institutions of civil society such as the universities and an open media, and the central role of market society in generating technological innovation, social mobility and meritocracy. For liberals the idea of the West is synonymous with the project of the Enlightenment and is inextricably bound up with secularism, rationalism, science, liberal-democratic politics and human rights. For post-modern hyper-liberal antagonists of everything to do with the West, the emphasis is much more upon its supposedly intrinsic culpability for colonialism, imperialism, systemic racism, and the patriarchy [41].

But in these diverse frames of reference, there is one structural and ideational constant: individualism. Both modern conservatives and liberals celebrate a market society of individuals undergirded by a, more or less generous, welfare safety net. The radical progressives associated with woke politics on both sides of the Atlantic are also driven by the singular Western account of individual freedom and the right of all human beings to fulfil their individual potential as expressive and creative agents in the world without constraint. Habermas (1985) [42] famously theorised this grounding moral insight as an 'ideal speech situation.' Paradoxically, the radicalization of this unalloyed focus on individual freedom has seen radical progressive politics move towards identitarian group politics organized around race, gender and sexuality. Echoing revolutionary excesses of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, activists increasingly countenance punitive interventions targeting ostensibly privileged groups and designed to produce equal outcomes across an increasingly complex plethora of intersectional parameters. Hyper-individuals, disconnected from the warp and weft of shared communitarian value systems, are aggregated. The resulting forms of tribal collectivism struggle for control of top-down institutions – not only those associated with the state, but corporations, non-governmental organizations, charities and even churches.

Ironically, across all of these typically modern political orientations – conservative, liberal, libertarian and woke (hyper-liberal) – the shared commitment to the individual has a single source in the *Imago Dei* (humans made in the image of God) of Judeo-Christianity [43]. As Christopher Dawson [44] observed after the Second World War, the Catholic church (and later a more diverse Christianity) was the only institution and value system that ever achieved universal traction in Western Europe. It was this shared faith and the centrality of the sacral understanding of the individual, over and above any familial, tribal and even national affiliations, that undergirded the diverse paths to democracy and a culture of human rights.

‘As Kingsnorth writes: *‘The West’*, in other words, was born from the telling of one sacred story — a garden, an apple, a fall, a redemption — which shaped every aspect of life: the organisation of the working week; the cycle of annual feast and rest days; the payment of taxes; the moral duties of individuals; the attitude to neighbours and strangers; the obligations of charity; the structure of families; and most of all, the wide picture of the universe — its structure and meaning, and our place within it [41].

Holland [22] explores the same insight at much greater length in *Dominion*. Even the most atheistic anarchism or ardent gender activism are, he argues, fundamentally post-Christian to the extent that their point of departure is the foundational, sacral rendering of the individual as *Imago Dei*.

However, over the last two hundred years the same economic transformation that has created a mobile society of individuals and made possible the seemingly inexorable process of democratization – has also undermined the very conditions that made this path possible in the first place. As Polanyi described at length [32–34], capitalist modernization saw an inexorable disembedding of the process of economic exchange from wider cultural, religious and political considerations. The condition for price-setting markets that even approximated to the free play of supply and demand – the invisible hand, imagined by Adam Smith – was precisely that value and prices became severed from the ontological meaning frameworks that suffused other domains such as family and church, and from the rituals and relations that wove together place-bound communities. Elsewhere, I have described this in terms of the subordination of the domain of Livelihood to the atomizing and tandem logic of both Market and State ([8], Ch. 1-4 [45,46]).

William Ophuls (2011) [21] described this process, whereby the success of Western modernity in the end undermines itself, in terms of an ‘aquifer’ or ‘lodestone’ of fossilised virtue inherited from traditional society. Liberal society prospered and looked stable for nearly two centuries in so far as this lodestone served an orienting compass function, regulating individual and group behaviour as well as national politics in accordance with a set of straightforwardly biblical ethical imperatives derived, at heart, from the Ten Commandments. With the rush for demographic and ideational diversity, the undermining of shared national reli-

gion and a mood of pervasive relativism that has gathered pace in the century after Matthew Arnold’s poignant reflection on the retreating tide of faith, not to mention the default metaphysical materialism that animates consumerism and the permissive society – Ophuls observes, rather acidly, that the aquifer has not been replenished. In societies such as the UK, arguably, the aquifer began to run dry in the 1990s. Under Mrs Thatcher, the liberalization of Sunday trading, the big bang deregulation in the City of London, the elimination of even minimal Christian worship from Schools along with the mass migration (under Tony Blair), together sounded the death-knell for any idea of a shared Christian culture. But in its wake, 21<sup>st</sup> century Britons became steadily more individualistic, permissive and ever more dependent on the minimalist survival units of the State and the Market.

The celebrated Russian dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn was feted by Mrs Thatcher and other neo-conservative cold war warriors. But his own assessment of the plight of the West under their leadership was scathing. ‘The West is ineluctably slipping toward the abyss...losing...their religious essence as they thoughtlessly yield up their younger generations to atheism’ (1983) [47]. He was not wrong. As market individualism swept all before it, a combination of legal precedents and changing cultural mores confirmed the idea of religion as an essentially private matter. The medieval and ancient common sense that religion synonymous with unchosen, non-negotiable public duties became not just anachronistic but incomprehensible. The central idea of Cicero in *De Officiis* – that public virtue, honour and private interest must, as a function of Natural Law, coincide – which was earth shattering and revolutionary in the latter years of the Roman Republic, and foundational for the next 1700 years, has now become counter-intuitive and incomprehensible. “When religious duties are not fulfilled whether due to wilful negligence or the introduction of falsehoods about human and divine life, that unity is broken. We begin to see personal advantage and genuine virtue as being in conflict and so per pursue private interests without regard to what is actually good” ([48], Loc. 314). And as such, both individuals and society suffer a kind of disintegration.

As Kingsnorth (2021) [41] has observed, the net impact of individualization, social and spatial mobility, Weberian disenchantment and the retreat into the private interior realm – the construction of religion as, at best, an individual peccadillo – has been the loss of any structure of shared public taboo. In late modern societies, literally anything goes. In some ways the fact of what individuals can do, is of less import than the absence of any shared conception of what they should not.

Under Christendom, the *Imago Dei* was a foundational sensibility that first began to emerge in Israel under the influence of Elijah and Elisha with the insistence on fidelity to Yahweh alone and a process of interiorization associated with Hezekiah’s promotion of literacy and writing ([43], p. 27). A century later, asserting a nascent monotheism – that there was only one God, the Deuteronomists began to

forge a metaphysics of personhood ([43], p. 37). Denying the claims of ancestral clans, they insisted on the need for personal choice (Deut. 13: 6-10); rejected collective family accountability for crimes, asserting instead a revolutionary idea of personal responsibility; and even began to recognize the personhood of women who were removed from the list of possessions (Deut. 5:21).

Describing these tandem processes of psychological interiorization and the emergence of what would become the foundational Western and later modern understanding of individual personhood, Vernon's account entirely complements the historical exegesis of Tom Holland [22]. But these accounts are also suggestive about what has happened over the last two hundred years. Giving rise to unprecedented individual spatial and social mobility, the disembedding of the economy that defines Market Society has maximised the conditions for individualization, accentuating this process of interiorization to a degree that seems, to many, to be pathological. From a Christian perspective, Hahn and McGinley argue that, shorn of any connection to the transcendent – of any structure of constraint – the trajectory of individualization has become heretical, distorting the 'beautiful truth of the Imago Dei' such that the individual becomes the *only* locus of moral significance. The social catholic doctrine of subsidiarity is not, they argue, 'so much about devolution or federalism of efficiency, as it is about order – ensuring that each level of social organization takes responsibility for the goods proper to it' ([48], Loc. 591). This conception of 'thick communities' associated with their own rights and duties ([48], Loc. 579) requires a balance between the levels of individual, family, clan, place-bound community, nation and global community.

Not surprisingly, it is the social catholic doctrine of distributism [49] that provides the only compelling vision for a political economy in which the domains of Individual autonomy, Livelihood, Market and State find some kind of harmony. This is possible because the Catholic understanding of freedom is rooted in natural law and virtue ethics; and understood as being realised most fully by graceful submission to the transcendent order of the universe (God's will, or the Natural Law). In contrast, the kind of futile, petulant claims to sovereignty and autonomy that are central to the Cartesian and Enlightenment forms of individualism which animate secular ideologies (including the radical vision of woke liberals), are predicated on a metaphysical materialism that, in the end, denies any kind of transcendent meaning.

#### 4. Sustainability and the Conservative Impulse

In Section 4, this argument is further extended. Drawing on nineteenth century social catholic vision of a third way between state socialism and laissez faire market capital-

ism, it is argued that the political economy of distributism provides a most compelling basis for a truly alternative modernity, that is distinctively post-liberal whilst retaining the architecture of the democratic liberal state.

##### 4.1. Atheism and Economic Growth

The unsustainable growth society is synonymous with permissive society of mobile individuals. Here is the paradox. As Holland [22] demonstrates, the modern society of individuals is intrinsically post-Christian. The architecture of human rights, democracy, legal equality and moral individualism that animates all varieties of the liberal mind – neo-liberal, liberal, socialist, social democratic and woke-progressive – is inconceivable without this backstory of Judaism, post-Homeric Greece and Medieval Christianity. But at the same time, link between the paradoxical disembedding of the Imago Dei from a connection with God, metaphysical materialism, the Promethean drive for mastery of nature and consumerism is also internal. In the absence of God, psychological individuals do not disappear. They do not exit the stage of history and become dissolved once more into structures of unconscious participation that characterized human experience prior to what Jaspers called the Axial Age [18]. Rather, with the up-anchoring of modernity, the hero/immortality projects – the ideas, vocations, public roles that make life meaningful and through which individuals garner social esteem and ward off the deep-seated fear of mortality – require a new focus. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, individual mobility and passive consumption take on this role. Quite literally, consumer society is Mammon [50,51].

It is for this reason that an atheist liberalism is intrinsically corrosive of its own foundations. For two centuries, the stability of Western society was guaranteed by habitual and unconscious structures of shared virtue and taboo laid down by 1500 years of Christendom – a complete act that suffused every facet of motivation and incentive. Such stability didn't preclude constant change. Western society has been nothing if not dynamic. It did however sustain an overarching ontological frame of reference, taken for granted conceptions of virtue and moral-legal continuity. There was nothing overtly ecological or conservationist about this habitus. But it geared human achievement both individually and collectively at the level of family, community and nation, to transcendent goals that sought a relationship of grace between individuals estranged by sin and the transcendent. The concept of original sin rather than being an oppressive burden, functioned as a great leveller – guaranteeing a moral equality and starting point, as well as a realistic understanding of the tension between our flawed human nature (motivations, incentive structures, patterns of behaviour) and the way of being to which we aspire as moral agents.

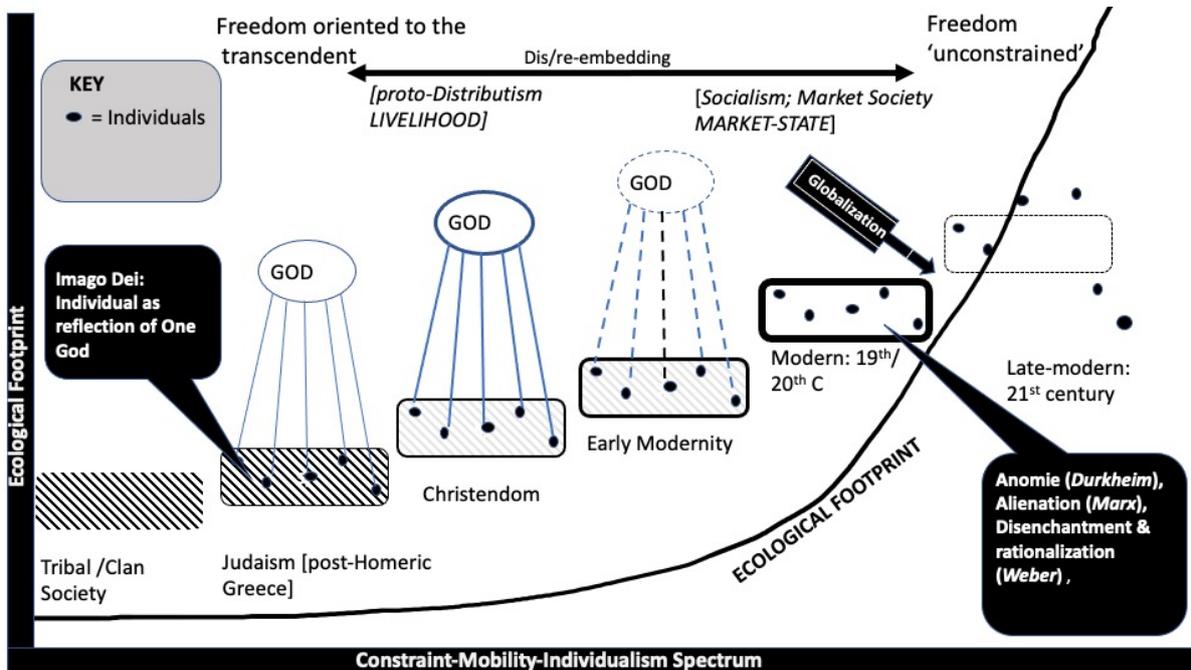


Figure 2. The Imago Dei and Modernization.

For all the enormous achievements of Western modernity [52], there is ample evidence not only that the ecological costs [53] are becoming existential, but that the social costs in terms of happiness and societal function are also becoming unsupportable in terms of a wide variety of metrics including declining female happiness [54], health [55], social capital formation [56,57], psychological resilience [58], the collapse of marriage, child mental health etc.

Steven Pinker (a classical liberal) and many right-wing libertarians, and market-oriented neo-liberal or 'neo-con' conservatives, tend to deny the reality of the global ecological crisis whilst highlighting such social costs as a function of progressive welfare systems which, they argue, undermine incentives and unravel traditional institutions such as marriage. This argument is not directed at such commentators. Social conservatives also often tend, in practice, to underestimate the corrosive impact of the market and the intrinsic tension between capitalist modernization and a more viscous society of families and households.

Left-wing, progressive and greens find themselves in a much more difficult position. It seems incontrovertible that there is a tension between the trajectory of ecological restraint and that of unanchored Promethean freedom (see Figure 2). With respect to the Polanyian problematic of 'instituted economic process' [46], any significant, albeit partial, re-embedding of market relations into the warp and weft of wider substantive relationships and values, challenges the inevitability of individual spatial and social mobility as the primary societal good. It also brings into question the idea that the primary survival units guaranteeing individual security and well-being across the life-course should centre on the Market (jobs, private pensions, private health) and /or the State (unemployment benefit, health systems, social housing, social

insurance etc). The logic of both Market and State is towards some balance of more liberal or more collectivist individuation: mobile individuals relating to each other as consumers or citizens. Note that collectivism is not the antonym of individualism. Rather it pertains to the way in which atomized individuals are organised and relate to each other i.e. centrally by way of the state. In the case of both, the viscous, pre-cognitive mutual affiliations of family, interdependent function and place-bound community (Livelihood) are muted by design and often expunged altogether. Thus, states resist the logic and attractions of unregulated home-schooling. Big box retailers operating in the context of the abstract market of global supply chains displace market-places, in which exchange is moderated and leavened by face-to-face interactions and dependencies. Church affiliation and religious ritual become private issues of lifestyle rather than conduits for the affirmation of public morality.

With respect to the notion of the 'complete act,' different modalities of constraint operate in tandem. From the Eliasian perspective, the process of civilisation is synonymous with heightened controls over nature, controls over/between people and groups and controls over self (Figure 1). With regard to the latter, Elias describes the internalization of controls and the movement from external constraint to internal self-restraint. The society of individuals is one in which the diffuse restraining impact of opaque relations of interdependency gradually replaces mechanical political or coercive constraints, the latter moving behind the veil of social complexity. This internalization of restraints has been associated with a dramatic reduction in the scale and intensity of interpersonal violence in advanced modern societies [31].

However, despite growing understanding of collective ecological impacts and affective-laden affiliations with the natu-

ral world [59,60], this sociology of internalised restraint has not engendered an ecological civilizing process [61]. Rather, modernity brings with it a paradox: the ecological cost of a civilization that can begin to discern its own ecological footprint turns out to be very high. Scientific understanding comes with a prohibitive price tag for the simple reason that an electron microscope or Hubble telescope can only be the function of an enormously complex economy associated with unprecedented flows of energy and materials. The same technology that allows us to see from without, the biosphere as a blue-green pinprick of biological complexity floating against the infinite backdrop of space, simultaneously threatens to destroy that fragile beauty [62]. Thus, moving from left to right in Figure 2, from a more to a less embedded society of mobile individuals, involves an inevitable increase in metabolic scale and ecological impacts.

From this perspective, the trajectories of atheism, metaphysical materialism and unrestrained individualism, as well as a more restrained and ordered social peace, unfold in tandem – towards greater complexity, Promethean ambition and unrestrained ecological impacts. At the same time, the Eliasian social peace that emerges on the back of functional democratization [29], does not necessarily engender greater happiness or harmony. Rather, the more restrained and individuated personality of modern societies is subject to greater mental stress, feelings of ambiguity, unhappiness and alienation; the resulting individuals are more self-reflective, self-conscious, self-monitoring, but also sometimes self-harming and self-critical. Herein lies a paradox, that modern conceptions of freedom, autonomy and individual sovereignty depend on the coalescence of a bounded self that is intrinsically more vulnerable.

This working out of the triad of controls (Figure 1) presents, for Greens, a Gordian knot. Ecological restraint would require, to a significant degree, the re-embedding of market relations and the emergence of more viscous or ‘sticky’ Livelihood forms of community in which social action is constrained to a greater extent:

1. by the web of personal dependencies and face-to-face relationships and
2. by the dethroning of personal consumption and individual achievement as the principal source of meaning and ontological security.

Any resurrection of the umbilical connection between a transcendent God, socially embedded and ritualised conceptions of virtue and the meaning of life for individuals would be radically green in effect without necessarily any conscious ecological intent – if only because the emphasis on neighbourliness and community and the partial devaluation of wealth, lend themselves to more restrained, embedded, market-places articulated in the domain of Livelihood rather than Market or State.

On the other hand, such a pattern of degrowth would not be liberal. There is a real likelihood that a reduction in complexity and in the scale and intensity of interdependencies between strangers (moving from right to left on Figure 2) would see a decrease in the internalized controls on interpersonal

violence, and the re-emergence of a more impulsive structure of personality and an increase in involvement/detachment ratios in social action across the board [2,6,7,63] i.e. a reduced propensity for people to model and calculate the costs of this or that action and a greater play of the affects in social action.

#### 4.2. Distributism

The name that Catholics have given to this kind of political economy is Distributism. Derived from Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) and Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), Distributism was a response to what social catholic teaching saw as the excesses of both left and right in the prevalent theories of political economy. Hostile to the over-reach of both the State (bureaucratic socialism) and the Market (laissez faire liberalism), Distributism favours a maximal distribution of private property, the decentralization (as far as possible) of production and the reassertion of family and the domain of Livelihood as a counterweight to the State-Market. Advocated most effectively by GK Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc [64,65], and overlapping with the ideas of Christian socialists and the Guild Socialist movement associated in the UK with GDH Cole and William Morris, Distributism tends to be sympathetic to cooperative and mutual forms of productive organization, small family farms and household-scale businesses.

The central principle of ‘subsidiarity’ can be seen as the central Catholic contribution to political economy. The core idea is that functions should be performed by the smallest unit possible. Expounded in *Quadragesimo Anno*, the principle enshrines the sacral autonomy and sovereignty of the individual created in God's image. But it also equally enshrines roles for functional units and levels right up to the nation and beyond. In this sense it is a fundamentally ecological view that underlines the complex whole of the social organism – at odds with both corporate and state centralism but also the libertarian individualism of the Austrian school of economics or Ayn Rand.

Since the 2008 crash Pope Francis has reanimated the debate, attacking unfettered global capitalism in the encyclical *Evangelii gaudium* in which he argued:

*“Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. [...] A new tyranny is thus born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules. To all this we can add widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion, which has taken on worldwide dimensions. The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits.”*

#### 4.3. Distributism and Sustainability

For all that these ideas having been in circulation for over a century, and despite (or because of) their overlap with both social democracy and market liberal agendas, Distributism has made little impact politically. However, it may finally come

of age as a political ideology for three reasons.

- (i) After 200 years of utilitarianism and materialism, it is becoming apparent to many people that the path of scientism and rationalism is incapable of steering human development. Bereft of real meaning human systems have latched onto hero/immortality projects (to use Becker's terms [50]) of the lowest common denominator, and resulting in a frantic, never-ending struggle over the means of conspicuous consumption [66]. Having near depleted the reservoir of virtue that has sustained liberal society, democratic polities in the West are experiencing concatenating crises in relation to migration, economic change and diverse moral problems relating, in particular, to the politics of gender and race. The populist ballot box insurrections since 2015 demonstrate that there is an appetite for new ideas and policies, but most of all for new meanings and narratives. One such ontological framework involves Christianity and a renewed articulation between the sacral individual and a transcendent God – the kind of real freedom to flourish under conditions of Natural Law described by Hahn and McGinley (2020) [48] above.
- (ii) With the so-called 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution associated with the Internet of Things and a series of process innovations such as additive manufacturing, the economy is on the cusp of a paradigm shift. Where 18<sup>th</sup> century steam power led to the centralization of production, these new technologies are likely to see an enormous increase in small-batch household scale production and repair – in relation to sophisticated technologies that have hitherto remained the province of capital-intensive corporations. Kevin Carson has called this vision of low-overhead domestic fabrication the 'Home-Brew Industrial Revolution' ([67]; see also [68]).
- (iii) In this context, Distributism might possibly do what 'ecological' or 'green' economics has consistently failed to do for over 50 years i.e. to provide a political path to a lower metabolism more localized economy. Greens have always assumed that a green economy must be informed by overtly green values. This is clearly not the case. Palaeolithic hunter-gathers were very green with respect to their impacts but far removed from any conservation ethic or sensibility [69]. Ecology is above all a matter of metabolic scale. Distributism leverages an ancient Catholic view of justice to effect a back door to a green economy -something recognized long ago by E.F. Schumacher in the 1970s [70] cult book *Small is Beautiful*.

## 5. How to do it? Pattern Language as the Rosetta Stone for the Political Economy of both Sustainability and the Christendom

In Section 5 I draw upon Christopher Alexander's pattern language theory delineate a political economy of sustainability rooted in the social catholic vision of embedded markets,

family centred production and subsidiarity.

### 5.1. A Pattern Language for Sustainability

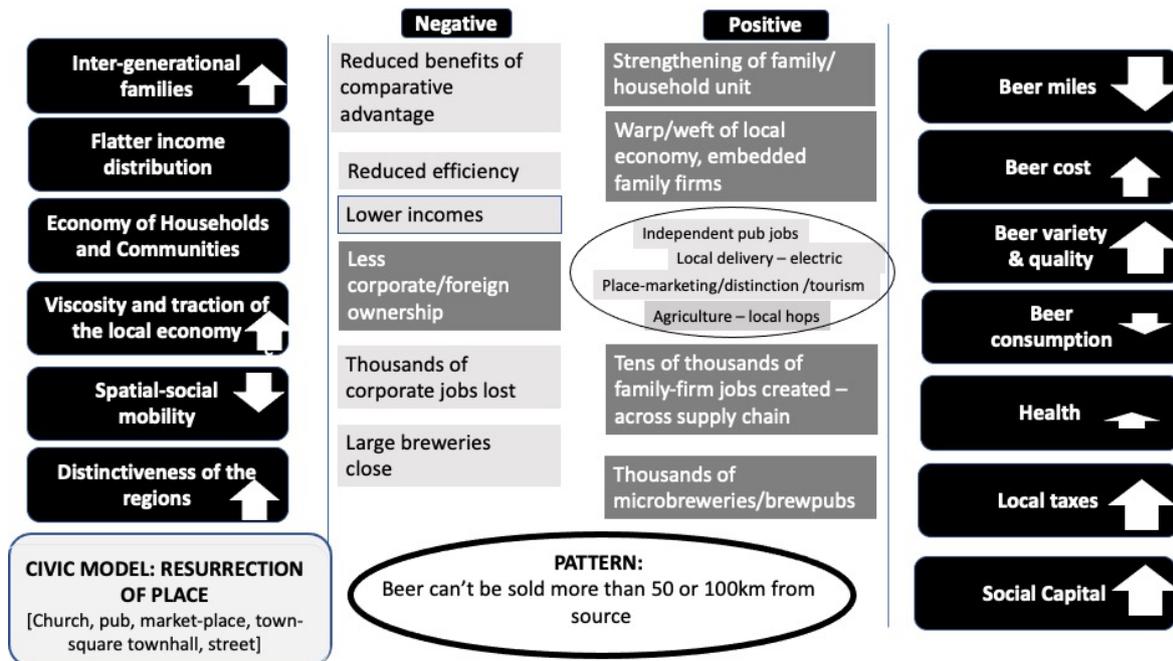
Christopher Alexander (1977) [71] developed the Pattern Language as a response to modern architecture. Even the best designed modern cities couldn't rival the natural organic beauty of the world's most attractive and loved vernacular settlements E.g. a hilltop town in Tuscany, the York Shambles, Old Delhi, an Irish long house. And modernism mostly produces inhuman and unappealing environments. Exploring why this was the case, Alexander came to recognize any vernacular as the intersection and intergenerational accumulation of dozens of 'tried and tested solutions to recurring [functional, aesthetic, engineering] problems.' In *The Pattern Language* he sought to describe thousands of such problem-solutions to create a repertoire with which architects could draw upon to produce more pleasing, timeless and natural built environments.

This approach has great potential for exploring the kind of Distributist policy repertoire through which we might recover the 'timeless' way of organizing an economy and society. The goal is to edge social, economic and cultural arrangements into reverse gear and to move them incrementally towards more embedded, localist, lower-overhead, lower throughput modalities which are ostensibly geared towards values such as 'ontological meaning' and 'virtuous relations', whilst delivering sustainable metabolism by the back door.

### 5.2. Example 1: Beer

Brewing used to be the most highly distributed of all trades. All villagers wanted beer. Liquid was expensive to transport, and as a live product, real ale didn't last very long. It was brewed to be drunk, in situ. In the UK, even as peasant homebrewing and brewpubs gave way to industrial production, the scale was small by contemporary standards, and all towns had at least one brewery. Those breweries have long since closed down and, a proliferation of brave microbreweries notwithstanding, the industry is dominated by enormous corporations who ship billions of gallons of dubious quality, identikit lager around the world.

Figure 3 'Pattern # Brewing Beer' sketches the marked Distributist impact of restricting the transport of beer. This simple change in the regulation of the industry would transform a monopolist sector dominated by global corporations into the quintessential domain of small family firms. As well as contributing in a small way to the embedding of economic activity and the privileging of market-places over abstract price-setting markets working without reference to culture or geography. To the extent that, the renewal of small business creates inter-generational family business, co-operatives and relations of mutual dependence with other businesses (delivery firms, local restaurants, farmers), this kind of measure has the potential to resurrect both community and small-market capitalism, whilst contributing to a much greener regime of production and consumption, including the reuse of bottles and carbon free transport.



**Figure 3.** Pattern # Local brewing.

### 5.3. Example 2: A Localist Pattern for Higher Education

Elsewhere I have argued that: “Since the 1990s, the higher education sector has ballooned at the expense of technical and craft skills training. The model which has been taken for granted – of specialised, residential, collegiate, academic training taking place away from home – was based on an assumption of spatial and social mobility. Children of just eighteen leave the places where they grew up, often never to return for any length of time. This weakens their aesthetic and affective attachments to these places; dissolving entanglements of mutual reciprocity in the community; undermining the habits of cohabitation, mutual care and understanding between inter-dependent adults in nuclear and even extended families [72].”

Universities function, for all intents and purposes, to enhance spatial and social mobility – to sever the links between students and their families, place-bound communities, occupational traditions. For most of the last century, in complex civic-national societies, these features of the system have been construed as virtues: the creation of mobile citizens with transferable skills and able to slot into vacancies in the economy as they arise.

But from the perspectives of both (a) ecology and growth and (b) social cohesion and virtue, this system – now, as a matter of national pride, embracing the majority of school leavers – is highly problematic. By undermining place-bound structures of signification and familial transmission of ritual and religious tradition, the state of hyper-mobility engenders a permanent state of ontological insecurity [73]

and a transactional approach to social life that spills over into every area of the lifeworld including sex, dating, marriage and parenting (not least with dating sites such as Tinder – [74,75]).

From an anthropological point of view, it is very clear that, considered as a rite of passage, the generalization of a UK elite residential model of higher education wrests issues of acculturation and ‘finishing’ away from place-bound parents and communities and instead puts the onus formally on what Gellner (1983) [76] referred to as the ‘exo-education’ agencies of the State (in so far as universities are public institutions) but more realistically on the cosmopolitan, permissive and individualist domain of the State-Market. ‘Parents and communities stop here! You no longer have a role. Your children are being groomed for greater things!’

A pattern language approach would reverse, at least partially, the logic of this ‘exo-education,’ shifting the locus of acculturation and socialization back to inter-generational family and place-bound community. In this respect, perhaps the single most important domain is social media. Diversity and an ethos libertarian moral individualism makes this problem seem particularly intractable, simply because of the difficulty of generating a binding (and coercive) cultural consensus about the relation between parenting and technology. However, even today, there is an ongoing debate. Jonathan Haidt (2022) [77] recently suggested instituting a legal minimum age for child access to mobile telephony and coercive crowd technologies such as Instagram and Twitter.

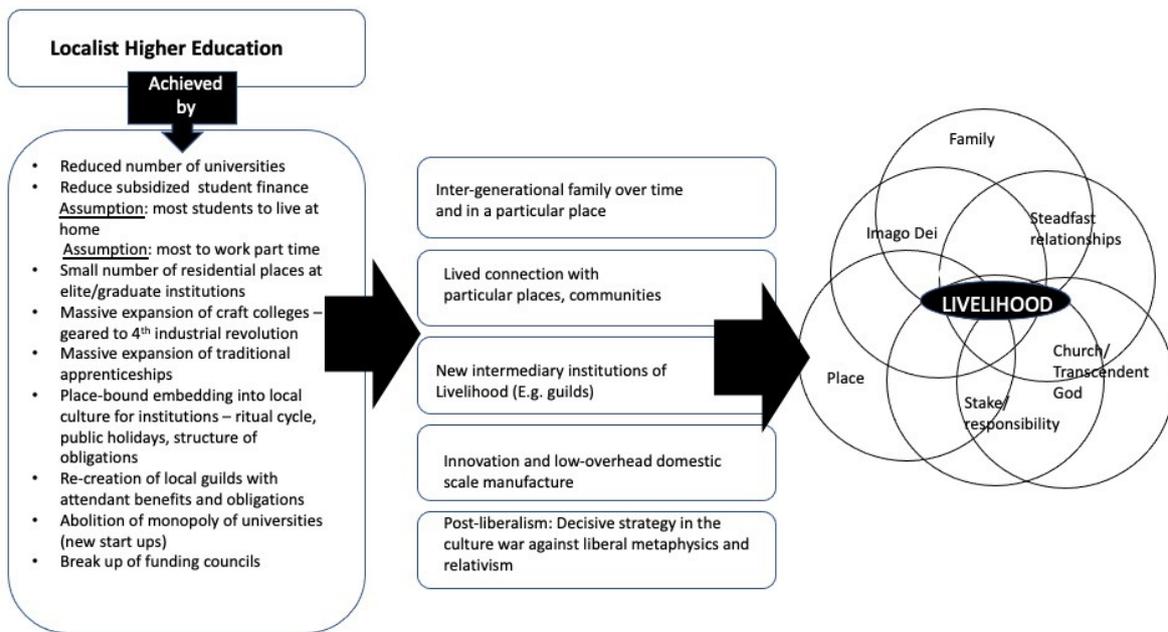


Figure 4. Pattern # Local Education.

Rather than generating mobile, autonomous citizen-consumers, detached from any particular community, indifferent to the narratives and mythologies of a particular place, and interdependent only in an abstract, functional sense – a localist education system would serve to consolidate the weave of particular, context-bound communities. For sure, modern societies require a steady stream of highly educated graduate students to service the bureaucratic and corporate elite. In France this function was traditionally given over to extremely competitive national institutions such as the Sorbonne. But seeking to expand this experience to more than fifty percent of the population has resulted in sharply diminishing returns. Re-localizing the system from the ground up would see changes in primary and secondary education:

- Family and church more involved in the socialization and acculturation of children, and the state less
- Greater autonomy for head teachers to run schools in accordance with the wishes of parents with less micro-management by school boards and local education authorities
- More endorsement of homeschooling and other non-state forms of schooling cooperative

The Pattern for higher education would see: a greater diversity of more local institutions; a resurgence of polytechnic craft colleges; part-time study as the norm; more diverse research funding channels; a strong expectation that undergraduates would live at home; public rites of passage and ritual cycles linked to public holidays in particular cities and towns; much more support for small business spin offs etc. The overarching goal of both K12 and HE would be to consolidate local familial and regional attachments, to build social capital, to reduce but not eliminate social-spatial mobility and to increase the viscosity of social relations. The effect of such policies would be to reduce the transactional

nature of relationships, increase the ‘relational drag’ both in the market and within communities and foster the partial re-embedding of social and economic life. None of this implies any utopian project of getting rid of price-setting markets -with all of the efficiencies they bring in terms of comparative advantage and the allocation of resources. But it would provide a context in which the domain of Livelihood would re-expand as a ‘survival unit’ (Elias 1991) [12] and a source of individual security, allowing a partial contraction in the domains of State and Market.

## 6. Conclusion

Over the last 200 years economic growth has expanded as a function of State and Market necessitating a corollary contraction in mutual, familial, subsistence and community-bound forms of security associated with the domain of Livelihood. At the same time, secularism and a profound metaphysical materialism have seen the enormous spiritual and moral achievement of the Imago Dei transmuted into what amounts to a kind of idolatrous worship of the sovereign individual as the only source and metric of value. Under pressure from globalization without and hyper-individualism below, the stable civic-national we-identity of the nation-state has, in many cases, begun to unravel – resulting in diverse populist backlashes. Exactly the same configuration of disembedded price-setting markets, metaphysical materialism, ontological/epistemological/moral relativism and transactional individualism have also driven the global ecological crisis by morphing the technological potential of modern societies into a passive but inexorable consumerism. The consumer society should, above all, be understood as a moral crisis of subsidiarity. In Christian terms, it represents an Idolatrous break between the Imago Dei on the one hand, and the constraining and liberating context of a

transcendent God, on the other.

A more ecologically restrained kind of modernity cannot be liberal. And degrowth has the potential to eviscerate all of the gains of moral individualism and emancipation that have, in part, defined the modern experience over the last 200 years [2,5–7,9]. But a partial shift (Figure 2) in the direction of Christendom, the reanimation of Western culture by the singular vision of Judeo-Christianity, could see a genuine alternative to the transactional individualism of the consumer society. With regard to the pattern language of such a trajectory, one could do worse than to imagine small cities and towns structured around the distinctive configuration of Church, Pub, Market-Place, School, Village Green, Allotments, Family Farms, Mainstreet. As trivial and sentimental as this seems, we know it makes a kind of gestalt sense because this pattern continues to recur in children's TV and literature, in popular fiction and in wistful evocations of a possible green future – not least Hopkin's *Transition Handbook* [78]. But if this is the direction that Greens would like to go, they would have to bite the bullet and embrace the historic primacy of Christendom in both creating the potential of a liberal-market society [79,80] but also, in framing and restraining that potential for the spiritual, human and ecological common good. Any such 're-Christianization' of society certainly has implications for non-Christians and secularists – in exactly the same way that woke-identity politics has implications for both (classic) liberals and communitarians.

Christendom doesn't necessarily require the imposition of a theocracy as with the more radical vision of Catholic integralism [81]. But it does pre-suppose a counter-hegemony (in Gramsci's sense) at the level of taken for granted values and common sense. This is exactly why the culture war is a 'war'. Both sides of this conflict intimate at least some degree of cultural and even state coercion. The relativism of far-left identity politics functions (as many have observed) very much as a religion with notions of orthodoxy, heresy, universalism and coercion. It is predicated on a combination of hyper-individualism combined with an aggregative state-collectivism and an accelerating trajectory of global integration. Any more place-bound, constrained and communitarian version of post-liberal society that at the same time attends to the autonomy and sovereignty of individuals seems inconceivable without a shared, hegemonic structure of feeling that derives from the central imaginary of the *Imago Dei*. This central legacy of Judeo-Christianity is the central truth that emerges from the work of historians such as Larry Siedentop and Tom Holland. To the extent that post-Christian political traditions such as socialism, secular liberalism or developmental nationalism have articulated a vision of human rights, this has invariably been rooted in the Western Enlightenment and (following Holland and Siedentop and Macintyre as well as Taylor) European Christendom. If there is an alternative well-spring for sacral individualism, it has yet to show its face.

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