

The Resilient Society

The Red- or Blue Planet

Your Choice, Our Future

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Ivo Lammertink (2024)

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The Resilient Society

The blue- or red planet: Your choice, our future

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*“Problems cannot be solved at the same level of thinking
that created them”*

Albert Einstein

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-Preface-

Imagine standing at a monumental crossroads. Facing a choice that will define the future of the planet and humanity itself. It's like the moment in *The Matrix* where you choose the red pill or the blue pill. Red literally represents the red dusty planet Mars and Blue the endless oceans of Earth. The red pill is in contrast to the Matrix the pill of ignorance. Believing one person can not make a difference, and pointing the fingers at others. The blue pill represents seeing the truth of the challenges we face and taking responsibility. Becoming aware that every decision you take is one that negatively or positively contributes to our existence. Do we continue down a path that leads to a barren, inhospitable Earth, where the rich live in capsules on Mars? Or do we choose a new path, one where Earth remains a thriving, vibrant home for all?

Visionaries like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos are already paving the way for life on Mars. It would be a last resort, a desperate measure. Imagine the stark, red landscape, the absence of greenery, the confinement within artificial habitats. There would be no blue skies, no green fields, no oceans. It's a bleak existence, one that underscores the urgency of our current choices.

Now, let's contrast this with our beautiful Earth. A planet perfectly designed to support life. Our forests

are full of life, our oceans are teeming with energy, and every sunrise and sunset is a canvas of the most brilliant painters. Earth's distance from the sun is just right to sustain life, creating a balance that Mars could never replicate.

This book invites you on a journey. We will explore the challenges facing our world and the crucial choices we must make. Through stories and ideas, we will chart a path towards a resilient society that can withstand and thrive amid future crises.

Join me as we dive into the necessity of building a resilient society. Together, we can choose a future where Earth remains a vibrant, thriving home for humanity.

The choice is yours. Do we opt for the bleak existence on Mars, or do we strive to preserve the lush, life-sustaining beauty of Earth?

It is my second year at the university, the spring of 2013. Mr. Marchmann, a passionate American lecturer, stirred our minds with a fervent discourse on the imperfections of capitalism. I find myself spellbound, captivated by the depth of his insights and the fresh perspectives he unfolded.

On the whiteboard, he illustrates a line of rising prices through the last decades while below there is a line of income that remains almost stable. He colors the resulting gap and points out, "This is the credit gap. This is the root cause of the escalating inequality fostered by our capitalist system. The cost of goods and services soars, outpacing our incomes. People are forced to dance

with credit – larger mortgages, more credit card debt, more loans. The outcome? Soaring household debts and the occasional financial cataclysm, like the infamous crash of 2008. The wealth generated by surging prices finds its way mainly into the pockets of shareholders, exacerbating inequality.’

The rest of the lecture he elaborates on the goals of capitalism, such as the growth of economies and wealth accumulation, and how this way of thinking is ingrained in our society. My study focuses on sustainability, and something struck me after that lecture. I realize that our economies always seek to grow, but how can this be done in a world with limited resources? Then I realize one simple truth: our economic system is inherently unsustainable.

Since my childhood, I have always carried a deep aversion to wasting food, energy, and materials. As I lie in my bed, I wonder if I had switched off the lights. I would walk through the house, double check, and go back to bed. Yet again, I would think to myself whether I was entirely sure. I was already sleepy and maybe I overlooked one light or did not hear the tap running? I would go out for a second time and sometimes even a third. It sounds like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), but I blame the old Mickey Mouse cartoon (from 1940) in which the water keeps overflowing. I would have thoughts of our house flooding if I did not check it often enough. It was also the idea that we would waste our resources by leaving the tap running or lights on. To throw food away would be too painful to watch and I would

rather eat it all myself to the point of nausea.

I have always been in love with nature and societies. Traveling extensively with my family, I'd witnessed slums, plastic pollution on pristine shores, and crime in different corners of the world. However, I always returned home amazed by the kindness of strangers and the awe-inspiring beauty of our planet. It is all so precious and this world can be a paradise when we can find ways to live in harmony with each other and the earth.

During my university years, I frequently sought Mr. Marchmann's office to engage in philosophical debates about political-economic systems. I am grateful how he often took the time out of his busy schedule for these moments. As we dialogued, I pondered what I should do with my life if I did not want to contribute to the ceaseless march of capitalism. Most career paths in the Netherlands and abroad seemed inevitability tied to the capitalist pursuit of unending growth.

I delved deeper into the literature, joined movements, attended discussion groups, and worked on sustainability projects with a municipality and a consultancy firm. I came across many books that wrote on alternative political-economic systems. These books all contain some truth to an alternative system, but at times felt a bit abstract or offered in my opinion too small a solution for the worldwide scale challenges we are dealing with.

My thoughts began to crystallize as I pondered what a comprehensive alternative system might resemble. Over time, I realized I was shaping a blueprint of my

own. We built on the shoulders of giants as the saying goes and I also saw that my idea combines many alternative ideas. A planned economy with direct democracy, an expanded commons, and markets with 50% shareholder influence by the state on environmental issues and labor rights. Plus, the overall goal is not economic growth but to create a more resilient society. I felt like I got something here and decided to make a book out of it.

I never thought I would write a book given that there was a time in high school when they even thought I had dyslexia. In retrospect, I think I was merely a slow reader and by reading many books in my youth I have improved my reading and writing. Writing this book became a journey that spanned years, filled with personal challenges that tested my resilience. Some days I wished I never started writing this book. To be ignorant. As the saying goes “ignorance is bliss”. Leading a simpler life would have been an easier path had I chosen to remain indifferent to global issues and never embarked on writing this book. I could have avoided the constant evaluation of my decisions based on their potential impact on nature and others. I might have evaded the responsibility that comes with scrutinizing my choices, whether it be opting for air travel or occasionally using a combustion engine vehicle. Yet, armed with the knowledge I now possess, I am convinced that any individual with a bit of morality would inherently feel compelled to make an effort in contributing to a better world.

I eventually found my path and got back on my feet. I am working on myself by learning, adapting, and

realizing that I cannot do everything alone. These days, my work is also my hobby and I have found the right balance between work and writing.

Since the world never stops changing, finding resilience is a matter of reflecting, learning, and adapting, and we often times need to stop and take a step back. We need to feel, see, and reflect on where we are heading and if this is a preferred state of being for both ourselves as individuals and also the community at large, and the earth. We must learn, reflect, adapt, and face challenges together. These are some of the most important insights from resilience thinking, which will help individuals and societies face the challenges ahead. I hope that, just as my teacher did for me, I can inspire you by providing you with a new perspective and ignite a passion to become part of a societal change.

-Introduction-

The purpose of this book is to make you aware of the societal challenges we face and activate you to contribute to a resilient society. This book utilizes a basic structure that explains why we need a system change, what the alternatives are, and how, when, and where we will set the transition toward the alternative of a more Resilient Society.

The phrase “system change” to most readers will sound abstract, mundane, and vague. If we make it more concrete with the commonly used capitalism vs. communism axis, this phrase can still seem distant from our daily reality. Yet, as we will unearth within these pages, these systems are but abstract embodiments of our daily values and conduct.

What do we value as important and how do we interact with each other? It becomes more real when we talk about buying a car or sharing a vehicle via a car-sharing app. It speaks more to our imagination when I raise the question if we should pay our energy, telecommunications, and health bills to private companies or if these services should be provided by the state? Do we, as individuals, companies, and countries always need to grow our material wealth? Or are there more important goals we should strive for? What could be a more appropriate collective goal that supports everyone?

The somewhat complicated words “political economic systems” therefore imply these questions that are to be discussed. However, we should not get lost in trivial discussions, like what is the appropriate tax level for cars, or should straws no longer be provided in a restaurant? These are the discussions politicians have had for the last decades while the world is on fire. The political agendas rarely propose a radical systemic change, but rather simple adjustments of less market or more market, a touch more liberal or more conservative laws. Politicians these days are managers driven by the spotlight and ego instead of fierce believers in better worlds. Like corporations, they only reorganize some parts of their organization with new ministries and titles. However, they seldom question the collective goal. They manage us through one crisis after another while lacking the vision and courage to make radical long-term changes. These crises will only multiply if we keep managing them in the short term without considering the future. Minor adjustments won't suffice. To secure a harmonious and peaceful future with all the basic human needs for upcoming generations, we must take a giant leap.

In light of the energy crisis in Europe these days, we finally have some more significant discussions about whether the energy sector should be left to the market or managed by the state. It is a step in the right direction. Yet amidst the multitude of crises, we also have the opportunity to look at the bigger picture. To rethink our whole political-economic system. This book offers a comprehensive blueprint for such a system, one with a

collective goal of enhancing our societies' resilience rather than unending growth.

Resilience, within this context, embodies the capacity of societies, economies, and nature to face disturbances head-on. Given the spectrum of natural, economic, and humanitarian crises that currently beset us and those awaiting on the horizon, this shift is not a choice but a necessity. It means that people are more independent but nevertheless connected. It means that it becomes more important to recognize our limited understanding of the complex forces of life, to live in more humble ways, and learn from nature. To be more in harmony with nature and each other.

We have come to believe that we are species capable of managing, controlling, and shaping the world. We forgot that we are a part of the bigger picture, that playing for god can have severe ramifications beyond our imagination. In a more resilient state, we find our part again in the cosmos of life. Therefore, our way of living should meet human needs while living in harmony with all life around us.

If you wonder how this is to be done and what you can do to contribute, then this book will take you on the journey to answer these questions. In Part 1, you will understand why we need a system change in the first place. In Part 2, you will read about the alternative political-economic systems and learn more about the Resilient Society. In Part 3, you will learn how, where, and when the system can be implemented and what you can do to contribute.

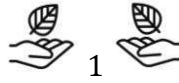
-Part 1-

Why do we need change?

“Do the best you can until you know better.

Then, when you know better, do better.”

Maya Angelou



-How did we get to this point?-

These days I suppose barely anyone needs convincing as to why we need a big change in the world. That is why I will keep this chapter short. Nevertheless, for those who still need some persuasion, this chapter will provide the key arguments as to why capitalism is no longer acceptable. The connection between the distinction of species, civil wars, inequality, climate change, non-renewable resources depletion, acidification of oceans, deforestation (the list goes on and on), and capitalism/neoliberalism or whatever name you prefer for the current institutional hegemony in global societies has been pointed out too many times. Yet this book would be unnecessary if it seemed that the hegemony was losing ground. There are many opportunities in the multitude of crises these days, but capitalism is still standing strong. As Naomi Klein¹ points out:

'The battle is already under way, but right now capitalism is winning hands down. It wins every time the need for economic growth is used as the excuse for putting off climate action yet again, or for breaking emission reduction commitments already made. It wins when Greeks are told that their only path out of the economic crisis is to open up their beautiful seas to high-risk oil and gas drilling. It wins when

Canadians are told the only hope of not ending up like Greece is to allow the boreal forests to be flayed so we can access the semisolid bitumen from the Alberta tar sands. It wins when a park in Istanbul is slotted for demolition to make way for yet another shopping mall. It wins when parents in Beijing are told that sending their wheezing kids to school in pollution masks decorated to look like cute cartoon characters is an acceptable price for economic progress. It wins every time we accept that we only have bad choices available to us: austerity or extraction, poisoning or poverty.”

Instead of the terms “capitalism” or “neoliberalism,” as these are abstract and non-specific in regard to what they actually constitute, Naomi Klein prefers the term “extractivism.” This term reflects the relationship people have these days with each other and nature. It is a win-lose relationship, without reciprocity only for the short-term and based on domination, to extract as much as possible from nature and each other.

Consider the cautionary tale of the island of Nauru. The Nauruans lived in balance with the island's ecosystem for hundreds of years until the Europeans anchored their ships at the shore. In 1778, Captain John Fearn was the first European to take sight of Nauru. Soon after, European whaling ships and traders started making regular visits to the island. Among the things traded were firearms. This marked the beginning of a ten-year internal war, reducing the population from 1,400 to 900

people by 1888. There was little the Nauruans could do to prevent the newcomers from taking over. The foreigners were keen to control the island, as it was rich in phosphate, an essential agricultural mineral. In 1906 the newcomers founded the Pacific Phosphate Company, and the island was shared among Britain, Australia, and New Zealand by the League of Nations as a 'Trustee Mandata'.

By the 1960s, the phosphate reserves were depleting. The whole island of Nauru consisted of phosphate, so its depletion meant the possible impoverishment of the inhabitants. The governments forwarded the idea to resettle the Nauruans to the North Coast of Queensland. The Nauruans were not keen on this plan and fought for Nauru's independence.

Nauru became an independent republic in 1968, and the phosphate company was bought out to become the Nauru Phosphate Company. The Nauruans hoped that they could reverse the island's devastation by creating trust funds from their mining revenues. However, the plan failed due to corruption, bad investment advice, and the high costs of restoring the island's ecosystem. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Nauru became quite wealthy from all the remaining phosphate exploitation. Charles Hanley² writes about the extravagant parties people had: "They would come with gifts like cars, pillows stuffed with hundred-dollar bills-for one year-old-babies!" The island inhabitants even got the title in a U.S. news show as the fattest place on Earth, as half of the population suffered from type 2 diabetes³. The Nauruans could eat out every night, and even those who preferred to cook a

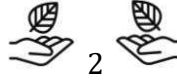
fresh meal at home could not since the agricultural lands were infertile, ironically lacking phosphate. The phosphate depletion and failure of the trust fund meant that by the 1990s, Nauru was desperate for foreign money, and it deregulated its financial sector, which made it a perfect money-laundering haven. Estimations by the New York Times Magazine quoted⁴, “amid the recent proliferation of money-laundering centers that experts estimate has ballooned into a 5 trillion shadow economy, Nauru is Public Enemy #1.” Now the island faces financial and ecological bankruptcy. The money-laundering schemes stopped, and the island had a debt of about 800 million. Among the phosphate depletion, it also faces severe freshwater shortages and rising sea levels. You might still see beautiful palm beaches if you look at pictures of Nauru, but the satellite pictures tell a different story; it looks like a moon landscape. Nauru is now referred to as the country that ate itself since the whole inner island has turned inside out.

Nauru is not an exceptional case of bad governance. It happens on the global scale as well. It is only harder to see due to the immense scale. We make these bad decisions every day. Decisions that are short-term focused and do not account for the limits of ecosystems and human rights. For the previous story, I had difficulty deciding which example of our disastrous neo-liberal governance to pick. What would impress readers the most? Our fast-fashion industry, which stimulates people to keep buying more clothes they do not need, which wear out quickly after only a few washes that are

developed in Chinese prison camps or by child labor? Or that the Amazon rainforest is being cut down for the production of soy, of which 95% is used for feeding cattle so we can eat more steak? In other words, destroy life in the richest biodiverse area of the world, so we can feed and then kill more life. Or the oil spills in the Niger River by Shell that is twice as worse as the well-known Deepwater Horizon accident, consequently impoverishing and even killing all the locals around the river? And these are just a few examples of a very long list I made.

I hope that, as a reader, you do not feel overwhelmed and powerless by the story of Nauru or the previous examples. My goal is to spark a fire in you. To make you aware of how we do things these days and stimulate the feeling that you do not want to be a part of this anymore. To seek alternatives which will pass the revue in this book. Now you may wonder what became of Nauru. Unfortunately, I cannot provide you with a fairytale story. It is now a central spot for Australia to move its illegal immigrants to. It used to have one critical resource, phosphate, but that was completely exhausted. Then, it became a tax haven and an immigration detention center. Now it will soon disappear under the rising sea levels. Nauru is a key example of how we treat nature, people, and firms. So how did we get to this point? By the paradigm that underlies extractivism, which is a zero-sum growth mindset. This always-persistent need for growth and competition is very self-destructive. It is self-destructive in every sense of the word, which means that

it will destroy each pillar humans depend upon nature, the economic system, and society itself.



The Veil between Humans & Nature

Limits of Language, Efficiency & Technocrats

Many books have been written about the effects of capitalism on nature. “Silent Spring” and “Limits to growth,” originating from the 60s, may be among the first and most important. We have two main problems in our way of thinking regarding nature. First and foremost is that capitalist societies regard nature as a means to human life, while we forget that we are an integral part of nature. The second problem is our technocratic way of thinking, which means that we believe that technologies will resolve all our problems. Yet let us first explore the first issue.