**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Green republicanism and a 'Just Transition' from the tyranny of economic growth

Barry, J. (2019). Green republicanism and a 'Just Transition' from the tyranny of economic growth. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2019.1698134>

Published in:

Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

Copyright 2019 Taylor and Francis. This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Green Republicanism and a ‘Just Transition’ from the Tyranny of Economic Growth

John Barry¹

Abstract

The conjoining of civic republicanism and green politics is a new but timely response to understanding and navigating a path through and beyond our turbulent times. A green republican analysis our contemporary condition – climate breakdown, rising inequality, the crisis of representative democracy – sees the structural and ideological imperative (tyranny) of endless economic growth as one root cause. From a green republican perspective economic growth has now passed a threshold where it has become a threat, both to the sustainability/longevity of the polity, but also common goods and human flourishing. This paper identifies and analyses key components of the growth imperative, such as debt-based consumerism and non-democratic workplaces, as well as more widely discussed requirements of growth to externalise ecological and social costs, and growth’s dependence on cheap and secure sources of fossil resources. It argues that these components of growth pose serious risks to liberty as nondomination, the securing and protecting of common goods, rough equality and securing the ecological conditions for the republic. Therefore, these ‘green’ concerns should be also concerns for republicans. The paper looks at one recent strategy that has been proposed to help move societies beyond climate breakdown and carbon-addiction – namely the ‘Just Transition’ discourse and set of policy proposals. The paper offers a green republican account of the Just Transition strategy for a post-or low carbon economy in which equality, justice and democratic participation are central.

Keywords: green republicanism, just transition, wage slavery, post-growth, debt-based consumerism.

¹ Professor of Green Political Economy, Queen’s University Belfast. Email: j.barry@qub.ac.uk, Twitter: @ProfJohnBarry. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6543-7698>.

Introduction

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity*
W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming'

We live in turbulent times. From the rise of right wing (and to a lesser extent, left wing) populism, anti-globalisation, anti-expertise, anti-establishment, post-truth politics and social media, economic and political instability, xenophobia and nativism, gross global and national inequalities in wealth and income, While it would be an exaggeration to say 'all that is solid has melted into air', the speed and depth of the shocks to the current global order and status quo within a lot of societies, is of a magnitude not seen for a long time. When in history did we last see the rise of right-wing authoritarianism so quickly – the 1930s? Is liberal democratic politics as resilient and adaptable as (finance-based) capitalism seems to be? And above all these crises of the early 21st century we have climate breakdown, the socio-ecological contradictions, slow violence and ecocide of the Anthropocene, creating a precarious, threatening and dynamic 'post-Holocene' human condition. How are we to orientate ourselves in such 'fluxed futures' (Barry, 2019) where the future is not what it used to be?

So, what political theory is called forth by these troubling times? One that can not only diagnose and help us better understand the problems and challenges we face (and ideally the root causes of them), but also offer a realistic and robust response and a path to solve or somehow cope with them? Is it Marxism with its consistent critique of capitalism and its inherent and non-contingent class inequalities, tendencies towards crises and the externalisation of costs to the state and society as a condition for the privatisation of benefits and profits? Absolutely. What about conservatism and its defence of tradition and established modes of life, aspirations and order in the face of cultural and normative changes. Yes. Despite its (admittedly deserved) bad press, conservatism has some positive features in informing how we face up to our climate reality (Scruton, 2012), not least in its emphasis on intergenerational temporality and place-based spatiality. Liberalism/liberal democracy as the main 'actually existing' political system and dominant mode of political theorising also has much to offer. Its normative focus on the dignity of the individual and celebration of pluralism and tolerance, amongst its many other features and principles, are important and hard won gains. And yes to feminism and political theories of anti-racism and decolonialism, given the uneven gender, racial and spatial impacts of climate breakdown and austerity, and the underlying sexist, racist and colonial structures of many societies, practices, cultures and ways of thinking.

But there are two other political theories which are often overlooked as ways of thinking about and through our crises-ridden times. And while they are, to some extent, not at the centre of debates within political theory (a rough indication of this would to be see a) if they are included in anthologies of political theories or ideologies, and b) if they do, where they are placed – usually at the end in my experience), conjoining them, as this and other articles in this

special edition seek to do, is an even more ‘niche’ activity. The two schools of political theorising I speak of are green political theory and civic republicanism. Viewed separately a strong case can be made for their usefulness in navigating the turbulence of the current ‘human condition’, both having important insights into our entangled socio-ecological problems. For example, civic republicanism can speak to some of the weaknesses of liberal representative democracy (not least around active citizenship and the legitimate use of public power for securing common goods), and green political theory can speak to the social, economic and democratic dangers (and possibilities) of climate breakdown and the contested political and ethical (as well as existential) responses to the Anthropocene, and the need for attentiveness and public care towards the ecological conditions and dimensions of the common good.

As argued below, the synthesising of these two schools and the creation of a ‘green republicanism’, could help both ‘plug the gaps’ in understanding of this current moment of more established and well-known political ideas and principles (some of which I listed above), and serve as a better guide to action. Indeed, this hybridising of different theoretical positions and traditions seems only fitting as a political response to the entangled and entwined character and logic of the Anthropocene itself. In times of growing instability and internal and external threats and risks to societies, can a green republicanism help us chart a course that is resilient and transformative, that can for example offer pathways for the ‘preservative transcendence’ of key aspects of modern (liberal-capitalist) societies even as they undergo profound structural changes? Given its focus on the ineliminable but also positive features of political contestation, can republicanism help respond to the political divisions and ecological-climate turbulence in broadly progressive ways? That is, can green republicanism both radically transform our current carbon-fuelled ecocidal and growth-oriented liberal-capitalist political economy and fragile representative democracies, but do so in ways that deepen rather than undermine democratic decision-making and enhance rather than violate human rights and justice? To paraphrase an emerging progressive approach to climate breakdown and the necessary systemic energy, food, transportation etc. changes required: does a green republicanism move us beyond a ‘Just Transition’ towards a bolder and more radical ‘Just and Democratic Socio-Ecological Transformation’ of liberal-capitalist societies (Soder et al, 2018)? From climate breakdown can come democratic breakthrough?

Republican ‘Just Transitions’ – No Carbon Taxation without Participation and Agitation

While often focused on energy transition from fossil fuels to low carbon or renewable energy systems, and the need to ensure workers and communities are protected and not disadvantaged (Healy and Barry, 2017), the Just Transition discourse (or strands of it, given it is not one monolithic position) also raises issues around democracy, deliberation and citizen participation, engagement and negotiating trade-offs in public. All republican and green republican concerns.

The Just Transition idea has its roots in the trade union movement based around the principle of just and equitable sharing of the benefits and burdens of the transition beyond a carbon-based energy system. Any energy transition must be fair on those who stand to lose out, especially workers in high carbon industries, or consumers/energy users on low income in terms of, for example, the potentially regressive impacts of a carbon tax. It is enshrined in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement and more recently in the Silesia Declaration ‘Solidarity and Just Transition’ at the Conference of the Parties (COP24) meeting in Katowice in 2018.

While the Just Transition strategy/analysis is a political economy one, it is also concerned with issues of the quality of democratic decision making, not least in calling for greater citizen participation in policy-making around the low carbon energy transitions. Thus, democracy and citizen voice, as well as the material/distributive aspects of compensation and retraining for displaced workers, communities and economic sectors, is part and parcel of the Just Transition platform. Part of this democratic and citizen participation relates to the central demand of Just Transition to create alliances and partnerships between different interests and groups. Now, while of course seeking partnerships and collaborative arrangements is not uniquely a green republican concern, (indeed partnership/collaboration has long been part of modern shifts from government to governance, which some see as distinctly *neoliberal*), a green republican approach to collaboration is premised on (or should be premised on) going beyond top-down expert and elite driven decision-making, and also is open and accommodating of contestation (Barry and Ellis, 2010). Democracy here is understood as non-violent disagreement – contestation is more important than consensus. For green republicans it is from democratic contestation, debate and agonistic disagreement that solutions or coping strategies can be found, compromises and agreed ways forward developed and implemented, reviewed, retired or rewritten. Provisionality and reviseability are after all the consequences of ongoing and iterative (as opposed to one off) political contestation.

A key feature of the ‘Just Transition’ approach is its honest recognition that responding to climate breakdown and creating a low carbon green economy means recognising that there will be losses and losers. It thus presents the ‘win-win’ logic dominant in mainstream discourse around energy and climate (especially within techno-optimist variants) as neither valid nor honest. That is, the shift from a carbon based economy and society does mean that some people, groups, communities, investors and businesses will lose out, since the fossil fuel industry, work and sector/s they are involved in will have to be retired. Hence the importance of ensuring, as far as possible, that no one is ‘left behind’ in the energy transition or that the costs and burdens of such a transition fall disproportionately on one section of the community or economy. But an additional future of a Just Transition strategy is an explicit identification of gross wealth inequality as a cause of social and political concern and a threat to the economic and political stability of the republic, as a small elite enrich themselves and translate economic into political power. President Roosevelt, whose administration developed and implemented the original ‘New Deal’ in the 1930s, explicitly accused ‘economic monarchs’ of imposing a ‘new industrial dictatorship’ (Leuchtenburg, 1995: 125) in his remarkably ‘republican’ analysis of the root causes of the American depression in the 1930s. As Casassas and De Wispelaere note, ‘Roosevelt regarded oligarchies that foster the concentration of economic and political power as natural enemies of democracy’ (2016: 292).

But the Just Transition, and to a lesser extent related strategies such as the Green New Deal, recognises that political struggle and civil society/citizen mobilisation is a necessary element of the energy and economic governance transition. As Barry et al point out

Civil society and grassroots action we believe are and will continue to be central, given the political inertia, foot-dragging, and counter-resistance within state and corporate structures, institutions, and actors within the global carbon energy complex. This could range from mobilisations against the incumbent carbon energy system through divestment campaigns or parliamentary and party political activities in addition to extra-parliamentary action... [including] non-violent civil disobedience against carbon

power stations and against unconventional or ‘sub-prime’ fossil fuel extraction such as fracking. (Barry et al, 2015: 16)

A green republican definition of democracy is as nonviolent disagreement and contestation, which integrates the long-standing green principle of nonviolence with the republican stress on the ineliminable, constitutive and positive character of contestation to politics. If we also accept the Just Transition focus on conflict management and transformation as part of the transition process, then a green republican approach to mapping and framing the political process of structural change required has much to commend it. Not least because a Just Transition is attentive to the need for social cohesion, the protection of liberty, rough equality, political stability and institutional-constitutional resilience, Taken together with the turbulent context above, some of which is external, it may seem counterintuitive that a green republican response to turbulence is enabling (and to a largely degree perhaps encouraging) internal political contestation, when *ceteris paribus*, calls for consensus and agreement might seem more appropriate. Here I think we come to the strength (or one of the strengths) of a green republican take on Just Transitions, in that stability and political order are viewed as forms of *political resilience*, based on *collective learning and creativity*, and *generating coping mechanisms where there is no solution*. Resilience here would be the ability for a republican polity not only to ‘bounce back’ from external or internal shocks, but also, given the high level of system tolerance for democratic and nonviolent contestation, to ‘bounce forward’, and in that way move beyond energy *transition* to possibly deeper political economy *transformation*. The deliberative, citizen based democratic politics endorsed by green republicanism enables and fosters such engagement as forms of *collective learning and creativity*. The collective learning understanding is part and parcel of a view of democracy and politics that is neither ‘zoo-keeping’ (Barber, 1983) nor preference aggregation. Grassroots (and often city/urban-based) creative, experimental responses to our ecological and climate crisis can be viewed as practices of green republican citizenship, and also as producing and protecting common goods.

The latter, the creative, messy, unpredictable, intentional design focus and produced material goods and services of such localised collective activity is the stuff, to paraphrase Damian White (2019: 51) of green republican ‘world making’. The coming together (to wax lyrical for a moment) of the ‘head, hand and heart’ of active citizenship and liberty as self-government (and self-exploration), to create and recreate via labour and technology (as opposed to ‘discover’) common goods (or protect or restore often ecological or civic common goods than have been degraded), that are at one and the same time constitutive of community. Here, for example a ‘Just Transition’ would involve the collective creation of post-carbon energy systems, new regenerative, circular and more localised green economies. In this transformative process citizens, as workers/managers, builders/maintainers, designers/creators, regulators and educators would be involved in the creating of new or repairing existing common goods. A post-carbon post-growth socio-economic system could give rise to new common goods – such as meaningful free time, a shorter working week, shared collective goods and services with secure access for all (health, education, energy), democratised production (see later) alongside socialised consumption (Barry, 2016), basic income or other novel common goods we cannot discern. In many respects a green republican approach to the ‘Just Transition’ (and one framed as a transformative rather than ‘reformist’ and ‘business as usual’ maintaining process) would be one characterised by the novelist Alasdair Gray’s statement of ‘Work as if you are in the early days of a better nation’ (McGrath, 2013).

In this way, ‘robust debate can help social learning and can provide imaginative solutions to problems’ (Barry and Ellis, 2010: 10), but after the talk comes action, and collective action at that. Finally, a green republican polity which seeks stability (maintaining system integrity) against the background ‘circumstances of politics in the Anthropocene’ of *inter alia*, contingency, uncertainty, complexity and turbulence requires (to borrow terms common in climate politics) both mitigation policies – aimed at identifying and finding solutions for the root causes of problems – and adaptation policies – that is coping mechanisms for ‘wicked problems’ for which it cannot find solutions, or the costs (economic and/or political, such as an erosion of self-governance) of which are too high (Barry, 1999: 203).

And here green republican stress on the importance of civic virtue is important, since virtues as character traits or dispositions of character can enable those with such virtues to adapt and respond appropriately to different and changing circumstances. That is, against a common critique of republican virtue as the indoctrination of dutiful, and unthinking, citizens ‘ready to serve the republic’, virtue is also about having the capacity and freedom to respond to unpredictable and uncertain circumstances such as we face in the turbulent Anthropocene. Freedom as self-government equates to citizens being able to collectively and democratically manage and control the political forces that govern their lives. But to this classically republican understanding, green republicanism adds that, in relation to the environmental forces influencing their lives, citizens control or manage their *relationships to the environment* as opposed to the environment per se. In some respects, *managing our relationship* to the environment is a coping mechanism in contrast to attempting to *managing or controlling the environment directly* which is a solution-focused and often technical (and to boot depoliticised and often exploitative and dominating) approach to socio-ecological interactions. And lest we forget, from a green republican viewpoint the domination of nature is often the domination of one set of humans by another, with nature as the means. The exploitation of nature can result not only in ecological unsustainability but also multiple forms of injustice by class (Bookchin, 2005), race (Vanderheiden, 2015), or gender (Plumwood, 1993). Hence those promoting a view of human liberty as non-domination should be wary of demands calling for or resulting in the *domination* of nature.

Economic Growth as a Threat to the Common Good

GDP measured economic growth does not include non-market goods, services and productive activities and thus it offers an impoverished conceptualisation of the economic common good, something that is obviously of concern from a green republican point of view. I include below one of the most eloquent and elegant criticisms of the limits and dangers of equating economic growth and social progress, from Senator Robert Kennedy in a speech he gave at the University of Kansas in March 1968 (a couple of weeks before he was assassinated):

Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product...counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage.. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us

everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans. (Kennedy, 1968).

A focus on economic growth when equated with social progress and human improvement in this way arbitrarily - and one could say ideologically in the interests of the few not the many (Barry, 2012, 2016) - circumscribes the public conceptualisation of our economic common good. In so doing the state's role in devising policies and regulations to promote that good is more limited, less imaginative and less inclusive than it otherwise might be.

Indeed, even in post-war America, at the beginning of the birth of its high consumer society, outgoing President Dwight D. Eisenhower expressed deep concerns. A lot of attention has been rightly given to his warning around the growing threats of 'the military-industrial complex' to liberal democracies. However, what is less known is Eisenhower's second warning:

As we peer into society's future, we...must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own needs and convenience the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent famine of tomorrow. (Eisenhower, 1961)

Thus we have two very republican (and I would add green republican) statements from two post-war (and mainstream) American politicians. On the one hand, we have Bobby Kennedy pointing to how social solidarity, human health and non-monetised human activity, volunteering, citizenship, barter etc. were all excluded from GDP, thus impairing state-centred economic policies aimed at promoting the common good. On the other, there is Eisenhower warning against the short-termism of impulsive living and consuming to the detriment of future generations and imperilling the resilience of democracy and the republic as a free and equal entity, itself.

The inexorable logic of GDP, in solely focusing on monetised economic production and consumption dovetails with the neoliberal logic of privatisation, taking products and services that were once outside the market and commodifying them. When you marry your gardener, GDP falls, or while a community garden that feeds people does not count in GDP, turning that volunteer economic productive activity into a business does. And GDP growth does not recognise or value citizenship and the unpaid political work needed to sustain the vibrancy of a democratic polity, preferring instead to promote particular practices of production and consumption as discussed later. Thus, the very logic of GDP growth is inimical to certain important common goods, given its focus on the ever increasing multiplication of private ones. Under neoliberal capitalism this GDP growth has been more orientated around finance (speculation, currency and property related) and divorced from the 'real economy' and meeting the needs of citizens. Relatedly, this financialised growth model has resulted in even greater levels of inequality in wealth, resources and income that has fractured and degraded important common goods such as social cohesion and solidarity within societies. Ultimately, while this growth objective has caused climate breakdown and ecological devastation, it has also created internal threats to the republic. That is, in terms of creating the conditions for the current right wing populist backlash where 'the people' have taken revenge on those 'elites' who have benefitted most (or who are perceived to have so benefitted) from that ecocidal, socially

regressive growth political economy imperative under neoliberal capitalism. It is within these rather inhospitable political circumstances that any movement to implement a green republican agenda finds itself. However, there are some indications that an honest climate breakdown narrative (as expressed in the ‘School strike for climate’ movement) coupled with policy/economic strategies such as a Just Transition and a ‘Green New Deal’ (not least in linking the green movement to the labour movement and making the case for a more activist state) might have some success, as the recent 2019 success of Green Parties across Europe might suggest.

GDP growth focuses largely on private goods and services, produced and exchanged in the formal market or state system, and excludes intangible, non-commodified goods, services, work and practices. But GDP also excludes recognition and valuation of a large swathe of collective/public goods qua common goods such as open spaces, public parks, to goods that can only be created and enjoyed by collective, including political action, from good manners, generalised trust and active citizenship and ‘democratic work’ more generally.

At the same time, by disregarding the ecological costs of economic activity such as pollution and the negative health impacts associated with it, or the depletion of non-renewable natural resources, or the social costs in terms of mental distress due to new flexible, but more ‘productive’ modes of labour, GDP gives both a skewed and a risky perception of the economy. Skewed in that it is a measure that favours commercial and corporate interests as the externalities from their activities are not included in GDP. An example of how moving beyond GDP would threaten these corporate interests is the way the coal industry in the USA mobilised to reject and defeat an initiative under President Clinton to include the depletion of coal reserves and the negative effects of air pollution as a cost to GDP, since if this happened it would show that the coal industry does not contribute anything positive to the country (Cobb et al, 1995: 6).

Conversely, moving beyond GDP economic growth and towards a focus on collective and non-monetised goods would enable the value of community activity, civic and voluntary citizen activity to be brought into public and political focus. From a green republican perspective publicly recognising the value of citizenship as the political labour of the maintenance and upkeep of our democracy would not only be an obviously positive development, but also serve to encourage and promote in the ‘good of politics’ itself. A more expanded republican conceptualisation of social progress beyond growth and GDP and associated focus on formally paid employment or (passive) consumerism, could have led, for example, to the then President of America, George Bush Jr, who urged US citizens in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to ‘go shopping’. In this citizens were explicitly reduced to consumers, whereas a republican response might have been to order free copies of the US Constitution to be distributed throughout the republic and call on citizens to read, reflect and gather to discuss their republican democracy and citizen rights in an open, public and collective, public and explicitly political defiance of terrorism.

One could also advance a green republican argument to the effect that the structural imperative of orthodox GDP measured economic growth as a permanent feature of the economy constitutes a form of domination and undermines equal political liberty even as it may increase consumer choice. *Firstly*, there are arguments to the effect that economic growth is promoted by and for the interests of a minority (Barry, 2018) who benefit not just materially

but in terms of having private arbitrary power over others. Here, the power of key producer groups and those who own and control capital to shape an economy and state policy to suit their interests has long been recognised as an empirical reality under capitalism and a reason why state actors, politicians etc., are more influenced by producer/capital than consumer/labour groups. That is, the power differentials or bargaining power inequality between capital and labour (especially finance capital under modern neoliberal conditions) should be of concern for republicans and *a fortiori* green republicans. The structural power of globalised finance capital and privatised debt-based money creation in particular should raise great concern given how such private power renders economic growth the dominant publicly legitimated imperative of state economic policy. That is, economic growth promoted for and by private interests (or disproportionately favouring them given the asymmetry in economic power relations) is presented as a distorted form of the ‘public good’ (Barry, 2018). An example of this is how the imperative of economic growth creates the conditions for human identities and interests around consumption/consumerism (and to a lesser sense production) to be privileged and promoted at the expense of citizenship identities and interests and especially to the detriment of active forms of citizenship.

Secondly, a growth-based economy (unlike other possible objectives for the economy) structures the economy and government such that liberty, citizen virtue/active citizenship, and democratic practices are at greater risk of being undermined or eroded. This point is developed in the section below where I suggest that the pursuit of economic growth and productivity, efficiency and competitiveness within the macro-economic structure of the economy, in part explains why workplaces at the micro-economic level are despotic and not democratically organised.

Thirdly, economic growth not only depoliticises economic decisions by avoiding the question of redistribution of economic wealth, using some variant of the ‘rising tide raises all boats’ argument. But more than that, economic growth (certainly under capitalism) both requires and reproduces often extreme forms of socio-economic inequality, as we have seen in many countries in the last two decades. And from a green republican point of view what we need to examine is the distribution of wealth and income from economic growth, and not simply and simplistically be satisfied with promoting growth per se. Or at least a green republican point of view is not wedded to continual economic growth as a permanent (as opposed to a historically contingent) objective of the economy (Barry, 2018). Inequality can have negative effects on *inter alia*, social cohesion, the common good and practices of citizenship, all issues of concern to republicans. For Thompson, articulating a position very much in line with green republicanism, ‘economic inequality leads ineluctably to a degrading of the common interest and re-orientation of public, common goods toward elite, particular interests’ (2018: 202).

If economic growth increases inequality to such an extent that key features of a republican polity are threatened (such as the common good, citizenship, social solidarity and freedom as non-domination), then it becomes a problem. And while orthodox economic growth can and has produced many benefits, created the material condition for improvements in people’s lives, provided tax revenues for a strong state etc., green republicans see it as a means not an end in itself. While other political theories such as liberalism seek to address the inequality and ecological problems caused by growth by promoting technological solutions to ‘decouple’ growth from ecological, energy and resource intensity, that is, to ‘green’ business

as usual, green republicanism would be open to decoupling growth itself from a well-functioning polity. That is, green republicanism, while not anti-growth, does see growth, or at least endless growth, as a contingent not necessary or permanent feature. And we can also add that growth at all costs has served to justify deregulation and a downsizing of the state, reducing its capacities and powers, at the very time as a larger, more powerful and more interventionist state is required for strategies such as a Just Transition, rapid and deep decarbonisation of societies and multilateral climate governance.

Debt-based Consumerism

If ye love wealth better than liberty, the tranquillity of servitude better than the animating contest of freedom, go home from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you. May your chains set lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that ye were our countrymen. (Samuel Adams, 1776/19 : 22)

For certain strands of republicanism, human beings are vulnerable to forget their civic duty to defend the collective conditions of those individual and collective freedom. There is a strong strand in republican thinking in which ‘human beings are easily overcome by base passions. In their ordinary roles, men and women all too often succumb to the worse selfish instincts, betraying trusts, ignoring communal responsibilities, and indulging in material, social and sexual rapacity’ (McInerney, 1994: 10). Here, conjoining green post—growth analysis and republican ideas, I suggest that modern *debt-based* consumerism promoted by advertising on the one hand (Xavier, 2016), and widespread non-democratised workplaces on the other (discussed below) are key structural or institutionalised features of modern capitalism which undermine not only their own ecological and social conditions, but are also liberty compromising, socially destabilising and vulnerability producing. Debt is fundamentally a way of creating profoundly unequal power relations (McAuley, 2018), whereby an imbalance of economic power is created by the need for those who have the (private) power to create money as debt, to lend to those who have not for the purpose of making money from money (Rowbotham, 1998). Private (as opposed to public debt) at root creates the conditions for ‘economic slavery’ (Graeber, 2011). And as money is debt created i.e. with interest, meaning more needs to be paid back than the original borrowed, this means economic growth is a structural requirement and outcome of a debt-based money system. Thus, orthodox, undifferentiated GDP measured economic growth as a permanent objective both threatens equal liberty for all and undermines the long-term ecological sustainability of human society.

Advertising and marketing are key drivers of debt-based consumerism. For reasons of space I state without further argument that advertising does not count as free speech to be afforded constitutional protections for example. In short, while a structural requirement of capitalist economic growth to ensure there is always sufficient and growing demand to absorb productive expansion, there is no reason to suppose advertising (at least as we currently understand it) is either necessary or desirable in a (green) republican political economy. But, there would be no *prima facie* reason from a republican perspective to completely outlaw advertising either, since while not a form of free speech, nevertheless a republican polity should allow advertising which does not demonstrably harm the common good, dominate others, or stand as a risk to the principles and practices of a functioning and healthy democratic society.

So while not banishing it a green republican state would regulate advertising and take into account the cumulative impact of advertising and consumption on the polity's resource, biophysical and ecological precondition, common goods and practices of citizenship. Here, consideration might be given to the opportunity costs of advertising and consumption, in terms of the other uses and products and services those resources, technology, human labour and creativity could have produced and contributed to common goods or differently reconfigured private goods.¹

Wage-Slavery and Productive Unfreedom

How can a democratic society be said to exist when the vast experience of the overwhelming number of its citizens is 'wage slavery'? Just as republican abolitionists in 19th century America pointed out the incompatibility of slavery and a republic, modern green republicans ask the same question in relation to 'workplace despotism'. Consistent with green political arguments for greater democratisation of economic and political life, the green republican asks 'why should democracy end at the factory/office/classroom door?' Non- or anti-democratic forms of management and governance, such as we find in most, if not all, forms of modern employment are, from a republican point of view, forms of domination and alienation – 'despotic experiences of non-autonomy' on a daily and mass basis. As Engels noted:

The slave is sold once and for all; the proletarian must sell himself daily and hourly. The individual slave, property of one master, is assured an existence, however miserable it may be, because of the master's interest. The individual proletarian, property as it were of the entire bourgeois class which buys his labour only when someone has need of it, has no secure existence. (Engels, 1847/1925: 9)

I here leave to one side the issue of how workers can be said to 'voluntarily' submit themselves to such forms of 'despotic power', and associated ideas of unevenly negotiated contractual relations between employees and employers. Suffice to say that I question how 'voluntary' and 'free' individuals are in making these decisions, given the lack of viable alternatives for those without assets, property or capital or non-wage slavery sources of income and/or meeting their needs. We can also note in passing that neoclassical economics assumes that individuals 'choose' whether to work or not, going so far as to view unemployment as 'voluntary leisure' (Spencer, 2006: 459).²

These 'private governments' control individuals qua employees, often (especially amongst non-unionised workforces) without any or much inclusion of the voice of workers, countervailing power by workers, or transparency and accountability in managerial decision-making. The scope of unelected, arbitrary power and authority that bosses have over workers should be of pressing concern for civic republicans (Anderson, 2017).³ This concern is warranted since such arbitrary dominating power is a real and present danger in terms of causing multiple and complex forms of on-going and sustained harms, denying and curtailing liberty and dignity. Here the green republican position is a modern variant of the 'labour republican' tradition from the early 19th century (Gourevitch, 2015). The asymmetrical power relations between management/employers and workers (often with minimal or no 'exit' or 'voice' rights) means workers are subject to *dominium*. That is, they are subject to interference by the private power of management (based on their ownership of and/or control and decision-making relations within the firm) that both lacks public justification and does not 'track the interests and ideas of the person suffering the interference' (Pettit, 1997: 55).

Of interest here from a green republican political economy point of view is that one of the main justifications offered for maintaining (and extending) workplace dictatorships and denying democracy in the workplace is efficiency and the maximisation of production. In a word, growth in the interests of those who own and control workplaces. Introducing democracy and worker voice into the workplace could lower productivity (and think of the constant media, government and orthodox economic research pointing out ‘productivity gaps and weaknesses’ which hold back a firm, a sector or a region) from exporting and producing more and growing. But what if such a linear and instrumental focus on enhancing productivity and orthodox efficiency were less dominant? While for straightforwardly ecological reasons around ‘limits to growth’ we could envisage a green republican policy preference for this, what I point to here (notwithstanding it has not been fleshed out completely) is how democratising employment is an obvious policy choice from a republican point of view. It is a way of realising citizenship practices and cultivating its associated virtues, reducing forms of domination and unfreedom, and secures a precondition for the realising of some of the internal goods of productive labour such as autonomy, self-direction, creativity and collaboration.

Thus a key feature of this new horizon for human progress is liberty. An economy freed from the shackles of the ceaseless strictures of endless growth, expansion, competitiveness, productivity etc. would at one and the same time also constitute a new vista for human freedom and flourishing. Liberated from growth, what would be the economic rationale for not extending democracy and self-government into the productive sphere? Released from the fetters of efficiency and maximising production, what arguments could be raised against public policies seeking to realise the internal goods of labour? A Just Transition beyond growth could reduce the profound contradictions of workplace tyranny and wage slavery existing in a free and equal society, and round out the unfinished democratic project.

Conclusion: ending the tyranny of growth

We have enough evidence that orthodox economic growth beyond a threshold undermines human well-being, is corrosive of community cohesion and social solidarity. There comes a point where answering the political economy question ‘what the economy is for?’ involves the threshold beyond which economic growth becomes ‘uneconomic growth’. For this reason, we need to remember that, while the end or limiting of economic growth is a major problem for capitalism, this does not automatically translate into this being a problem for individuals or communities. But only if we adopt the invitation of a green republican political economy perspective, and begin to politically and creatively imagine ‘economic policy’ beyond ‘neoclassical economics’; the ‘economy’ beyond the ‘market’; and ‘work’ beyond ‘employment’. The productivity imperative within non-democratic workplaces results in both macro-economically ecologically unsustainable as well as illiberty-producing and unfreedom-reinforcing practices at the micro-economic level. In this way what is briefly sketched in this paper means that any new ‘macro-economics of sustainability’ (Jackson, 2017; Nadal, 2011) also requires what might be termed ‘micro-economics of democratisation’. The political economy of the Just Transition and a Green New Deal is a step in that direction, moving towards a post-carbon economy which seeks to minimise instability and inequality as a precondition for moving beyond orthodox economic growth in a more fully developed green republican political economy of democracy in an age of climate breakdown.

A green republican political economy needs to challenge the ideology of growth, including proposing to move beyond carbon and indeed beyond the ‘employment society’. In the interests of enhancing freedom, minimising risks and reducing instability, while ensuring common goods, this political economy seeks to replace the ‘live to work, work to earn, earn to consume’ treadmill of contemporary production and consumption. And key to this is to envisage political economies beyond orthodox, undifferentiated carbon-fuelled economic growth as a permanent feature of society. As Illich noted, ‘Wherever the shadow of economic growth touches us, we are left useless, unless employed on a job or engaged in consumption’ (Illich, 1978: 10). Time to step out of the shadows.

The contention here is that if a sustainable future in the Anthropocene requires us to move beyond carbon and beyond growth, a green republican politics and associated post-growth political economy has much to offer in enabling a just energy/climate transition but also a trajectory towards deeper democratisation as an integral part of the structural transformation of the economy. And does so in a manner which minimises political instability while embraces democratic and nonviolent contestation as inevitable and positive in terms of addressing the uneven distributional impacts of the transition away from ‘actually existing unsustainability’. Indeed, the hope (and there a great need for hope) is that contestation alongside overcoming the tyranny of growth, could spur technological, social, cultural and socio-technical innovation and creativity (White, 2019) in facing and responding to climate breakdown. And such innovative responses to protecting our environmental common good, ‘our common home’ (as Pope Francis puts it), could also create more not less pluralism in and varieties of the ‘good life’.

Economic growth, for so long the great engine of progress, has, in the rich countries, largely finished its work. Not only have measures of wellbeing and happiness ceased to rise with economic growth but, as affluent societies have grown richer, there have been long-term rises in rates of anxiety, depression, and numerous other social problems. *The populations of rich countries have got to the end of a long historical journey.* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 5-6; emphasis added)

References

- Adams, S. 1776. *An Oration delivered at the State-House, in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: J. Johnston.
- Anderson, E., 2017. How bosses are (literally) like dictators. *Vox*, available at <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/7/17/15973478/bosses-dictators-workplace-rights-free-markets-unions> (accessed 27/3/18)
- Barber, B., 1984. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Barry, J., 2019. The Anthropocene: or Welcome to our Fluxed Futures. In: M. Arias-Maldonado, M. and Z. Trachtenberg, eds. *Rethinking the Environment for the Anthropocene*. London: Routledge, 201-216.
- Barry, J., 2018. A Genealogy of Economic Growth as Ideology and Cold War Core State Imperative, *New Political Economy*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2018.1526268>.

Barry, J. 2016. Green Political Economy: beyond orthodox undifferentiated economic growth as a permanent feature of the economy, in Gabrielson, T., Hall, C., Meyer, J. and Schlosberg, D (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 304-32.

Barry, J., 1999. *Rethinking Green Politics*, London: Sage.

Barry, J., Hume, T., Ellis, G. & Curry, R. 2015. 'Low Carbon Transitions and Post-Fossil Fuel Energy Transformations as Political Struggles: Analysing and Overcoming 'Carbon Lock-in'', *Energy & Environmental Transformations in a Globalizing World: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*. Athens: Nomiki Bibliothiki, p. 3-23.

Barry, J., and Ellis, G., 2010. Beyond Consensus? Agonism, Republicanism and a Low Carbon Future, In: P. Devine-Wright ed, *Renewable Energy and the Public*. London: Earthscan, 29-42.

Bookchin, M. 2005. *The Ecology of Freedom; The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Chico CA: AK Press.

Casassas, D. and De Wispelaere, J., 2016. Republicanism and the political economy of democracy, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 19(2), 283–300.

Cobb, C., Halstead, T., Rowe, J. 1995. 'If the GDP is up, why is America down?'. *The Atlantic Monthly* 276, pp.59–78.

Eisenhower, D.E., 1961. *Farewell Address to the Nation*, available at: <http://panarchy.org/eisenhower/farewelladdress.html> (accessed 18/2/19).

Engels, F., 1847/1925. *The Principles of Communism*, Chicago: The Daily Worker Publishing Co.

Gourevitch, A. 2015. *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Healy, N. and Barry, J., 2017. Politicizing energy justice and energy system transitions: Fossil fuel divestment and a 'just transition'. *Energy Policy*, 108 (4), 451-459.

Illich, I., 1978. *The Right to Useful Unemployment and Its Professional Enemies*, London: Marion Boyers.

Jackson, T., 2017. *Prosperity without Growth*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge.

Kennedy, R., 1968. Remarks at the University of Kansas, March 18, 1968', available at: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Robert-F-Kennedy-at-the-University-of-Kansas-March-18-1968.aspx> (accessed 2/4/18).

Linder, M. and Nygaard, I., 1998. *Void Where Prohibited: Rest Breaks and the Right to Urinate on Company Time*, Cornell: Cornell University Press.

Leuchtenburg W.E. 1995. *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- McAuley, M. (2018), *Neoliberalism and Personal Debt: A Sociological Study of Personal Debt in Northern Ireland* (PhD). Queen's University Belfast.
- McInerney, D., 1994. *The Fortunate Heirs of Freedom: Abolition & Republican Thought*, Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press.
- Mitra-Kahn, B., 2011. *Redefining the Economy: How the 'Economy' was Invented*, Thesis (PhD). City University of London.
- Nadal, A. 2011. *Rethinking Macroeconomics for Sustainability*, London: Zed Books.
- Pettit, P. (1997). *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plumwood, V. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge.
- Rowbotham, M., 1998. *The Grip of Death: A study of modern money, debt slavery and destructive economics*. Oxford: Jon Carpenter Publishing.
- Scruton, R., 2012. *Green Philosophy*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Soder, M., Niedermoser, K. and Theine, H. 2018. Beyond growth: new alliances for socio-ecological transformation in Austria, *Globalizations*, 15(4), 520-535.
- Spencer, D., 2006. Work for all those who want it?: Why the neoclassical labour supply curve is an inappropriate foundation for the theory of employment and unemployment. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 30(3), 459-472.
- Thompson, M., 2018. The Political Dimensions of Economic Division: Republicanism, Social Justice, and the Evaluation of Economic Inequality, *In: Langman, L. and Smith, D eds., Twenty-First Century Inequality & Capitalism: Piketty, Marx and Beyond*. London: Brill, 201-221.
- Vanderheiden, S. 2015. *Environmental Justice*. London: Routledge.
- White, D., 2019. Ecological Democracy, Just Transitions and a Political Ecology of Design. *Environmental Values*, 28(1), 31-53.
- Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K., 2008. *The Spirit Level*. London: Penguin.
- Xavier, M., 2016. Subjectivity under consumerism: the totalization of the subject as commodity. *Psicologia & Sociedade*, 28(2), 207-216.

¹ It is telling that the originator of the measure of economic growth, GDP, Simon Kuznets explicitly sought to exclude advertising from GDP on the grounds that like financial and speculative activities are “properly speaking, costs implicit in our economic civilisation” (in Mitra-Khan, 2011: 239-40)

² Hence the potential of what could be viewed as quintessentially green republican policy such as a universal basic income to remove or at least reduce the fear of lack of income/poverty,

hopelessness or uselessness which is the alternative to taking formally paid employment, thus giving workers some countervailing power or ‘exit’ power.

³ The surveillance and micro-management of workers in the modern workplace is so varied, pervasive, subtle and acculturated that we do not think about it much. And the historical struggles of workers are dominated by analyses of issues around employment, contracts, pay, pensions, and less about conditions of work. For example, an example of the forgotten despotism of workplaces and workplace struggles is the right of workers to urinate, something which took longer in America than other capitalist industrial countries (Linder and Nygaard, 1998). The indignity of this speaks volumes and it was defended on grounds of ‘economic efficiency’ and in the service of productivity (and creating the conditions for a docile workforce).

Acknowledgements (if any)

I would like to thank Iseult Honahan and Ashely Dodsworth for their comments on drafts of this article and also the input and observations of the anonymous review and participants at the ECPR workshop in Nicosia in 2018 where this paper was first presented.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

John Barry is Professor of Green Political Economy at Queen’s University Belfast.