

4

The Architecture of Abundance A Path to a Democratic Economy

JUSTIN ROSENSTEIN AND THE ONE PROJECT TEAM

Felicia considered the Autumn cycle reports as she walked out into the warm evening. The news was being read and celebrated around the world. Global poverty: down ninety-three percent since 2020. Every climate target hit this year, with three unexpectedly surpassed. Topsoil the healthiest it has been since 1920. Average work hours reduced another eighteen minutes to reach 19.2 per week, with one hundred percent employment of those able and willing to work. And perhaps most hearteningly, average global self-reported life satisfaction up two percent year over year. A bittersweet feeling washed over Felicia as she listened to the quiet of the city amid the human voices, cicadas, and songbirds.

She felt enormously proud of her contribution and relieved that her service on the Regional Council was over. It had been painstaking work, a year-long crash course in ethics, ecology, and sociology. Weeks of debating and ultimately collaborating with people with whom she initially seemed to have little in common. Difficult tradeoffs to weigh, always. But ultimately, they had done their part, as had thousands of other local, regional, and global councils—the mistakes of some compensated for by the wisdom of many others. And the results spoke for

themselves: the will of the people made manifest in a world that was better today than it had been a year earlier.

Yet certainty was giving way to an unmapped future. Now proposals were being requested for projects that could contribute to the planting of ten billion trees annually in some of the hardest-to-reach rainforest terrain. Some were just concepts, but others were farther along and closer to being considered. At home, five new playgrounds were being requisitioned, and she could imagine spending some long months near her parents, designing and building them. Or perhaps she would go to Taiwan where her sister was part of a fellowship class training the next generation of AI ethics researchers. There was a Navy position based nearby on the ocean plastics removal team, and she had always wanted to spend time at sea.

Felicia knew what her father would say: “Choices are hard. But having no choice is a lot harder.” Her father had had no choice but to sneak across several borders when only sixteen and fleeing from a civil war. He had no choice but to work fourteen hours a day slaughtering chickens in some gruesome perversion of a farm. And he had no choice but to sit in a private prison for a year after immigration services raided the killing floor on which he worked.

“We had four hundred choices of breakfast cereal,” he often told her, “but no control of our lives.” Her father’s world was only twenty-five years in the past. To Felicia it felt almost impossible to imagine.



But her father’s world is our world. In 2015, representatives of humanity sat at one table to develop shared goals for a sustainable future, the closest thing we’ve ever had to a global will of the people. The UN Sustainable Development Goals expressed a soaring vision for what we could achieve by 2030. End poverty. Universal education. Gender equality. Sustainable resource use. Yet everyone involved in the process knew that the global economic system, and the governance systems that support it, had little incentive or mechanism for achieving these goals. The goals would rely on charity and voluntary commitments. It’s no wonder then that progress over the first five years has been minimal and funding has been trillions of dollars short, while humanity slides past ever more ecological limits.

We can do much better. I just offered a glimpse of a possible world in which equitable, deeply democratic processes, aided by technology, give power and voice to all people and enable humanity to set and achieve shared goals for the management of our precious planet. It's a world of local autonomy and diverse cultures with diverse priorities that are still capable of coordinating at the global level on issues like climate change and existential threats from technology. It's a world where politics is done without professional politicians, and freedom is achieved without the disastrous side effects of capital markets. It's a world in which we had agreed that poverty, hunger, climate change, and the destruction of nature are evil, recognized that protest and creative resistance had been necessary but insufficient, took matters into our own hands, and changed course.

In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher convinced much of the globe that “there is no alternative” to the modern market economy. That sounded plausible as the world witnessed the rampant corruption and ultimate collapse of totalitarian communism—the dominant alternative at the time. But Thatcher's statement is obviously false as we look toward the future. The ways we work, consume, communicate, find love, and learn have been entirely revolutionized since Thatcher left office. Is it possible to imagine there is still no alternative to economic and political systems that were birthed in the eighteenth century?

This essay proposes a radical alternative: that we begin to transition from our current world—dominated by amoral markets, backsliding democracies, and neo-authoritarians—to a new system for meeting our needs, wants, and goals that is effective, equitable, and ecological by design. We are advocating nothing less than replacing today's values-blind economy with a values-first economy of which all stakeholders are fully in control. We must transition mindfully, incrementally, in a way that anticipates the unexpected and systematically learns from mistakes. But we must do it, and we must do it soon.

I'm not talking about a retread of failed twentieth-century alternatives like planned-and-command communism or “green” capitalism. Instead, we can use the power of modern information technology, combined with age-old wisdom about cooperative use of common resources (wisdom that market ideology has sought to erase and deny), to create something radically better. Felicia's world is to ours what Wikipedia is to Britannica, what regenerative agriculture is to factory farming, what a pluralist society is to apartheid—something freer, more effective, benefiting everyone, and easy to dismiss as impossible until it takes root.

In order to imagine the systems of the future, we must keep our minds open, and accept that our imaginations can only glimpse the future. Still, we

must—with care, humility, and the participation of everyone affected—begin to transition to new systems that optimize for the will and wellbeing of the people and the planet.



My whole adult life, I have acted from the deep intuition that collaboration is a key to reducing suffering and improving the human condition. For the first fifteen years of my career, I worked from the assumption that if I could help make collaboration easier and faster, social good would be the emergent result. Starting in my early twenties, I co-led the development of Google products like Drive, Facebook features like the Like button, and then Asana, which helps teams of all kinds work better together.

Asana and Drive are tremendously useful at helping teams achieve their goals more quickly. (My feelings on social media's evolution are more complicated.) And many organizations use Asana to do great things in the world.

Yet, over the years, especially as I came to increasingly question the direction humanity was taking, I asked: Where are team goals coming from in the first place? On examination, the primary forces determining organizations' objectives appeared to be modern systems of economics, governance, and sensemaking that—while extraordinarily capable at delivering certain kinds of goods—are insufficient for the problems we now face, and only perpetuate colonial-era class, race, and power structures, degrade the natural world, and exploit and neglect billions of people.

This has been obvious to many for a long time. But it wasn't until I started to question the story of perpetual human progress I had learned in school that I began to observe society differently. Each major human system—like food, water, justice, education, healthcare, technology, media, business, community, international relations, defense—seemed broken in a unique way. But our inability to fix them—and, in most cases, the problems themselves—seemed to have a common cause: each system is in the grips of the market-state power complex. How could a surplus of food coexist with a billion hungry people? Why does American industry spend fifty times more money on treating diseases than curing them? It felt heartbreaking and nightmarish that the planet on which I was born was enchained by a giant prisoner's dilemma: The world could work for everyone, and work better for everyone, if we collaborated toward mutually beneficial outcomes, as one team. And yet we weren't.

So a year ago, I started One Project, a non-profit venture to explore what would be required to realign humanity's resources and efforts with our common goals and values. For the past year, the One Project team has been reading widely, while meeting with and learning from a diverse set of critics, visionaries, and leaders—inquiring into the profound philosophical and technical questions necessary to approach generationally difficult problems about how we live life on Earth.

The stories I'm about to tell of a better future, and the features of a system that make it possible, are nascent fruits of this inquiry. We're sharing them now in the hopes that you'll critique and improve our thinking dramatically—and maybe even collaborate with us.



2020 had taught Felicia and indeed all of us that pandemics weren't some far-off what-if. They could arrive at any moment and entirely upend an unprepared world, destroying bodies, but also ripping social fabric, destabilizing governments, driving into the ground businesses that took generations to build. So, when we transitioned away from a values-blind market-based economy to a goals-based one, Felicia, her regional Citizens Council, and indeed Terrans everywhere identified pandemic preparedness as a goal needing significant attention and investment.

For starters, Terrans built a public global knowledge base, a wiki populated with all we had learned from COVID-19. Over the years, epidemiologists, geneticists, sociologists, survivors, frontline workers—and even those who questioned whether there had been a dangerous outbreak at all—added to it. A compendium of complex, conflicting information. The technology didn't eliminate differences of opinion, but it facilitated productive dialog, managed debate, and built consensus; and like its primitive ancestor Wikipedia, it gave an imperfect but still fairly sharp picture of our global collective intelligence. This process of making sense of the world made politicized briefings and cable news pundits look like the ancient relics they had now become.

When it came to the Pandemic Preparedness Global Council, few knew exactly which experts would be most capable and trustworthy to coordinate a future response. But everyone knew what a disaster 2020 had been. Because of widespread mistrust of government, vast swaths of the population had believed that

officials in charge were incompetent puppets or dark conspirators. Social media companies, in turn, made billions spreading lies and innuendo about these well-meaning experts. But this time, the experts were of the people's choosing. Citizen Councils like Felicia's and the people they served each had placed trust in the most informed, high-integrity friends, acquaintances, and leaders in their own circles, who in turn had given their trust to yet more informed experts through a well-honed process known as "liquid democracy." As trust flowed organically to those with the most specialized knowledge and integrity, a global team was assembled that held real legitimacy in the people's eyes.

The Council, in turn, drew from our shared intelligence to allocate mass resources around the globe to build PPE stockpiles. Better mask designs were pioneered out of Chennai. The instructions for making them became instantly available, and distributed manufacturing projects launched in every bioregion to take advantage of the innovation. Funding was allocated to contact tracing infrastructure that was customizable to meet each community's standards for privacy. Smart thermometers that tracked unusual illness activity in neighborhoods were distributed widely. At the local level, Felicia and her fellow citizens didn't each keep their eyes on every program, of course. Everyone was busy living their lives. But the Council, like every council, reported to *us the people*, all people, and every move they made was transparent, open-source, and open to feedback.

So when COVID-32 exploded, the world was ready. The Council proposed an immediate two-week worldwide pause. In 2020, the global economy was like a shark—it would die if it stopped moving forward. Back then, prioritizing lives over economic activity meant material insecurity for the most vulnerable workers, destruction of massive fictional value in capital markets, widened inequality, and broken dreams everywhere. Was it any wonder that countries struggled to attain compliance with lockdowns? This time, Felicia's region, and regions around the world, were ready with community-based support systems that reduced economic fear, and there were no longer incentives for powerful business interests to push for hasty re-openings. Throttling down would mean other important goals would be deferred, but without the need for anyone to lose their livelihood or their home. We were thinking long-term. So when the Council recommended a pause, most people paused, while resources were redirected to protect and generously compensate the essential workers who couldn't.

Over the next six months, as the virus simmered and occasionally flared, there was a flurry of activity. In Felicia's city, thousands of us in good health transitioned our work lives—getting groceries for our neighbors or teaching kids whose parents were essential workers. Those unable to leave their homes signed up to provide emotional-support calls to the most vulnerable and alone. In the evenings, many served on the peer-to-peer response service, answering questions, aided by the Pandemic Wiki, about everything from safe socializing to battling feelings of depression. Others poured over data on the effectiveness of interventions, played prediction markets to anticipate the next flare-up, or home-schooled quaranteams of children. Skills were matched quickly to needs, as we banded together as a community. Not long ago, this would have all been called “volunteer work.” But in a goals-based economy, those performing needed work were compensated well.

As we protected our communities, teams around the world divided up the work of cooperatively developing treatment protocols. Those that showed the most promise applied to the Treatment Council for more resources. Dead ends were abandoned. We developed powerful medicines, quickly. But finding an effective treatment turned out not to be our most difficult challenge. The disease was highly contagious and virulent—everyone wanted to be protected. While the new medicines belonged to the people, initially there wasn't enough to go around. Deciding who got treatment first was an ethical dilemma for which councils of scientists weren't suited. Instead, representative Citizen Assemblies, everyday people chosen by lottery, convened in each region. With consultation and education from broadly trusted scientists, ethicists, and network theorists, each assembly determined a treatment distribution strategy that was culturally appropriate, legitimately democratic, and just.

COVID-32 was indeed the super virus for which COVID-19 had been a dress rehearsal. But globally, there was far less death and far fewer shattered lives than the last time around. We mourned. We implemented processes to learn from our mistakes. But we also celebrated. Some credited better data availability or easier partnerships or better aligned incentives for our success. Others said it was the reduction of weaponized misinformation, and more democratic processes. In fact, it was all of these, but each was a different flower nurtured by the same root—a truly democratic economy based not on an insatiable fiction called profit, but instead on what was good for people and the planet.



Imagining a future like this helps us realize that our biggest challenges can be addressed. Consider the current destruction of the biosphere on which all life depends. As long as our economic system allows for unaccounted ecological externalities, without a reliable path to a systemically supported turnaround, we are at exponentially increasing risk of destroying our only viable biosphere—and very soon. Today, the market doesn't demand that anyone pay for most pollution, destruction of ecosystem services, degrading of resources for future generations, or catastrophic climate change; yet all of these are the result of economic activity. Attempts to hold polluters accountable have been counter to the dominant religion of economic growth, and so they have never had significant impacts. A goals-based economy would let the people, in consultation with experts, build accounting models that count all the good *and* all the harm created by economic activity (and track them through supply chains via sensor-enabled logistics tech). Producers would compete to minimize their negative impacts on other important goals or even design their activity to have positive outcomes. Well-resourced startups would collaborate and compete to develop the best holistic solutions for carbon drawdown. In such an economy, a stabilization of the biosphere would be part of a new definition of economic growth, growth of the things that make us and our planet healthy.

We can also imagine a far more equitable future, in which the distribution of goods works very differently. Financial markets are an imaginary game, and money is their scoring system. In capitalist mythology, a person's score reflects their grit, talent, and frugality. In reality, scores are rigged. Since the thirteenth century, Europeans have been "enclosing" common lands (and people) around the world with fences and violence, calling them "property" and "capital." Unsurprisingly, to this day, their descendants have more points in the game.

We can transition to a new game, where points can be gained only through genuine contribution to (or need from) society, rather than through renting, loaning, extracting, exploiting, commodifying, abstracting, or "middle-manning." We can design the mathematics of the game to be fair: the people who contribute the most, get the most, within democratically-established bounds of equality, compassion, and reparation.

In the old game, unemployment and poverty are natural, even necessary. In the new game, there's always work (and skills training) to go around, with fair compensation that respects everyone as peers, and software that assists in matching you to the role in the one human project that's the best fit for your capacities and curiosities. In this world, immigration means more

contributors, people who lighten others' loads and measurably expand the size of the pie and everyone's piece of it. Automation is not a threat, but a tool to reduce tedious labor. We can all enjoy its fruits and spend more time with the people, places, and things we love.

This isn't state socialism. Here, property is not owned and distributed by governments. It is understood rightly as the wealth of the people and the planet, allocated and apportioned by distributed democratic processes and the formulas upon which they converge.

We live in a bizarre and unjustifiable world in which the color of one's skin likely determines the length and quality of one's days. Today's economy is unabashedly plutocratic and implicitly racist, sexist, ableist, ageist, and colonialist; tomorrow's economy could be deliberately reparatory and democratic. To avoid recreating the oppressions that have been part and parcel of liberal democracy, such as the tyranny of the majority and the silencing of the oppressed, a new system can empower demographically representative groups of ordinary citizens to meet, deliberate and make decisions, guided by constitutional frameworks that specifically resist oppression. Groups tend to blame or victimize others in the absence of positive, personal experiences with one another. Bringing diverse councils of community members together, online and face-to-face, in inclusive, facilitated processes has been shown to generate mutual understanding and creative problem-solving, avoiding the typical win-lose dynamics of our current democracies. In such environments, difference is not something to be resolved or overcome. Rather it becomes the very source of higher levels of group intelligence and a more complete model of reality.

In the new game, public institutions report to the people they most affect, not to distant politicians and their appointees. When the people control the funding, rules, and leadership of the justice system, we can begin to heal from collective traumas like mass incarceration and the war on drugs. We can take back control of the designs and resources of our neighborhoods. (And, in a fair society where everyone has enough, there will be vastly less need for policing.)

When my team and I share this vision of a humanity capable of taking on its greatest challenges through deep collaboration, we usually encounter a few objections.

The first is that mass coordination is too complex. The myth of today's system is that it's simple, even natural. People have needs. Other people meet those needs. Everyone's free, and the Invisible Hand makes the world go round. In reality, if my infant daughter asks me about our current economic system when she gets a bit older, it will be mind-numbingly complicated to explain. She could truly understand its design only after adopting

a constellation of man-made social constructs: private ownership, “money” as abstract wealth, compensation based on extraction rather than creation of net value, compound interest as a reward for debt-creation, taxation, the Leviathan state as property enforcer, the “fractional reserve banking” Ponzi scheme. And I would fail entirely at explaining why people tolerate what its structure requires and generates: artificial scarcity, artificial demand (today’s global-scale brainwashing by corporations), unnatural poverty, rampant inequality (a mathematical inevitability of free markets), and utterly unsustainable consumption of resources.

The ideas we’ve shared here leave us with many questions. But we believe there is a simple elegance to a political economy in which people jointly set goals for the good of their local and global communities, and then allocate resources and efforts to reach those goals. This is not a new or exotic concept. The UN Sustainable Development Goals are an implicit global call for goals-based economic management. Indigenous and non-industrial societies have managed common resources in this way for 99.9 percent of human history. Even today, 2.5 billion people depend on forests, fisheries, farmland, irrigation water, and hunting grounds that are managed as commons. Open source software communities have used commons-based thinking to build the backbone of the internet. And broadly, in the history of the evolution of life, cooperation out-competes competition in the long run. Any new system will be too complex to sketch on a napkin, but we think the current system can be vastly streamlined to serve what we, the People, most desire.

The second objection is that such a system sounds like a technoutopian fantasy that, like all such fantasies, will ultimately prove dystopian. We too are worried about technology’s impact on society. It is our current political-economic system, however, that makes technology so dangerous. In today’s world, technology is created by an elite few for the ultimate benefit of an elite few. So-called “free” social media services employ self-improving algorithms to hold our attention, manipulate our emotions, and change our behavior for the profit of advertisers and political actors. Their trillion-dollar market caps attest to their success. Artificial intelligence is advancing by leaps and bounds to put more power in the hands of corporations who are locked in an arms race of competition for people’s mindshare, money, and loyalty. The brave few computer scientists and ethicists working on containing these technologies rely on non-profit pittance in their efforts to protect the future of humanity.

We propose putting the governance and ownership of technology in the hands of all people. Algorithms and AI can become our allies in translating our human values and aspirations into executable work, aiding our

collective intelligence and allowing us to do more with less pressure on our planet. This vision is far from a technocracy. It is democracy realized to a far higher degree than ever before—direct participation by all people, assisted by technology.

As radical as all this sounds, the seeds of this future are being planted today. Imagine an accessible, user-friendly website and mobile app, built as a commons-based, open-source platform cooperative, that allows any community to govern itself through collective intelligence, productive deliberation, and intelligent resource distribution. It's informed by the visionary work of existing practitioners of liquid democracy, citizen assemblies, trust graphs, participatory budgeting, open-source designs for local manufacturing, and circular economies, to name just a few. It is decentralized and secure thanks to protocols like Holochain. If such technology feels far off, consider that collectives across the world are already building prototypes of platforms that provide these services and more. In 2020, Taiwan gracefully managed its COVID outbreak through digital democracy tools that built trust and leveraged citizen participation in ways similar to the stories we told above. But existing technologies only hint at what's possible.

Once we're up and running, any community could set shared goals to work toward, agree upon equitable incentive systems, distribute work fairly, scale collective sensemaking, and build bonds of trust. All of these activities are social and human-centered: they're about people, connecting with people. Their effectiveness can be vastly amplified through forms of real-time communication, information processing, and data sensing that were nearly inconceivable just thirty years ago but are commonplace today. It is heartening to see that, just as quickly as our current systems seem to be failing, our capabilities to replace them are growing.

Such a platform, of course, won't transform the global economy overnight, but it could be adopted in the short-term by communities eager to embrace something new. These may be communities of place, like villages, towns, cities—including some of the hundreds of new cities that will soon be needed by climate refugees. Or they may be geographically far-flung, like social movements. The more people who feel let down by the broken promises of legacy systems, the more will be ready to migrate to something new. If, together, we create systems that can outcompete the old in delivering true prosperity, empowerment, and life satisfaction, we can scale up. We can help build movements of people who have tasted true democracy and who are calling for its use to expand. Such movements can win elections that bring the will of the people to power and put state resources under truly democratic control. Once communities create a new possible, they will never again be convinced that "there is no alternative."

Humanity has no roadmap from today to what futurist Kevin Kelly calls Protopia, a world that gets progressively better every year—healthier, just, safe, creative, and fun. What we do know is that calls for structural change and the terminal flaws in the status quo are now impossible to ignore. Some will choose to double down on the thinking of the past. Some will seek to patch it up.

Still others will see the chance to co-create a new reality based on values like justice, fairness, empathy, solidarity, non-violence, compassion, interdependence, and love for the universe. We intend to work with these values-based allies to help write the next chapter, while listening for the future that wants to be born.



This essay was a collective labor of love. We would love to hear your candid reactions, feedback, concerns, criticisms, ideas, and visions; show you the online (eventually, wiki) version of this essay with case studies and references; and let you know when we release new essays and products—all of which can happen at <http://oneproject.org/thenewpossible>.

Thank you to the many people who generously gave their time to providing comments and suggestions. This essay is theirs too, and our future work will integrate even more perspectives.