
Pandemic Brooding: Brown Tech in new clothing

David Holmgren – September 2021



HOLMGREN DESIGN
Permaculture Vision & Innovation

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“ I think it is important to see the Brown Tech world as a logical unfolding of energy descent systemic forces breaking down the techno-industrial world, rather than a great battle of benign wisdom over recalcitrant and subversive resistors, or alternatively, an evil plan for world domination that must be resisted at every turn. For an increasingly alienated, perhaps minority of permies, the emergent Brown Tech world is experienced as a mad undemocratic process taking away our rights and freedoms and imposing controls over previously private lives, possibly driven by shadowy elites striving for world domination or worse. This of course leads to association with people of very different values and backgrounds.

Parts of this essay have already been published as [‘Pandemic brooding: can the permaculture movement survive the first severe test of the energy descent future?’](#) In this longer essay, David Holmgren explores the responses to the pandemic in light of his [Future Scenarios](#) work.

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Melliodora in Spring

Introduction

The welcome signs of spring are all around me at Melliodora and Spring Creek¹ after a wet and gloomy winter. With very little passive solar gain, we burnt more wood, and with barely enough photovoltaic power to pump water and power a few other essential functions, we relied on backup from the Victorian grid – still dominated by coal, despite the impressive roll out of wind farms around our region. It was damp enough to remind us of the old days before acceleration of climate change, which has given us more winter sun but less groundwater recharge or fungal decomposition to moderate the fuel loads during the ensuing fire season.

Every day in the office we could watch a huge family of choughs² working the veggie garden for worms to offset the cold seeping through their bedraggled plumage. Despite the protestations of the choughs and many human folk, it wasn't a cold winter. Grass kept growing slowly where the hordes of kangaroos that have invaded the town haven't eaten it to the ground. Frost damage on tender subtropicals was minimal and the Bureau of Meteorology data confirmed my sense that this was one of the mildest winters on record right across the continent. In this case at least, my observations were backed up by what these days is called 'The Science'.

So with the relief of a wet winter to moderate the coming fire season, why should I feel so much trepidation about the near future? Spring was a time of death and rebirth in our Celtic tradition long before Easter marked the death and rebirth of Christ. The threat of famines was always greatest in spring as flowers nourished the soul but not necessarily the gut. But in this case, as with many people, it's the pandemic that has been getting me down, even though my personal circumstances are about as good as it gets.³

1 Melliodora is our home property, and Spring Creek the adjacent commons; see holmgren.com.au/melliodora/property/

2 *Corcorax melanorhamphos*

3 As I noted in my essay '[The class divide in a time of pandemic: a permaculture perspective](#)' last year available at holmgren.com.au/writing

Pandemic actions and reflections

While the pandemic itself is an interesting, and of course tragic, phenomenon for many, it is hardly more so than myriad other expressions of how humanity is hitting the Limits to Growth right on schedule, as suggested 50 years ago.⁴ But the collective response of humanity to the novel corona virus is, in my view, the really interesting – and maybe also tragic – phenomenon.

My earlier writings on the subject showed a restrained excitement for the potential of the pandemic to stimulate a massive increase in people interested in home food growing and all the other enlightened self-interest activities embodied in the household and community non-monetary economies celebrated in my retrosuburbia vision and work.⁵

Our teams at Holmgren Design, Melliodora Publishing and Permaculture Principles poured a huge effort into supporting that rapidly expanding interest and were rewarded enough that we didn't need to put our hand out for the government's largess. Our colleagues at Milkwood Permaculture had a challenge meeting the demand for their online Permaculture Living Course.

In 'The class divide in the time of pandemic',⁶ I was more polemic about the opportunities, as well as the necessity, to build a new economy in the shadow of the old system. I mentioned how the old system would be plagued by increasing



4 See Meadows, Donella & Club of Rome (1972) *The Limits to Growth: a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*, Universe Books, New York

5 Holmgren (2020) '*The Problem is the solution: how permaculture designed household isolation can lead to RetroSuburbia*' available at holmgren.com.au/writing; see also retrosurbia.com

6 Holmgren (2020) '*The class divide in a time of pandemic: a permaculture perspective*' available at holmgren.com.au/writing

Permaculture Ethics

-  Care of the Earth
-  Care of People
-  Fair Share

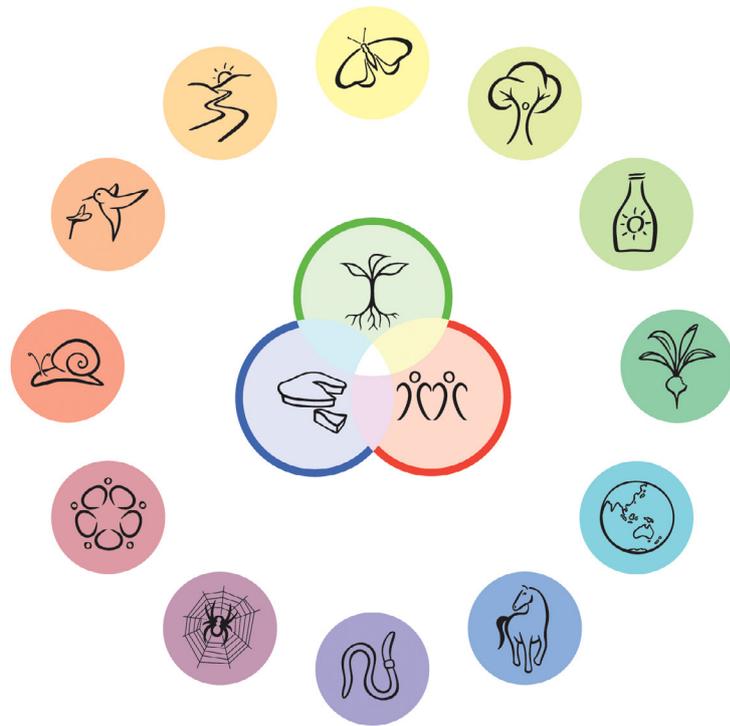
& Design Principles

-  1. Observe & interact
-  2. Catch & store energy
-  3. Obtain a yield
-  4. Apply self-regulation & accept feedback
-  5. Use & value renewable resources & services
-  6. Produce no waste
-  7. Design from patterns to details
-  8. Integrate rather than segregate
-  9. Use small & slow solutions
-  10. Use & value diversity
-  11. Use edges & value the marginal
-  12. Creatively use & respond to change

 permacultureprinciples.com

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dysfunction and arbitrary power by governments reflecting the structural characteristic of the 'Brown Tech' Energy descent scenario I outlined in *Future Scenarios*.⁷

Earlier this year in 'The problem is the solution but the solutions can turn back into (the same old) problems'⁸ I explored the ways a dark inverse of this permaculture aphorism keeps humanity heading towards greater dysfunction, a theme in my thinking since at least the mid-1990s.

As the pandemic rolled over into its second year, I became concerned that the psychosocial fallout of the pandemic, and especially the pandemic response at the global and local levels, could represent an existential threat to permaculture and kindred movements. At one level, this threat is the same as that to families, workplaces, networks and organisations more generally, where a sense of urgency to implement the official response, especially lockdowns and mass vaccination is producing a huge gulf between an ever more certain majority and a smaller minority questioning and challenging that official response.

My aim in this essay is to focus on how critically important it is to use all our physical, emotional and intellectual resources towards maintaining connections across what could be a widening gulf of frustration and distrust within our movement, reflecting society at large. I want to explore how permaculture

7 *Future Scenarios: mapping the cultural implications of Peak Oil and Climate Change* (2009) online at futurescenarios.org

8 Holmgren (2021) '*The problem is the solution but solutions can turn back into (the same old) problems*' available at holmgren.com.au/writing

ethics and design principles⁹ can help us empathetically bridge that gulf without necessarily needing to censor our truth or simply avoid the issue. While the pandemic and the responses to it will pass in time, I believe the future will be characterised by similar issues that test our ability to tolerate uncertainty and diversity and thus to exercise solidarity within kin, collegiate and network communities of practise.

Before diving into how ethical and ecological wisdom might help us navigate these immediate concerns, I think it is important that I zoom out to clarify how the big picture Energy Descent Future Scenarios framework can provide some perspective and diffuse some of the sources of emotional heat of polarisation around current events.

Future Scenarios

The positive, grounded thinking that characterises permaculture has always been informed by a dark view of the state of the world and long-term emerging threats. It originated in a hotbed of pioneering environmental activism in Tasmania at a time when the *Limits to Growth* report published by the Club of Rome was big news, at least in the circles that Mollison and I moved in.

In crafting the Permaculture Design Course, Mollison used to spend a day on what he called 'Evidence' (for the necessity of permaculture). In *Permaculture: Principles and pathways beyond sustainability*¹⁰ I nailed my colours to the mast in clarifying that permaculture was a design response to 'Energy Descent'¹¹ as the most likely future that humanity will face once stocks of fossil fuels are depleted and their combustion tips us into the Pyrocene.

In 2006 Richard Heinberg and I joined forces to show how permaculture was an existing, designed, bottom up and creative response to the twin threats of peak oil and climate change.¹² In 2008, with help from Adam Grubb, founder of Energy Bulletin (now Resilience.org), I published *Fut...ure Scenarios* as an online open access exploration of four near-future scenarios (Brown Tech, Green Tech, Earth Steward and Lifeboat) driven by the variable rate of oil and resource depletion on the one hand, and rate of onset of serious climate change on the other.¹³

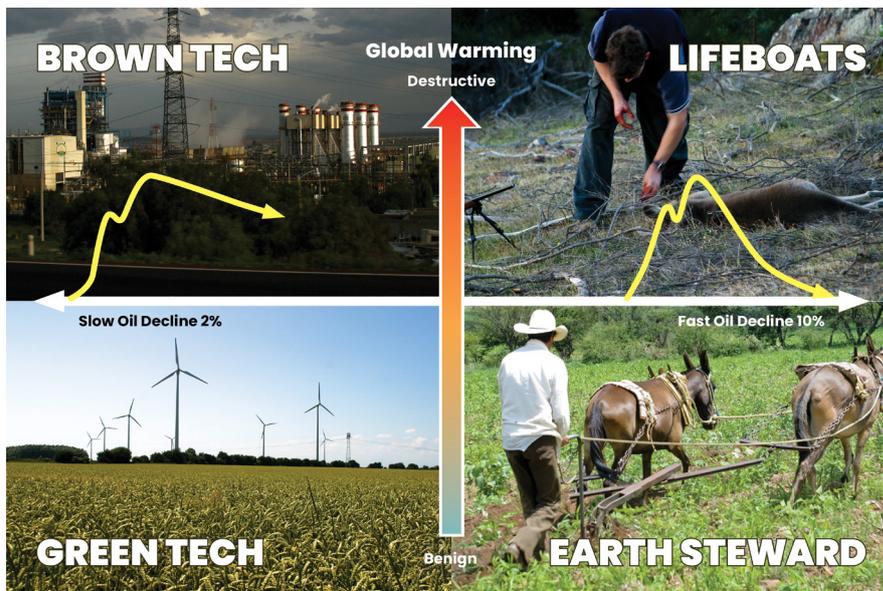
9 For an overview of the principles see permacultureprinciples.com

10 Holmgren (2002/2017) *Permaculture: principles and pathways beyond sustainability* Melliodora Publishing

11 A global future driven by progressively declining net energy availability to support humanity possibly for centuries into the future. My 2017 primer '[Futures framework for RetroSuburbia: limits to growth, energy futures and energy descent scenarios](#)' provides a succinct overview of my work in this area; available at retrosuburbia.com/reading

12 A presentation from this tour is available at holmgren.com.au/presentation/peak-oil-and-permaculture-tour

13 *Future Scenarios: mapping the cultural implications of Peak Oil and Climate Change* (2009) online at futurescenarios.org



Graphic from Future Scenarios showing the scenarios in relation to climate change and fossil fuel declines

This work led to some recognition with the academic field of future studies but my main aim was to help permies focused on grounded strategies with some over-the-horizon thinking about the world we might be designing for.

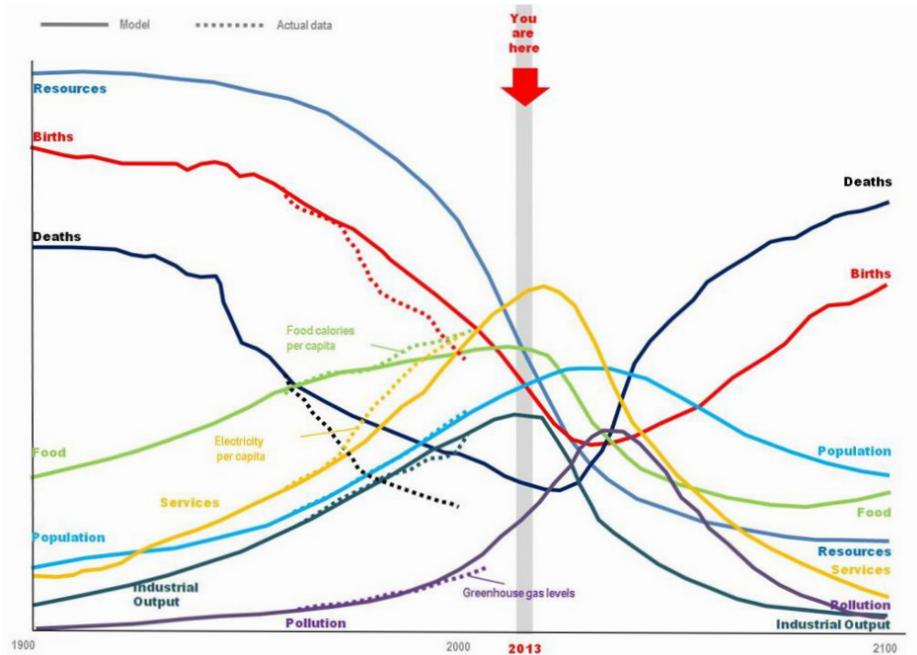
In 2011, I teamed up with Nicole Foss to explore and explain how the faster moving human construct of finance and economics might give near-term expression to the slower but more fundamental variables of resource depletion and climate change.

Most significantly, in 2013 in an essay ‘Crash on Demand: Welcome to the Brown Tech future’¹⁴ I ‘called’ which of my four scenarios I thought was already emergent only six years after I first conceived them. While picking winners is not the point of scenario planning, I thought the signs were clear enough to do so.

‘Crash On Demand’ was controversial (in the then-limited energy descent/degrowth networks) for my musings on how burnt-out climate activists might find some shred of agency by moving to permaculture activism. I hypothesised that if some minority of the global middleclass adopted a radical mix of permaculture productivity and voluntary frugality, the reduction in consumption might be enough to collapse the teetering global financial system and thus stall the material economy before uncontrolled tipping points cooked our world with three, four or more degrees of heating. The adverse effects on people of a global depression would be terrible but it might give us the time and the shock to reset our expectation for a sufficiency economy.

It is the lot of futurists to be wrong, at least in our more detailed portraits of the future, but it is only by ‘painting a picture’ that potential concrete outcomes of powerful but abstract systemic forces and factors can be illustrated and more easily understood.

¹⁴ Holmgren (2013); *Crash on Demand: Welcome to the Brown Tech future* available at holmgren.com.au/writing



Modelling by the World Three computer, from *Limits to Growth Report*; 2013 update from Mahivuni

In using concrete examples to illustrate the systemic change, I got some of these details wrong. As oil prices came down and supply shortages didn't eventuate, at least for the global middleclass, the interest in peak oil collapsed due to the extraordinary growth in shale oil gas production, mostly in the USA.

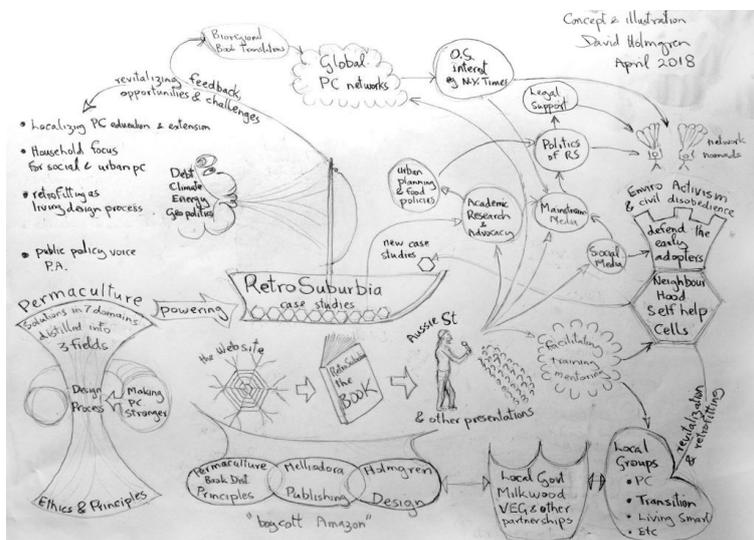
Reading reports by independent petroleum experts calculating that shale oil needed over \$80/barrel to be economically viable, back then I reasoned that this price would be high enough to crush as least the discretionary economy in long-affluent countries and have severe impacts in poor countries. However a combination of interest free money from the quantitative easing response to the GFC, dismantled environmental regulations and investors deluded by bubble economics¹⁵ led to 'Saudi America' being able to keep the punters driving, and most importantly, continue to flex its muscles in efforts at regime change and proxy wars. Combined with the grinding down of consumption by stagnating wages and insecure work, the more obvious expected effects of the peak in conventional oil production were masked by the shale boom. It is a great irony that I had too much faith in the rationality of markets to not invest where there was little prospect of getting their money back.

I think the pandemic ensures the world is unlikely to produce more liquid fuel than the 2018 peak of 'total petroleum and other liquids'. Whether this is primarily an accidental or planned outcome of the response to the pandemic, belated climate policies and divestment, or simply depletion finally overtaking the now fading herculean efforts to bring forward new production, can be debated by future historians. The pandemic may also mark other related peaks: that of global

15 Bubble economic refers to the irrational exuberance of markets that become detached from potential value and of companies, real estate and other investments. Named after the South Sea Bubble, a speculation mania that ruined many British investors in 1720.

industrial production, food production, human population and greenhouse gas emissions. That would align very closely with the 1972 Limits to Growth default run of the World Three computer.

I have always been sceptical that the population would ever reach 10 billion before declining due to natural demographic transition. The main factors behind this belief were declining net energy and, more recently, climate change (as reflected in *Future Scenarios*) while always acknowledging the compounding factors of ecological degradation, species diversity loss, geopolitical, financial and microbiological instability, to mention a few. Maybe the pandemic and the resulting knock-on effects will be the recognised mechanism for a 2030 peak in global population at less than 9 billion with the decline post peak primarily attributed to climate chaos. I think it is also possible that historians will point to data on excess deaths associated with the pandemic and its consequences as causing peak humanity at 8 billion in 2021.



Mind map of RetroSuburbia Rollout strategy that guided our efforts to leverage positive change

I need to acknowledge being wrong about another expectation that emerged from my future scenarios work and informed *RetroSuburbia*. I fully expected the property bubble in Australia, and many other affluent countries, would likely pop at the next stress point following the fake wealth creation during and since the GFC. I had already concluded that financial contagion would mask oil depletion as a driver for economic depression and consequent longer term energy descent. Late in 2019 I noted various sources suggesting the growing instabilities in the bond markets (that I barely understand) were reaching a critical point.

The global spread of the virus led to an explosion of money printing dwarfing that in response to the GFC and it worked (at least so far) in boosting the stock and housing markets into a new frenzy of disaster capitalism.¹⁶ The scale of fake wealth creation via bonds, debts and derivatives is almost impossible to comprehend.¹⁷

Life in a pandemic certainly has many of the characteristics of the Second Great Depression of my 'Aussie Street' story,¹⁸ but of course creative writing and storytelling are not subject to such critical review as serious futures work.

16 'Disaster capitalism' feeds off natural (climate change) and other disasters to provide recovery and reconstruction services funded by the public that typically benefit the corporate providers and contribute to ongoing dependencies.

17 Jeff Desjardins' '[All of the World's Money and Markets in One Visualization](https://visualcapitalist.com)' info graphic helps, available at visualcapitalist.com

18 Watch a presentation of 'Aussie St' at retrosuburbia.com/resources/aussie-st-in-morwell

Interpreting recent history through the Brown Tech lens

My futures work is still little understood or even read in permaculture circles where most people are understandably focused on making good stuff happen. However I think it is important that I review my Brown Tech scenario. This was explored in workshops around Australia as well as overseas from 2006 to 2013 before I became fully focused on *RetroSuburbia* as the most important positive response that I could help stimulate in response to the Brown Tech world.

Brown Tech is driven by a slow decline in oil and rapid onset of serious climate change. Many people imagined the Brown Tech scenario as characterised by climate change denial at the top making things worse. The bit about 'top down response making things worse' was true but not the climate denial. Late but strong emergency level response to climate change in a context of crisis would be a more accurate portrait of the scenario.

The slowly declining conventional oil (after a peak in about 2008), and other key resources, still provide enough energy to run globally-connected, technologically-complex, urban-centred societies. However the more rapid decline in net energy available (after that needed to maintain and expand the energy industries) causes constriction in consumption and other stresses that have many of the characteristics of recession and depression, even if the signals that mainstream economists follow remain largely buoyant.

At the same time, rapidly accelerating climate change (beyond the worst mainstream projections of 2007) generates more intense and frequent extreme weather events, droughts and wildfires and other natural disasters, impacting global food supply and triggering mass migrations. These two primary drivers interact and amplify associated geopolitical, financial and psychosocial stresses that have been challenging Pax Americana.¹⁹

At the global scale, ecological energetics theory suggests that declining net energy to support humanity should lead to a contraction in the number of hierarchical levels of power, just as the massive increase in net energy has supported the development of international governance structures in the aftermath of WWII (especially the UN and its subsidiaries). Declining net energy suggests prior levels of organisational power (most notably the nation state) are likely to become more powerful, at least relative to the barely emergent global institutions.

Further background is important in understanding the signs and signals that contributed to crafting the Brown Tech scenario. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, the World Bank, IMF, WTO,

¹⁹ The USA-dominated western world 'rules based international order' that we have been living under since the end of WWII.



International Bank of Settlements and other instruments of Pax Americana became fully hegemonic. The neoliberal ideology of the 80s and 90s (initiated by what I have always called the Thatcherite/Reaganite revolution) celebrated and fed off the hubris of this victory, the internet and other expressions of rapidly accelerating globalisation. However since the turn of the millennium, crises reveal the neoliberal ideological commitment to laissez faire market forces led by corporations was skin deep.

Over the last 20 years, governments have been moving towards a ‘command economy’ in response to financial, geopolitical and climatic crises, where strong stimuli (carrots and sticks) are used to force business and people to act in ways driven by emergency level policies similar to what occurs in wartime mobilisation. With a decline in public sector capacity, governments rely on corporations to do most of the heavy lifting, but increasingly at the behest of government rather than shareholders.

Higher oil prices in the early 2000s, in response to accelerating depletion of cheaper conventional oil reserves, gave rise to resource nationalism. This was most notable in Russia and Venezuela where strong nationalist governments pushed back against the global system that previously gave resources to whoever had the most US dollars. I saw these events, along with the revolt in 1999 of third world countries against the proposed WTO trade rules, as possibly signalling the peak and decline of globalisation. I had been watching for signs of peaking globalisation as an indirect indicator of declining net energy (at least per capita). Tragically, net energy studies remain unfunded, confused and hotly debated even in the energy sector. The idea that they could act as forward indicators of geopolitical and governance regimes is still at the fringes of academic discourse.²⁰ This energetic and ecological world view is the same thinking that led to permaculture, and while I understand it is out of sync with almost all human-centred views of the world, it continues to help me work from the big picture patterns to relevant details of creative responses.

While information technology and the rise of China as the factory of the world appeared to suggest endlessly accelerating globalisation, since 2000 the subtle signs of declining net energy, and consequently relocalisation of power structures, have been increasing.

²⁰ See work by Howard Odum and colleagues, for instance Odum (2007) *Environment, Power, and Society for the Twenty-First Century: The Hierarchy of Energy*. Columbia University Press.

Relocalisation

For permies and kindred folk, relocalisation is about community-level empowerment, but in crafting my Future Scenarios, the degree of relocalisation reflects net energy availability and ecosystem service functionality rather than conscious political choices. In all energy descent scenarios, the barely emergent global governance structures contract or fail while national, city and hinterland, locality and household/collective levels of power grow to varying degrees to fill the power vacuum created by failing higher levels of governance. Consequently the rise of command economies led by strong central governments, such as in China, but with more trade wars, proxy wars and megaphone diplomacy, can be considered a form of relocalisation (from global governance). In my workshops I quite enjoyed watching reactions to this reframing of the relocalisation concept.



9/11 triggered regime change wars across the world to try to maintain and reinforce Pax Americana. Like efforts to sustain overextended empires throughout history, this bloody strategy and its fig leaf explanation ‘the war on terror’ only accelerated resource depletion and climate change, and led to the death and displacement of millions and impoverishment of masses of middleclass citizens in the USA and other long-affluent counties.

Surveillance State

The rise of the surveillance state has been a critically important part of the shift to command economies. The war on terror was the justification for funding a massive expansion of government bureaucracy and powers (eg Homeland Security), novel forms of detention (eg Guantanamo Bay), and global punishment beatings to intimidate (eg Julian Assange). Much of the infrastructure and data for the surveillance state has piggybacked on the business model of the tech giants harvesting big data about everyone and everything. The global middle class and now the working poor have given away data by unwittingly funding ‘free services’ they ‘could not do without’. At least in these early stages of the command economy, the population has been managed with carrots rather than sticks.

The financialisation of the economy gave those still in the middle class the continuing sense of affluence through housing, stock market and other bubble economies. The obscene wealth accumulation and corruption at the top, disquiet

and dread about the future in the middle class, and anger of the working poor have driven new political agendas, movements and governments ranging from populist nationalist policies on the political right to bold Keynesian proposals on the left (eg Green New Deal) to direct this wealth to the greater good.

What most of the participants in these debates fail to understand is that money is not real wealth, and that the growth of money/debt (not backed by resources) since the 1970s can only succeed in sucking real wealth from Mother Earth and human creativity for so long. I must admit I thought the GFC would be the end of this madness with a Greater Great Depression. Since then, the money fabrication has accelerated, but most of that wealth creation has ended up in the pockets of a few corporations, hedge funds and their super-rich shareholders.

Parking the money with the rich

In trying to understand the accumulation of obscene wealth at the top, an idea by Erik Lindberg²¹ struck me as very plausible, reshaping my own understanding. The super-rich are so few in number that there is a limit to how many Rolls Royces they can drive or how much caviar and champagne they can consume. Leaving aside some novel forms of high energy consumption like the space tourism race, most of the virtual wealth of the super-rich is parked in forms that don't directly lead to demand for more resources and energy.

On the other hand, any scheme to redistribute this wealth, whether to publicly mandated infrastructure, or given to the citizens of already affluent countries, or even those in poor countries, would immediately stimulate demand for material and energy resources from Mother Nature. Apart from furthering environmental degradation and climate chaos, this would trigger multiple limits to resource supply, causing runaway prices and accelerating regime change to maintain supply, while sucking resources out of every other sector of the economy. For example the International Energy Agency (IEA) has recently forecast that to achieve global climate targets, the world annual mining of lithium needs to increase 42-fold by 2040.²² This is just one of the essential elements needed for the renewable energy transition. By parking the wealth with the rich, the collapse of the complete fake global financial system is being held at bay for the time being at least.

How this explanation could reframe attitudes and actions at the personal and collective level could be the subject of a whole other essay but I haven't yet got around to following that path beyond seeding the explanation here and there.

21 See Lindberg (2018) '*Post Peak Minsky—Debt, Unsustainability, and Inequality*' available at resilience.org

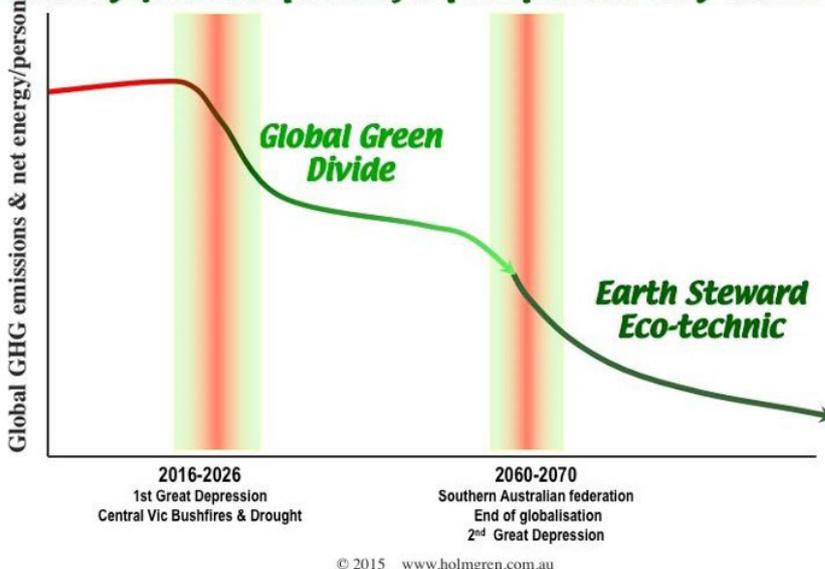
22 See IMA (2021) *The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions*; download pdf from [iea.org](https://www.iea.org)

Welcome to the Brown Tech Future

This is just some of the Brown Tech context in which governments find themselves forced to take control and use crisis to leverage change in social democratic societies where it is otherwise almost impossible to do so. Command economies in societies such as China increasingly become the model for how to deal with threats both external and internal, at the same time that our propaganda focuses on demonising those societies. This combination of strong central government rallying the public around national goals and using the power of corporations to achieve critical ends has a name. It was Mussolini's definition of fascism; although today the word is more a term of abuse. I think it is technically correct to describe China as a fascist state, but to do so today just adds to the anti-China hysteria.

Whatever the new temporary global or regional hegemonic power in charge, the command economic system is inherently unsustainable over longer-term Energy Descent, although it could last for several decades before it fails completely. In my Future Scenarios model, the more benign Green Tech scenario would naturally segue to Earth Steward²³ in response to ongoing energy descent, perhaps after decades of stability (as told in my story 'History from the Future' set in Djaara country of central Victoria from the perspective of 2086²⁴). Unfortunately Brown Tech is more likely to lead to armouring of urban systems against accelerating climate and other crises, but will eventually break down to the Lifeboat scenario at some point in this century. Leaving aside those longer-term possibilities, we urgently need to understand and work out how to navigate the Brown Tech scenario which is hardening around us.

History from the future; a prosperous way down



Slide from a Future Scenarios presentation showing how the 'A History From The Future' story fits into a stepwise energy descent pathway where relatively stable scenarios transition as a result of relatively short lived crises

23 See '5.3 Stepped energy descent pathways linking the scenarios' at futurescenarios.org

24 My 'A History from the Future' (2016) story includes a blend of Brown Tech and Green Tech and includes China as the leading global power influencing what happens in our part of Australia at least; available from retrosuburbia.com/reading

Centralised armouring and peripheral abandonment

Especially significant for permaculture and other fringe groups and networks, is the Brown Tech characteristic of a systemic tension between centralised armouring and peripheral abandonment. Governments are likely to withdraw services from rural hinterlands but invest to protect those in cities, especially capital cities. The city-country divide grows despite some temporary reversals due to the dynamics of communication infrastructure and autonomous power rollout.

In the Green Tech scenario, these and other aspects of the renewable energy revolution distribute more economic power to hinterlands. But in the Brown Tech world, a late response to the climate crisis is likely to see the renewable energy rollout controlled by corporations (rather than community co-ops like our local Hepburn Wind²⁵). While jobs for sparkies and other trades servicing the renewable rollout combined with more mining of needed minerals and metals might keep parts of rural Australia booming, the net yields from all this activity are still likely to be focused on armouring urban centres and centralised supply logistics. In Future Scenarios workshops, I illustrated this tension between town and country with the example of bushfire leading to likely closure of the single line earth return powerlines that the Black Saturday Royal Commission said should be placed underground. I suggested governments might offer cents on the dollar for remote and hard-to-defend rural properties to encourage people to relocate to 'defendable' towns and cities.²⁶ So far, the response in the real world has mostly been a continuation of 'muddling through' with a mix of market and tech solutions (such as autonomous rural power) and bigger government budgets for command-and-control firefighting and evacuations.

In these workshops I also suggested the armouring of the centre and abandonment of the periphery is also likely to apply in ways other than geographic. As stresses and strains on social welfare, health and other services increase, the government is likely to force people to accept undesirable positions within the economy to ensure the increasingly expensive armoury of complex technology-heavy systems, which would ensure a critical mass of consumers and skilled workers on tap to maintain viability. For example, to justify some expensive piece of medical equipment, hospitals need more patients, but the health system is already struggling with too many needy consumers. The alternative will be to become more self- and collectively-reliant without access to centralised services.

My other example is close to the heart and gut of most permies. As climate, energy and geopolitical stresses increasingly threaten the centralised food system, corporations know they need to move toward monopoly power within markets and squash fringe competition from farmers markets, community supported

25 See hepburnwind.com.au

26 Also included in my '[A History from the Future](#)' (2016) story

agriculture (CSAs), and community and home gardens. However funding from different levels of government is used to encourage community gardens and new niche farming enterprises for example. Policies of one department or level of government will be contradicting those of others, creating a systemic schizophrenia. For the ordinary citizen, these tensions between encouraging centralised consumption and work while simultaneously encouraging peripheral self-reliance will be experienced as a choice between security and comfort at a cost to autonomy versus the ideal of autonomy and freedom but with great uncertainty, and risk of failure, sanction or even outlaw status. In 'Aussie St' I painted the picture suggesting that access to guaranteed and rationed food at Moles and Bullies would be dependent on having an Aussie ID card. In 'History from the Future' I added a political tension as a strong centralising (Labor) government in Canberra and a somewhat libertarian (Liberal) government in Melbourne pulled in different directions.

Psychology of responses to Brown Tech threats and opportunities

It was clear to me that when faced with such choices, most people will choose to stay within the increasing strictures of the system, while some minority would choose freedom and responsibility for self, kin and community at the margins. Those with deep scepticism of the system for whatever reason are more likely to resist control on principle, and suffer the consequences, while those with some remaining faith in the system will tend to flock together for mutual support and reinforcement in accepting novel constraints for the common good and a better future.

Personal psychology around wanting to be liked or fit in vs rowing one's own boat plays a part, as does ideology about how society should be organised. Libertarian and anarchistic values obviously favour being fringe people. Those with a strong sense of the collective good, including most environmentalist values, are often strongest in the urge to accept and enforce alignment around a strong collective effort. While an external enemy has historically been a rallying call for collective action, there is big resistance to that metaphor in people focused on social justice and the environment. The 'war on climate change' meme hasn't really worked so far.

Potential reactions of permies to Brown Tech realities

Permaculture teachers, designers, practitioners and activists ('permies') to varying degrees use their own understandings of permaculture ethics and design principles to reflect on difficult issues and choices, both in their own lives and collectively at different scales of engagement.

Many permies relate to the design principle *Use edges and Value the Marginal*.²⁷ Permies may be predisposed to being marginal folk through their efforts at self- and collective-reliance outside of centralised systems, which has given them a head start and an aesthetic revulsion for the tick-box straightjackets that increasingly dominate almost all work in government, big business and even NGOs. For some of us, our whole lives have been a preparation for such futures. In less extreme cases, simply being aware of alternatives gives hope and new-found capacity, especially in the young and adventurous prepared to take risks.

On the other hand, most permies have a strong sense of the collective good, and the long-term future, and are predisposed to make necessary sacrifices for that collective good. The lack of a public discourse about any level of sacrifice necessary to achieve a safe climate, even within the mainstream climate movement, has been a source of frustration for many.

For them, success (at least in the short term) might be the alignment around an emergency, similar to the way in which many in the climate movement have been working to articulate and galvanise at least since 2007. From this perspective, crises are seen as an opportunity for collective action after decades of dysfunctional malaise. For the majority eager to finally see meaningful action, recalcitrant and subversive resisters become an object of derision and even hatred. The efforts to construct this perspective around the climate crisis has been in a holding pattern for years, with action happening too slowly to avert disaster.

However as crises unfold and forks in the road appear ahead, often it is chance that leads one person in a family, group or network to take one fork and before long find themselves on a path along the edge of a widening chasm while a relative, friend or colleague is on the other side. Between them a churning torrent of psychosocial angst can prevent them from hearing or understanding each other. Increasingly things will be seen in black or white terms promising certainty just as all certainties break down. I have always worked to build coalitions across these divides.²⁸

27 See permacultureprinciples.com for an explanation of the permaculture design principles including *Use edges and Value the Marginal*.

28 As expressed in my '[Bushfire Resilient Land and Climate Care](https://holmgren.com.au/writing)' (2020) for example; available at holmgren.com.au/writing



Photo: www.italiaambiente.it

I think it is important to see the Brown Tech world as a logical unfolding of energy descent systemic forces breaking down the techno-industrial world, rather than a great battle of benign wisdom over recalcitrant and subversive resistors, or alternatively, an evil plan for world domination that must be resisted at every turn. For an increasingly alienated, perhaps minority of permies, the emergent Brown Tech world is experienced as a mad undemocratic process taking away our rights and freedoms and imposing controls over previously private lives, possibly driven by shadowy elites striving for world domination or worse. This of course leads to association with people of very different values and backgrounds.

Ever since George Bush's 'you're either with us or against us' rallying call for the war on terror, I have had foreboding fears about being able to maintain nuanced discussions in society at large. In the Trump years I found it became difficult to do that, even in permaculture and kindred networks of 'like minded' people and, yes, I was even interpreted as 'being a Trump supporter' for attempting my lifelong passion for debate (including devil's advocacy).

There will always be good people doing their best in difficult circumstances with different views of the world. For example you don't even have to believe in climate change to see value in the strategies of *RetroSuburbia*. In a time when tolerance, and beyond that, valuing people of different race, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexual preference has become so highlighted, attitudes to others based on their beliefs, values and actions is plumbing new depths of intolerance. Although social media is one of the drivers of these toxic expressions of intolerance, I see rising intolerance as symptomatic of how energy descent is eroding the certainties of our world view.

My view of the state of the world is darker than most, something I have managed to hold over the decades, while focusing most of my energy on creating the world we want by living it each day. That balance between dark perspective and positive action may have protected me from burnout, partly because I don't see the most despicable outcomes as primarily a product of evil. My essay 'The Apology: from the Baby Boomers to the handicapped generations'²⁹ acknowledges the harm created from mostly good intentions.

However, in understanding the historical behaviour of elites faced with systemic crises, I believe one of the grand hazards of the Brown Tech scenario is the demonisation of marginal groups as the purported cause of the problems

²⁹ Holmgren (2019); available at holmgren.com.au/writing

the majority are suffering from. This thought about the future dates from my adolescent years when I felt that Australia was a candidate for this scapegoating aspect of fascism, if and when the lucky country fell on really hard times. The temptation for elites to amplify the vilification of internal enemies contaminating the body politic is explored in Charles Eisenstein's recent 'Girard Series' essays about this process, both historically and currently unfolding.³⁰

In recent years, many environmental activists focused on solutions have felt energised by a great sense that finally we are on the road to solving climate change, or any number of other systemic challenges, with logical, evidence-based plans building on a combination of eco-technologies, and societal realignment organisation.

However from a permaculture perspective we need to remember the value of not having all of society's eggs in one basket: creativity is generated at the margins; there are limits to the important principle of integration; and big and fast responses to crises can often lead to bigger disasters. From the early days of permaculture, I warned of the dangers of eco-fascist tendencies that could come from even permaculture ideology rising to the top in a world of chaotic change.

In our current situation, we need to be more tolerant of those on the margin finding different paths, value their role as guinea pigs going against the grain and moderate any sense of collective certainty about what will help society through uncertain futures. As an example, while I understand the 'electrify everything' push of the environmental mainstream, I am a strong advocate of wood energy in both its low-tech and high-tech forms as part of permaculture resilience in rural environments and even suburbia.³¹

Permaculture pluralism

Anyone involved in permaculture knows that permies can come to quite different conclusions about what is the most ethical and practical solution to the same problem. For example faced with marauding wildlife, some will go to considerable expense (and resource consumption) building elaborate fences, anti-aviaries and other deterrents to separate wildlife from food.

Others will treat the wildlife as another abundance of the system to be harvested. Various permaculture principles, as well as the fundamental ethic of Care of Earth, might be invoked to support both approaches - and most permies will apply both strategies to varying degrees, depending on the context.

³⁰ Eisenstein (2021); available at charleseisenstein.org/essays

³¹ See for instance Chapter 6 'Wood energy: the other solar revolution' in *RetroSuburbia* (2018); retrosurbia.com

Likewise, many permies believe taxation is essential to redistribute resources from places of abundance to those of scarcity and as an expression of solidarity essential to any functioning, let alone ethical, society. Others see almost all the expenditure by governments of tax revenues as representing rape of Mother Earth's abundance and theft from Indigenous people, or further, as either downright evil or at best a bandaid covering festering wounds. An ethical response is to minimise taxpaying (by reducing income and consumption). Again, design principles and ethics can be invoked to support either position.

From my perspective, grappling with the ethical and systemic issues is more important than the notion that there might be a correct answer, and therefore a wrong answer, to the challenge. In the past, there have been heated debates, and agreements to disagree, but rarely would participants in permaculture design courses, convergences or networks see the answers of others as reasons to reject permaculture. Many celebrate personal actions as small-scale experiments, with their good, bad and interesting outcomes informing other experiments, especially the next generations', as we muddle through energy descent to hopefully more benign, or at least less-bad, futures.

Perhaps most controversial within permaculture networks is the issue of spirituality as a source of meaning and wisdom alongside that of science. It is possible to give examples of polarities of attitudes to spirituality but most permies might acknowledge some sense of spirit informing their permaculture work.

So why should I be concerned that differences of opinion and action in relation to lockdowns and vaccinations could be an existential threat to the celebrated pluralism of permaculture?

To answer this question, I will explore the pandemic and the unfolding responses, both mainstream and marginal.

Pandemic flavoured Brown Tech

I believe the pandemic and the responses to it represent a major turning point in crystalising the Brown Tech future. It ticks so many boxes:

- a nature-driven crisis which has been long predicted and, to some extent, planned for
- rolling uncertainty that progressively breaks down past expectations
- a crisis which, like a war, requires the suspension of normal economic activity, personal rights and governance processes
- a demand for strong action by government for the common good informed by science
- a revival of Keynesian policies including a massive increase in government debt

- an enemy (the virus) that can be easily demonised without there being too many defenders to ignore or silence
- strong censorship of broadcast media and novel efforts to censor social media to sideline debate that could undermine the rapidly emergent and evolving program

If the crisis is not solved, then demonisation progressively shifts to those resisting the plan and its essential all-encompassing and radical actions.

This situation is creating the fork in the road where some permies will find themselves (perhaps surprisingly) following the program, while others will have become certain that they will at least quietly resist complying to some degree or other, right up to a radicalised public resistance, whether that be through resigning from work, street protest or satirical art.

We can learn and gain, individually and collectively, from both these increasingly divergent paths – but the learnings could be painful. Let's consider the benefits that might have led permies down one or the other path, perhaps unwittingly, to increasingly polarised positions.

The mainstream plan

Firstly, I want to explore the pandemic response of governments informed by the scientific and medical establishment. Although there are differences of emphasis and policies around the pandemic, these debates are around the margins, even if they are at times heated. Most fundamentally, the mainstream plan takes the following as now self-evident:

- The virus is an existential threat to society that must be contained and disarmed if not eliminated before an establishment of some hoped-for, tolerable new normal.
- Social distancing, disinfectant cleaning, testing, contract tracing, masks and various levels of quarantine, border controls and lockdowns are the only mechanisms available to prevent collapse of the health system and deaths escalating to horrific levels in the short term.



- Novel vaccine technology is the only real hope for a tolerable new normal.
- To achieve effective herd immunity and minimise death some great majority of the adult population and probably children need to get vaccinated as soon as possible.
- The adverse effects of these provisionally approved vaccines are minor and/or rare and much less than the risk of the disease.
- Preventative and early treatments are at best of marginal value, or more likely based on false hope and fraud.
- The suspension of normal civil liberties is a necessary, albeit temporary measure, to achieve the plan in a timely fashion and reduce the suffering both from the virus and the plan itself.
- People who actively resist the plan need stronger social, economic and, where necessary, legal sanction to ensure their actions don't prevent the plan from working for the common good.
- Apart from debate around the margins about how best to respond to these givens, debate and questioning at the level of science, logistics, economics, law, politics, media and social media is not just unnecessary, but an existential threat to the plan and society at large so must be prevented by unprecedented means.
- It is the responsibility of every citizen to play a part in the plan, be bold in convincing those who are hesitant, and challenging those not following the plan, especially those actively resisting it.

Permees following the plan are likely to see themselves as being part of a society-wide collective effort to minimise pain and suffering in the aged, the disadvantaged and those in poor health; a choice in favour of collective and longer-term gain at the cost of individual and short-term sacrifice. For many of us, this is a perfect metaphor for what is needed to address the climate emergency. By accepting what appears to be a broad consensus of global, national and local medical and scientific experts, we avoid the protracted debate and lack of a technical consensus that has stymied governments in initiating strong action to address the climate emergency.

For many, the pandemic may feel like a wakeup call to grow up from what could have been more adolescent disdain for government, experts and corporations; so at least in this case, we should accept them as having *the* answer. Perhaps our experimentation with alternative ways in the good times may, in a pandemic, be similar to the saying there were no atheists in the trenches (of WWI). We might not feel the need to pray to God, but for many of us Science is a saviour of sorts in a pandemic that threatens most of what we thought was solid. Just as we have never really understood the details of climate modelling and science, we don't understand the complexities of virology or epidemiology but accept that scientific processes of research, peer review and debate have been at work in the background for years, if not decades, to establish enough of a consensus of experts for emergency action.

For permies in despair about the waste and dysfunction of the consumer economy, the closure, albeit temporary, of many discretionary services and businesses is some sort of taste for how we might need to decide what is important; maximum consumer choice for the affluent vs provision of basic needs for all. The personal sacrifice and adaptation to difficulties, including stay-at-home lockdowns, have been opportunities to focus more on the important things in life and get a taste of what social solidarity feels like.

Reports of contrarian views seem to mostly come from sources contaminated by association with climate denial and other views we categorically reject. The resisters' outrage looks to many like just more selfish, science-denying and ignorant right-wing rednecks, trying to prevent collective wisdom and social solidarity from working. Familiar powerful bad players in global corporations or nation states have been replaced by much more immediate angry undesirables, who without much power or vision could wreck the hard work of the collective to create a workable new normal.

The dissident view

It is more difficult to generalise about those who question or reject the program. A great diversity of views, explanations, feelings and actions flourish in an environment of unprecedented censorship. While there is great sensitivity about the term 'censorship', let alone 'propaganda' by those supporting the plan, for those on the other side, it is astonishing how rapidly the axe has fallen on questioning, and debate, in the media, social media, workplaces and families, let alone defence of what – until very recently – most of us took as our inalienable rights.

For many permies, the pandemic seems to be another example of hyped up threat like the 'war on weeds', 'war on drugs', 'war on terror' used to manipulate the population to comply with some version of disaster capitalist solutions. Most sceptics acknowledge the virus as real, but not as dangerous as the cure in lockdowns and other draconian measures. The 'war on the virus' seems just as futile or misguided as all the other wars on nature, substances, and concepts. So much for trying to have nuanced discussions about how viruses are an essential and largely symbiotic mechanism for the exchange of genetic material and mediation of evolution!

While the closure and loss of cafés, gyms and hairdressers might not be a great loss, except to those directly affected, many of us have noticed that the official response to the pandemic tends to follow a pattern of support and strengthening of dominant corporations while leading to the weakening and likely collapse of small business and community self-organised activities.

During the first lockdown, ‘stay at home in your household’ was celebrated as a great plus for people getting the *RetroSuburbia* message. More recently, the messaging about shared and multi-generation households being suspect has been building, especially in the working-class western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne where many of the essential and less well paid workers, who keep society functioning, live. We have shifted from a joke about ‘which permie created the pandemic?’ to a gritted teeth recognition that the response to the pandemic is working to vacuum people into a level of dependence on techno-industrial systems as if in some dystopian science fiction.

Many permies have taken advantage of the shift online to network more effectively around the country and the world, but we are deeply troubled by our increasing dependence on mediated experiences and what seems like draconian regulation of informal engagement with people and nature. The concerns for what this is doing to children are far more serious than the loss of the regulated version of social interaction that children get at school.

For many of us, it is completely natural to be sceptical about one big fast answer provided by the giants of the pharma industry at huge profit, while they have been granted legal immunity for the consequences of their novel products. Many have made the rational assessment that the very low risks of the virus (for most of us at least) seem better than the unknown of a novel technology approved and pushed on a frustrated and frightened population in record time. Some in this camp were sceptical about vaccines in general but most have been influenced by the largely censored views from some leading global experts, that these vaccines are in a totally different risk category to all previous vaccines.

While waiting and seeing what happens next looks selfish to the majority, the difficulty in getting access to data and unbiased interpretation drives many to rely on their gut feelings. One or more examples of spin and manipulation of data by officials, and especially the media, leads to a general collapse in trust about any, and even all, aspects of the official story. For instance:

- Many of us have seen evidence that existing low-cost and low-risk treatments are available and used effectively in some countries, contesting the ‘no available treatment’ orthodoxy.
- Most understand that while the vaccines seem to give some protection from more severe effects of the disease at least in the early stages, they do not appear to stop transmission, at least of the latest variant.
- Many wonder why the build-up of natural immunity from prior exposure to the virus is not considered part of the solution that should at least be discussed before vaccine passports are implemented.

Concerns about more serious adverse effects of the vaccines, as predicted by some experts, have developed into alarm, anger and resistance as both the evidence increases and efforts at cover up and spin become worse. Extreme consequences

that many of us dismissed early on as highly unlikely are now showing up in hard-to-read scientific papers, clinical reports and official records and databases.

A similar process has happened with the official responses. For example vaccine passports are now widely discussed and debated as part of the attempt to get as many people vaccinated as possible, as the efficacy of vaccines falls and concerns about adverse effects lock in resistance by a minority. At the start of the pandemic this possibility was decried as paranoid conspiracy theory.

France has been leading the charge to impose vaccine passports for many public and work spaces including hospitals. Beyond massive street demonstrations, it's hard to assess how large the resistance will be in different countries and circumstances but there are already signs that whole industries will lose a significant part of their workforce as some substantial minority of the population withdraw their work, consumption and investment in the system rather than getting the vaccine. Whether by design, policy stupidity or the unexplained viral power of censored scientists and vaccine doubters to overcome the largest public health education/public relations/propaganda effort in history, it is conceivable that the result could be economic contraction on a much larger scale than has occurred as a result of lockdowns so far. I can't help but see what is unfolding as a bizarre version of my 'Crash on Demand'³² scenario.

Economic contraction could mostly be in the discretionary economy, but how would the health system cope with a loss of staff, especially if some combination of ineffective vaccines against new strains and antibody-enhanced disease lead to medically informed people losing faith before the general public? Part of the solution might be doctors and nurses from overseas, or the adoption of treatment options for Covid currently being used with success in countries like Mexico and India. (In the week since I wrote that last sentence, doctors from overseas are now part of the plan for Australia. Are the authorities working from prior playbooks or just making it up as they go in reaction to the unfolding crisis?)

Australia and New Zealand seem to be something of a test bed for the most draconian regulations in an attempt to keep Covid as close to zero as possible (and failing). Certainly large numbers of people in other countries see us as a police state and wonder why there hasn't been more resistance Down Under.

Some of us have noted plans promoted by the World Economic Forum for a Global Reset³³ that will require a command economy to respond to the climate emergency, and that the pandemic is an opportunity to implement some of the structures and processes needed to create what some fear is a global new world order.

32 See '[Crash on demand: welcome to the Brown Tech future](#)' (2013); available at holmgren.com.au/writing

33 See weforum.org/great-reset

For many people finding the trajectory from trust to mistrust often leads to either deep depression or an energised anger, mostly focused on the authorities but often expressed to friends and family at great cost to all concerned.

Although I have some of those thoughts and feelings, I mostly feel a great tension between a deep and somewhat detached fascination with the big picture and the sense of urgency I habitually feel in spring to get fully cranking with the seasonal garden and generally keeping our home at Melliodora shipshape. To some extent, this a normal state of affairs for someone firmly tethered to the earth but with one's head in the clouds. It feels like finally I have a box seat to watch what looks like the train of techno-industrial civilisation hitting the Limits to Growth stone wall and breaking apart, all in slow motion.

Personal views on the pandemic

Up until this point I have not indicated my interpretation of the details of either the virus or the response because I wanted to focus on the bigger systemic drivers without getting muddled in the good/bad, right/wrong polarities. However we all have to face what life throws in our path with whatever internal and collective resources we have at hand.

As is my lifelong habit, I have done my own 'due diligence' to understand and guide personal decisions. In the past I have always been open about my conclusions and decisions, whether around the campfire or on the most public of forums. I have often joked about the comfort I feel in being a dissident about most things including being beaten up at primary school in the early days of the Vietnam war for being a 'commie traitor' to being ostracised in the 90s for opposing the war on weeds orthodoxy of the environmental mainstream. But today being a dissident is no joking matter. Unfortunately the psychosocial environment has now become so toxic that the pressures to self-censor have become much more complex and powerful. Much more is at stake than personal emotions, ego, reputation or opportunities and penalties.

Following my instinct for transparency, I will state my position, which has been evolving since I first started to consider whether the novel virus in Wuhan might lead to a repeat of the 1919 flu pandemic or even something on the scale of the Black Death. I can summarise my current position and beliefs as follows:

- The virus is real, novel and kills mostly aged, ill and obese people with symptoms both similar to, and different from, related corona viruses.
- It most likely is a result of 'Gain of Function' research at Wuhan Institute of Virology in China supported by funding from the US government.
- Escape rather than intentional release was the more likely start of the pandemic.

- Vaccines in use in western world countries are based on novel technology developed over many years, but without resulting in effective or safe vaccines previously.
- The fear about the virus generated by the official response and media propaganda is out of proportion to the impact of the disease.
- Effective treatment protocols for Covid-19 exist and if those are implemented early in the disease, then hospitalisation and deaths can be greatly reduced, as achieved in some countries that faced severe impacts (especially Mexico and India).
- The socioeconomic and psychosocial impacts of the response will cause more deaths than the virus has so far, especially in poor countries.
- The efficacy of vaccines is falling rapidly while reported adverse effects are now much greater proportionally than for previous vaccines.
- The under-reporting of adverse events is also much higher than for previous vaccines, although this is still an open question.
- The possibility of antibody dependent enhancement (ADE) leading to higher morbidity and death in the future is a serious concern and could be unfolding already in countries such as Israel where early and high rates of vaccination have occurred.

Given the toxic nature of views already expressed about (and by) people I know and respect, I am not going to engage in an extensive collating of evidence, referencing who I think are reliable experts and intermediaries who can interpret the virus, the vaccine or any of the related parts of the puzzle. Outsourcing personal responsibility for due diligence to authorities is a risky strategy at the best of times; in times of challenge and rapid change the risk escalates. I do not want to convince anyone to not have the vaccine, but I do want to provide solidarity with those struggling (often alone and isolated) to find answers, so the following are two starting points that I think could be helpful:

- For those trying to understand the vaccines, their efficacy and risks, ‘This interview could save your life: a conversation with Dr Peter McCulloch’³⁴ provides perhaps the best overview with full reference to official data, scientific papers and clinical experience from one of the most well-credentialed physicians in the field.
- For those focused on treatment options, the Front Line COVID-19 Critical Care Alliance (FLCCA)³⁵ physicians are a good source on this rapidly emerging field of clinical real and worldwide practise.

As a healthy 66-year-old I am not personally afraid of the virus, but if greater virulence and death rate do emerge with new variants, I might consider the preventative regimen recommended by the FLCCA doctors. There is no way I will

³⁴ Available at <https://www.bitchute.com/embed/BxME0RDJ6IS9/>

³⁵ covid19criticalcare.com

be getting any of the current vaccines in the foreseeable future, no matter what the sanctions and demonisation of my position on this matter.

At this point there may be readers who decide to ignore anything and everything I have written as obviously deluded. These are the costs of transparency – and a test of whether a diversity of perspectives about important issues can be tolerated.

In any real pandemic, the direct observation of illness and death generates fear of the disease, self-isolation and hoped for protective response. Authorities often try to calm public behaviour to avoid chaos. Currently unprecedented amplification of fear about the virus and pressure to obey lockdowns and vaccinate is deemed necessary in the absence of widespread personally verifiable threat. To me this feels more like a test run under semi-controlled conditions instead of a serious pandemic long predicted as a natural outcome in a world of nearly 8 billion hyperconnected humans.

On the other hand, the mindset of relying on official data and its interpretation over one's own observations is potentially very useful in cementing a public preparedness to 'follow the science' rather than trust individuals' own survival instincts. A strong case can be made for doing so in relation to all sorts of threats, such as smoking tobacco.

I am not suggesting all of this is part of some master conspiracy plan unfolding like clockwork. It is more likely a result of rapidly evolving self-organisation in which many adaptable and well-resourced players and coalitions can take advantage of, and thus further drive, the outcomes in particular directions.

Another explanation of the apparent global plan is the phenomenon of 'lock in' affecting globally networked institutions and elites. Once committed, doubling down is the only option to cover the disaster of a failing strategy. This is already well established in the global financial system where more debt is the answer to the crisis of debt.

This pandemic crisis has clear parallels to the problem of climate change where an abstract threat can only be seen through recorded and broadcast events (ie natural disasters). In this way, the acceptance of the virus as an existential threat to society may pave the way for acceptance of extraordinary action in response to the climate emergency.

I am not suggesting climate change is anything other than an existential threat, but I am very sceptical (in advance) of any 'necessary' top-down responses that are likely to be sold to the public to produce the sort of alignment we have seen with the pandemic. As I have previously indicated, a hard-line command economy response to the climate emergency is likely to simultaneously discredit and disable the diverse bottom-up creative adaptation and mitigation responses to the climate

crisis.³⁶ The climate emergency, like the pandemic emergency, will be used to sell a one-size-fits-all top-down response where we must comply with rules and responses crafted by remote elites supposedly for the common good.

The rapidly evolving situation and all its psychological, sociological and economic dimensions suggest an expanding field of possibilities. These could include:

- a cyber pandemic that crashes the global financial system,
- a short war between China and the USA³⁷
- rapid reduction in consumption of oil and other critical resources and consequently greenhouse gas emissions as a result of the virus,
- plus of course accelerating climate disasters.

In different scenarios, concern about the virus and the ability to implement the plan could become ever more intense, or alternatively, be shunted offstage or metastasised into dealing with the next crisis. Consequently the details of what worked, what didn't, who takes the credit and who gets the blame, would probably all be lost in the swirling muddy waters of compounding crises.

Valuing the marginal

Tolerance, let alone celebration of diversity, is not the easy permaculture principle many of us assume. Valuing the marginal can be even harder, especially if we study the darker periods of human history.

Over most of history, minority ethnicities and subcultures lived in ambiguous complementarity with dominant majorities. For hundreds, if not a thousand, years my Jewish ancestors made valuable contributions to European culture while managing to maintain their own culture to an extraordinary extent. They lived in ghettos not just for protection from the eruptions of intolerance in the dominant Christian communities but to ensure their language and culture weren't swamped by that of the majority. While the Jews carried the elitist belief they were God's Chosen People, they didn't attempt to gain converts and were naturally respectful to the majority Christians. They survived through all but the worst of antisemitic pogroms by not antagonising the majority, largely accepting the restrictions placed on them by society. What else could they do?

Similar dynamics could emerge from the virus and the vaccine, where a subculture of home birth, home education, home food production and alternative health brings together people of previously diverse subcultures, including permies, who are excluded from society. That exclusion will seem to a majority to be self-inflicted, for those excluded it will feel critical to both survival and identity. Is

³⁶ See '5.1 Permaculture Meta-Scenarios' chapter at futurescenarios.org

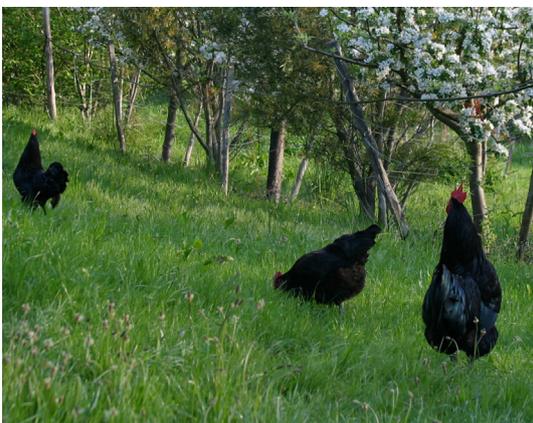
³⁷ Another part of my 'A History from the Future' (2016) story, which happens in 2022

it sensible to plead for tolerance in line with sensitivities to the rights of other minorities? Or is that just an invitation to be stoned to death, if not literally then virtually on social media?

In pre-colonial India, I believe the widespread Muslim minorities in most Hindu-dominated communities across the subcontinent provided a necessary and proportional population of meat eaters that kept otherwise sacred cows in check. Without them, the ecology of the Hindu vegetarian majority may have been unsustainable, while a majority of meat eaters in the subcontinent prior to fossil fuelled and fertilised agriculture would have led to ecological collapse. The Hindus and Muslims in thousands of small communities got along well or at least tolerated each other through the centuries, perhaps because of this ecological complementarity.

Unfortunately one of the weaknesses of western culture, which shows up in both Christian and Muslim traditions, is the idea that if a particular path is the correct one, then everyone should follow it. From the perspective of east Asian philosophy and many Indigenous traditions, harmonious balance is more important than the right way. The yin yang symbol showing each polarity containing the seed of its opposite encapsulates this critically important antidote to the recurring western theme about the triumph of good over evil. In *The Patterning Instinct* Jeremy Lent explores how these different world views have shaped history and that any emergent ecological world view will foreground the importance of harmonious balance.³⁸

In the early 1990s while negotiating catering guidelines for our residential Permaculture Design Course with our vegan venue hosts, I raised this perspective to explain the philosophical basis of our request to be able to use modest amounts of eggs from our Melliodora hens. After explaining how Su's girls were cared for, I said the quantity of eggs we would be using would be small. I immediately realised this made little impression so I changed tack. From their perspective, if keeping hens for eggs is bad then in principle one egg from one hen is as bad as the factory farming supplying Moles and Bullies. Their perspective was in keeping



with the western tradition of absolutism whereas permaculture, if it could be considered a philosophy, sees right behaviour as contextual and relative, as in the eastern traditions. Rarely can we consider anything 100% good or bad in permaculture, a theme I repeatedly referenced in trying to defuse the 'war on weeds', and more generally through the Mollisonian aphorism 'The problem is the solution'.

38 Lent (2017) *The Patterning Instinct: A cultural history of humanity's search for meaning* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; see also jeremylent.com

Voltaire's Bastards and Thinking Like a State

Another important influence and check on my own sense of certainty has been the ideas of Canadian historian John Ralston Saul. In his master work *Voltaire's Bastards*,³⁹ Saul documents the characters who combined the power of logic, data collection and technology with the absolutism of the western tradition to create a 'dictatorship of reason'. He discusses examples such as:

- the generals on both sides in WWI repeatedly sending waves of young men into the field of machine gun fire pursuing an established logic of war fighting that had not come to terms with novel factors outside of their conceptual framework.
- the apparently logical and rational nature of the Nazi decision making that set up the gas chamber extermination camps for demonised minorities (where most of my European Jewish relatives perished).
- Henry Kissinger transforming the previously open-ended debate that characterised meetings of the US presidential cabinet with an overwhelming stack of briefing books written by the experts (under his management) that led to rubber stamp decision making.

Reading these and many other case studies that mark critical junctures in the history of the west since the great hopes of the Enlightenment, made me reflect on my own role at the time as the 'expert designer/developer' of Fryers Forest ecovillage⁴⁰ with all the rational evidence and 'gift of the gab' to explain the plan for the forest and the community. Ralston Saul helped me see the limits of logical accumulation of evidence giving more and more certainty of belief and outcomes, which can disempower other modes of thinking and action. While I still revel in the opportunity to debate a subject, always playing the ball rather than the man, I can also see the risks and dangers when the accumulation of evidence gathered through a particular ideological framework is used to overwhelm and suppress the value of doubt, which is Ralston Saul's modest antidote to the excesses of the dictatorship of reason.

In recent discussions with colleagues about the pandemic, Daryl Taylor and Josh Floyd both referenced *Seeing Like a State* by James C Scott.⁴¹ This book outlines how nation state power depends on legibility achieved through placing a simplifying grid of data collection and management over the complexities of communities and landscapes without which the state cannot control its territory or its citizens.

39 Saul (1993) *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* Simon & Schuster; see also johnralstonsaul.com

40 See 'Fryers Forest Eco-village' at holmgren.com.au/fryers-forest

41 Scott (1999) *Seeing Like a State: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* Yale University Press; see also this 2018 interview with Scott '[When the revolution becomes the state it becomes my enemy again](#)' available at theconversation.com

The work of Ralston Saul and Scott provides much needed wisdom to understand and navigate the vortex of self-organisation driving top-down responses to the virus and at least moderate the extreme expressions of good and evil that threatens to swallow us all.

The wisdom of the collective

I want to lead by example in trying to understand and articulate why it is good that the majority of the population appears to be strongly behind the plan and that maybe it is even good that a majority of my permaculture colleagues, and dare I say followers, might also be lining up to get vaccinated, when I have no intention of doing so.

Firstly, I should acknowledge the obvious reason that if the official story is right, the majority getting vaccinated will combine with naturally acquired immunity and control the worst effects of the virus without the need to get every last dissenter vaccinated.

Secondly, given the pressure to push the vaccination rate in every way possible, encouraging some extra hesitators to resist will only increase the pressure and possibly lead to harsher sanctions as well as more broken family relationships and reputations, and pain and suffering, which could be worse than potential adverse effects of the virus or the vaccine on those people.

Thirdly, because so many people I respect as intelligent and ethical are following the plan, I won't fall into the trap of losing respect for who they are, what they have done and what else they might do in the future. And if it turns out this is the start of a more permanent hard fascist command state, then we need people of good values on the inside to keep open whatever channels of communication remain possible.

A lifelong effort to shape what is now classified as 'Deep Adaptation'⁴² has led me to understand that as systems unravel, the stories that make sense of the world also fall apart and in the desperate search for mental lifeboats, different stories come to the fore. The mainstream story around the pandemic is one such mental lifeboat that allows people to maintain faith and function. Without the renewed source of faith and order from rational science guiding technological wizardry few of us understand (funded by the apparently limitless power of fiat wealth), the psychosocial shock from a pandemic, even much less than 1919's, could be enough to create social, economic and political chaos on a historically unprecedented scale, at least in the long-affluent countries, especially Australia. Whatever the nature of the next crisis, I think it will require citizens to by and large accept that the behaviours, rights and freedoms we took for granted are artifacts of a vanishing

42 See deepadaptation.info

world. Further, it will provide a harsh reality check on how dependent most of us are on systems we have no control over, so most will believe they have little choice but to accept the new state of affairs.

So while I might resent what I see as unnecessary sanctions on those resisting, I accept that in the early stages of Brown Tech Energy descent, harsh and by some perspectives, arbitrary, controls on behaviour will be part of our reality and arguably necessary to maintain some sort of social order (even if shortsighted or not sustainable in the long run). In line with the Deep Adaption framework articulated by Jem Bendell and others, my aim is to focus on how we ameliorate the adverse effects of a predicament that humanity cannot escape.

More philosophically, the virus and the response to it could be seen as a meditation practise showing us how no one is an island separated from the whole of life. To break down the toxic notion that we are free agents to do as we choose without consideration of consequences, especially for future generations and the wider community of life, is something permaculture teaching has tried to bring to daily life. Working out how we do this in meaningful ways is a constant challenge.

Sympathy for the Devil

Having at least had a go at seeing the good in the mainstream plan, I now want to articulate quite passionately why the majority should at least tolerate and not seek to further punish the minority for their resistance. To advocate for this within the permaculture movement, I appeal to our pluralism of celebrating the diversity of action. This is especially where permies take the risks of being the unvaccinated guinea pigs, who can at least be a control group in this grand experiment on the human family. Beyond that, I hope our colleagues inside the tent will see the need to express solidarity with our right to chart our own course and not feel they have to be silent for fear of being cast out of the tent.

While I respect the younger permaculture folk following the plan for the common good, I still believe the most creative deep adaptations to the Brown Tech world will be crafted at the geographic and conceptual fringes by younger risk takers coming together in new communities of hope. As an older person, more at risk from the virus and naturally more risk averse (than I was in my 20s at least) I want to appeal for the need to accept young people who, at close to zero risk from the virus, want to break out of the straightjacket the adult world is creating for them, and try their luck on the margins creating a new economy in the shadow of the old. While the paths to the armoured centre and the feral fringes both have their risks, those on the inside, especially older people, should accept that the young risk takers on the fringes might create pathways through the evolutionary bottleneck of Energy descent more effectively than the best resourced and rationally devised plans from within the system of thinking that has created our civilisation crises.

Whether or not the pandemic will lead to the flowering of creative light-footed models for adaptation, the larger Energy descent crisis for which permaculture was originally designed (that most permies recognise as the 'Climate Emergency') needs these responses at the margins. If the permaculture movement cannot digest this basic truth and at least defend the right of people to craft their own pathways in response to collapse of all certainties, then our movement will have failed the first great test of its relevance in a world of Energy descent.

Some permie dissidents will double down in their focus on preparation to survive and thrive in spite of the sanctions, while others will be energised by non-violent direct action to resist what they see as draconian and counterproductive collective punishment. In doing so they may draw on past experience or inspiration on the frontlines of anti-war, environmental defence and free communication resistance and dissident art.⁴³

Tradie takes his own life after industry shut down in Melbourne

By Alexandra Marshall | September 20, 2021



Screen shot from [Rebel News.com](https://rebelnews.com) story

In the past, more apolitical permies trying to introduce permaculture to socially conservative punters could still acknowledge, at least privately, the element of truth in the quip 'permaculture is revolution disguised as gardening'. In today's climate, can permies inside the tent accept and appreciate their colleagues on the frontlines of a new resistance movement that might moderate the extremes of how society navigates the larger climate emergency? Or will they flip and decide permaculture was, after all, hippy nonsense but is now contaminated with toxic right wing conspiracy madness so must be dumped as unfit for purpose in our new world?

43 [Artist as Family's Covid Roadmap](#)

In saying this, I'm not suggesting we should all follow suit, let alone belittle or demonise those who don't take the walk on the wild side. That would also be a contradiction of permaculture ethics and design principles. As we have always taught, ethics and design principles are universal but rarely lead to clear and conclusive solutions. Strategies and techniques vary with the context; wonderful elegant design solutions for one context can be hopeless white elephants, or worse, in another. Context is everything and as colleague Dan Palmer has so effectively applied in his Living Design Process,⁴⁴ the people context is as complex, subtle and diverse as that of the land and nature.

The sovereignty of persons to choose freely how they grapple with the tension between autonomy and the needs of the commonwealth is not just an ideal from western Enlightenment civilisation working out how to apply the gift of fossil fuel wealth. It is a fundamental expression of how the ecology of context is constantly shifting, and that all systems simultaneously express life through bottom-up autonomy of action and top-down guidance of collective wisdom.

In times of great stability, the distilled wisdom of the collective, embodied in institutions, carries human culture for the long run. Sometimes the sanctions on the individuals who rejected the rules of the collective were harsh and, according to modern thinking, arbitrary but over long periods of relative stability, those rules worked to keep society functioning.

In times of challenge and change it is, ironically, dissidents at the fringes who salvage and conserve some of the truths of the dying culture and carry them forward into the unknown future to craft new patterns of recombinant culture.

What we call 'science' had its origins in what Pythagoras salvaged, almost single handedly, from the decadent and corrupt theocracies of ancient Egypt of which he was an initiate, before he walked away from the centre to the margins of civilisation.

Major failures in the application of so-called trusted science have been a feature of our lived experience. Tragically, science could be one of the casualties as humanity passes through the cultural evolutionary bottleneck of climate chaos and energy descent. Permaculture was one attempt to craft a holistic applied design science grounded in observation and interaction, taking personal responsibility and accepting (negative) feedback, designing from patterns to details and creatively using and responding to change. I still believe that salvaged and retrofitted versions of practical science crafted at the margins will serve humanity better than rigid faith in the priests of arcane specialised knowledge maintained by an empire of extraction and exploitation. Can we be sure what the father of science and mathematics would do in this time of turmoil?

44 See livingdesignprocess.org

Whatever the historical significance of these times, maintaining connections across differences of understanding and action within permaculture and kindred networks will strengthen us all in dealing with the unfolding challenges and opportunities of the energy descent future.

David Holmgren

Melliodora

Spring Equinox 2021

Postscript

After completing this essay I was sent [this documentation of the global financial system crisis](#) providing a context for the pandemic and the extraordinary top down responses. In combination with the larger and slower moving energetic and environmental limits which are my focus, this analysis helps us understand the urgency of the top down restructuring of the global economy to save it from collapse triggered by financial rather than biological contagion.