

# Rewiring Society for Survival

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# Contents

I. The Task . . . . .	3
II. “Wild Problems” . . . . .	4
III. Setting the Course . . . . .	5
IV. The Tipping Point . . . . .	6

Inventing a new way to live, one that will allow us, as a species, to go on living, is what economists call a “wild problem.” It will take a mighty imaginative leap, really a heave of consciousness. But we can do it. We have to.

It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

— Frederic Jameson

## I. The Task

The time for tiny tweaks to the status quo is over. We’ve run out of time for that. The only thing that will save us is massive buy-in to a major paradigm shift, a different way of living and loving on planet Earth. A lighter, looser, sparer one. More, because less.

Here’s how people typically change their minds. They do it the way a climber scales a rock face, inching out beyond the last point of protection — so that if they fall, they fall only as far as what they last believed.

Our rethinks are not big stretches, in other words. Just variations on what we think right now.

So it’s worth asking: in the year 2024, are humans actually able to throw over the side a lifestyle we’ve been raised to think is somehow our birth right? Are we capable of making a leap like that?

“It’s just the way things are.”

There are lots of things in life we never really give a second thought to. We do it this way because, well, that’s all we’ve ever known. We assume that wiser heads than ours put it all in place.

Of course that’s often bullshit.

There’s a story about a beloved family recipe for pot roast. One evening it’s served at a dinner party, and a satisfied guest asks for the recipe. A week later they call the host. “Thanks, tasted great, but I’m curious: Why this step: ‘Slice off both ends of the roast before putting it in the pan.’” Host goes, “Huh. I dunno. That’s just the way mom did it.” So she calls up mom. Mom says: “Huh. I dunno: That’s just the way grandma did it.” Turns out grandma only had one roasting pan, and it was too short for the whole roast — so you had to cut the ends off. Over the generations the pans changed but the ritual didn’t. No one thought to question it.

(Primo Levi tells a similar story in his memoir *The Periodic Table*. He was working in a varnish factory and was puzzled why every vat of varnish contained an onion. As a chemist, he was curious. What was up with that? It’s just part of the recipe, he was told. You need an onion to make varnish. Turns out you don’t need an onion to make varnish. It was in there to test the temperature. When the varnish was up to temp, you’d smell the onion frying.)

It's stupid to keep mindlessly doing things when you don't understand why they're being done. Because what you're doing may not be as trivial as these examples.

One of the things we keep doing mindlessly is neoliberalism.

Because that's all many of us have known. "We submitted ourselves to this scenario," as the poet Tung Pueblo put it, thinking it was the recipe for freedom. And we never really looked critically at it again. Even as it was turning us against each other, and most of us were slowly kind of becoming the opposite of free.

So now you ask yourself: What else am I mindlessly taking for granted?

The green-energy revolution will magically science us out of global warming.

Our leaders know what they're doing.

Global democracy is safe, it will prevail.

Here's another fiction many of us are holding on to: massive, seismic systemic change is not something that can happen in our lifetimes.

We know that major disruptions have happened, but these are events far away in time and place ... when circumstances were different, power structures fragile enough to topple, etc. It's hard to accept that such an event might be coming for us. It's a bit like allowing we could be in a fatal car crash tomorrow. At some level we know it's possible. But we kind of refuse to ... let it land.

There are places our minds just do not want to go.

Because: fear.

There's a quote by Mark Fisher that you hear a lot. It's basically Frederick Jameson's with a twist:

It's easier to imagine the end of capitalism than what comes after.

It's that "what comes after" that's crazy-making. What IS on the other side of this consumer-capitalist experiment? Chaos? Anarchy?

Or worse (gasp): socialism.

The examples of socialism that pop to mind are disastrous distortions of a workable template, totalitarian Leftist states with tyrants at the helm (Mao, Stalin, Pol Pot), and catastrophic suffering the by-product. This alternative to capitalism just seems evil. For many Americans, trying to imagine a kind of democratic socialism that works ... well, it's just about impossible. There are no hand holds on that rock face.

## II. "Wild Problems"

Would we be better off if we dumped capitalism? That is what economists call a "wild problem."

Wild problems are ones we have no real idea of how to think about. We can't get our minds around them because we've never encountered them before. There's no playbook. There's no way to PROVE which decision is the right one. No straight-line analysis is going to cut it. No experts are standing by to settle the matter. Rationality

can't help you; it may in fact hurt you. You can't logic out a wild problem. When you try, you just end up looking ridiculous.

In the archive of Charles Darwin's papers is a hilarious account of him trying to decide whether to get married. He drew up a cost-benefit analysis. "His list of pluses and minuses — especially the pluses — is the list that someone would make who has never been married and has no access to the upside of the inner life of a married man," as the economist Russ Roberts put it in his book *Wild Problems*. (minuses: "degradation!" Pluses: "chitchat") So "each fork of the decision was a mystery."

What we're talking about here is judgment calls. There's no right answer AND the stakes are high.

These are the decisions that define us as humans.

### III. Setting the Course

We don't know exactly what this new way of life we're going to need to adopt will look like. So if we don't know where we're going how do we proceed?

By setting the co-ordinates of the way we want to feel. Free. Calm. Interconnected. Part of something bigger than ourselves.

How do we build a world where everyone gets a shot at qualities like that?

In the arena of wild problems, we are, each of us, in a sense, on our own. All we have to navigate by is our own morals – what the Duke political scientist Mike Munger calls our "metaprinciples." These are the sum total of wisdom gained through every decision we've ever made, and the feedback we've taken to make adjustments that feel right.

Most people would call it "doing the right thing." Not overthinking it, just doing it.

In the case of this new way to live that we're trying to build, we might intuit that it's putting the brakes on greed and gluttony and metastatic growth. It means sucking it up and sacrificing, to keep the circle whole for the children of our children.

We intuit that there is a game within the game, here, and this one has no formal rules, no timeline and no judge. It is the real game, and it is governed by rules of the human heart.

Our only guide is our intuition.

Intuition is actually a powerful operating system. It was wired into us by evolution. "Evolution selected for making the right choices, or at a minimum not making bad choices," as Munger puts it. "The feeling that something is just right, or is just wrong, even if you can't say why, cannot be dismissed."

Intuition runs on emotion. And in the end, it's emotion, not facts, that changes human minds en masse.

In the 1970s, as acid rain became a phenomenon of growing concern Friends of the Earth bought a billboard in Times Square, and covered it with litmus paper. After a rainy spell, the billboard turned blood red. It was a holy-crap moment. Up till that

moment acid rain was an abstract idea that most people were arms-length from. Now it was real. Many look back on that as a hinge-point for environmentalists. Many people already knew the facts; now they felt the truth of it in their bones.

So this is the case for saying, in effect, fuck it, I know that this shift to a new way of living is the right thing to do. I have surmised it, based on everything I've heard, and lived, and read, and is now bubbling up within me. And I hope and trust that I'm not alone in this. That others are coming to the same conclusion.

## IV. The Tipping Point

In any social system there eventually comes a point when a critical mass of people kind of “get it,” all that the same time. It can happen at a result of what economists call an “information cascade.” A bunch of people were quietly sitting on their private feelings that something here is messed up. They didn't act on those feelings because they thought they were the only ones feeling them.

But then they discover that they're in fact NOT alone, that tons of people feel the way they do. And this confirmation, this social proof, wrenches from a whole population a collective aha. Suddenly, private knowledge (something everyone “knows” but has been too timid to say) becomes public knowledge, an accepted TRUTH. The guileless kid pipes up: Hey, the king's naked! That is how the murderous authoritarian tyrant is finally deposed. Or a system that everyone went along with, but nobody believed was working anymore, is overturned.

What we're talking about here is a leap of faith ... at scale.

Until recently, any form of socialism was anathema to the vast majority of people in America and other wealthy nations. Even the word made folks uneasy. It was simply beyond the pale, a nonstarter. Then the pandemic hit, and as governments opened their emergency kitties, many of these same people got their first taste of elements of socialism: generous unemployment insurance, moratoriums on evictions, monthly cheques that amounted to a universal basic income. This was hardly the boogeyman of folks' imaginings. There was no jackboot authoritarianism, no dreary command-economy chokehold. This didn't feel stifling. It felt ... fair. And right.

This is how minds are changed. An idea too wild to engage with gets a toehold in the collective psyche. And a little crack opens in people's defenses.

What happens next matters hugely.

What happens next, as the Japanese economist Kohei Saito puts it, is you turn the dial. You promote modest little changes like living in a small apartment rather than a big, drafty house. Like taking the bus. Cutting back on air travel. Stopping ordering “fundamentally useless things” online. Working less. Walking more. Getting to know your neighbors.

Multiply these actions by block and city, then notch them up to the levels of industry and state, Saito says. Tax the rich. “Steer capital toward home care and nursing homes,

not arms manufacturing. Give subsidies and water to local farms, not Big Ag. Make neighborhoods dense and walkable and dependent on public transit. Destroy the G.D.P. and the World Trade Organization, which has stifled climate-change action plans based on the argument that they violate free trade.”

Now that you’re genuinely entertaining an alternative, you can see the cracks in the one you had thought was inviolable. Neoliberalism. Which “venerates the logic of the market and strips away the things that make us human.”

We may not be able to fully grok a wild problem like the one we’re facing. But we can learn to feel our way in the dark.

The required shift here is from unfettered capitalism to something closer to democratic socialism; but this isn’t really about politics. The required shift is from endless growth to a steady-state equilibrium; but this isn’t about economics. No, what’s being asked of us is much more intimate. This is a spiritual moment in the life of Earthlings. The transition from hoarding to sharing. From “I” to we.”

From What is my birthright? to What is my duty?

Are you ready?

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