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Limits to Growth and Technological Choice

Arundhati (on the train, her mobile phone rings): Hello? Hi, Mama. Sorry? Yes, of course, the flight was fine. Don't worry so much... aeroplane travel is a very common thing these days, you know.... Ah, yes, the wonders of modern technology. What was that? No. I'm... Mama, I'm on the train, now... in the middle of the desert, so the line is dropping out ... *chuckling* No, that means the mobile phone connection is weak. The train is perfectly safe, mama, I'm really enjoying the trip, actually. I have the carriage to myself, and I'm reading a great book ... “Stark”, by Ben Elton. Have you read it? ... mmm... It's a fantastic story. I'm captivated by one of the characters - Sly Moorcock. He's an Australian newspaper tycoon, a Rupert-Murdoch-type self-made billionaire, a uranium mine owner and property developer, involved in “a shadowy super-elite, a group wielding almost incomprehensible power” called, the Stark Consortium, who have “more money than God and the social conscience of a dog on a croquet lawn”. It's interesting to read because I've been asked to attend a public forum called “Technology, Community and Growth in Australia's Future” while I'm in the country... I have a speech prepared, but it's at these kind of thing that I always manage to get into heated arguments with Sly-Moorcock-types wanting things their way... I keep imagining myself quarrelling with this Sly character... trying to rehearse my arguments I suppose, readying myself to be rattled... Sorry? Oh. That's a great quote. Can you repeat that? Mmmmm. Yes. “We may see the small value God has for riches, by the people he gives them to.”¹ That's beautiful. Thank-you mama. I am quite sleepy actually, I might rest a little. Yes, I am taking care of myself. Thank you for ringing. I will call you soon. Much love. Bye now.

Arundhati (reading aloud, softly, to herself):

“‘If only, if only we had done something. Acted when we still had time, even just ten years ago’, they said, ‘back in the late eighties, the early nineties when there was still time. The signs were all there, why didn’t we do something.’

But they hadn’t, back in ’89, ’90 and ’91, the years when the decisions needed to be taken, nothing had been done. People had listened to the politicians’ empty rhetoric at election time but nothing huge, nothing drastic; nothing real had actually been done. Too much

¹ Alexander Pope, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*, 1727, from *The Oxford Book Of Money*, “Riches and Poverty”, Jackson K (ed), Oxford University Press, London, 1995, p 171

money was involved, it simply wasn't economical. Nothing had been done and now the reckoning was upon them all."

Arundhati (under breath, yawning): Ah, Sly, you arrogant money-hungry bastard, what can you teach me about this wretched, worrisome world? Things aren't going so great. Even Gaia's father has lost hope.² What can I learn from you to avoid the catastrophes of your fictional - but all too realistic - universe?

A short, stocky man in a grey power suit and an air of authority appears on the seat in front and turns to face Arundhati.

Sly (chuckling): Ah, you poor, naïve, young thing. It was never a matter of avoiding this mess. We *all* knew for a very *long* time the shit was going to hit the fan, so to speak... but in the end no-one was willing to make the necessary sacrifices, were they? Everyone just got a little too accustomed to their Rolex watches and Rolls Royces and Marlboros and McDonalds!³ Not that I'm complaining! Hell, it's the impulsions and addictions of human greed en masse that got me to the top and I'm lucky enough to be getting myself out of here, thanks to the wonders of modern technology.⁴

Arundhati (startled, confused): Oh! Mr Moorcock? What are you doing here...?

Sly (leaning in close to Arundhati's surprised face): I just thought I'd keep you company. You seem a little lonely - a pretty young Ab like you, here all alone, on this train pissing it across the Nullarbor.

Arundhati (laughing): Actually, I'm not Aboriginal. My name is Arundhati Roy, and I'm from India. But it sure is good to know that you can recognise the particulars of Australian heritage, Mr Moorcock! I guess you're more acquainted with the market value of multinational companies than the details of your own nation's indigenous culture?

Sly: Well, of course! I won't deny that I am more concerned with fluctuations in my stock-market shares than distinctions between types of niggers. No offence, pet.

Arundhati: No, none taken. I'm entirely accustomed to the kind of sanctimonious, xenophobic attitude that seems to pervade Western-style "democracies"; that hegemonic "Us-Whiteys-Know-What's-Best" kind of thinking has spread its tendrils

² Here, Arundhati refers to the recent announcement by James Lovelock, inventor of Gaia theory, that nuclear power should be pursued above "Green" alternatives such as wind and solar power, because the state of the environment is so bad that we cannot afford to keep using fossil-fuels while we wait for these more ecologically-friendly technologies to come into fruition. Lovelock J, "Nuclear power is the only green solution: We have no time to experiment with visionary energy sources; civilisation is in imminent danger", 24 May 2004, 2003 Independent Digital (UK) Ltd, www.independent.co.uk

³ "With the greater part of rich people, the chief enjoyment of riches consists in the parade of riches, which in their eye is never so complete as when they appear to possess those decisive marks of opulence which nobody can possess but themselves." Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776, from *The Oxford Book of Money*, *ibid.* p 165

⁴ In *Stark*, Sly "a bona fide billionaire bastard" and the rest of the Stark Consortium plan to start life anew in space with a select group of rich, powerful, intelligent (and mostly corrupt) men and women. Elton B, *Stark*, Sphere Books Ltd, 1989, p 14

into many vulnerable cultures and eco-systems to produce whole nations brimming with hideous fumes, mass-manufactured products and “We-Want-More” drones.⁵ (pauses) It’s always interesting to see the unashamed smugness of capitalism smeared greasily across a man’s face as he talks to a black woman of the “Developing World” about how important money is.

Sly (laughing): “I’m tired of love: I’m still more tired of Rhyme, But money gives me pleasure all the time.”⁶ Yes, well, sweetheart, you can keep on spinning that inane-lefty-bullshit of yours, or you could just face up and accept that global capitalism is the way of the world, whether you like it or not.⁷

Arundhati: But...

Sly: I don’t think it’s fair to criticise the pursuit of money – it’s a perfectly moral and fulfilling goal. After all, money is the only thing that is absolutely good.⁸ And for all its faults, the market is still the only way to distribute wealth evenly across the world.⁹

Arundhati (interrupting): Obviously, there have been some hiccups in achieving that even distribution of wealth?¹⁰

Sly: Well, yes. Obviously. But then, there are always avenues of improvement for the market to become more efficient, more effective, more profitable, more....

⁵ Arundhati Roy discusses contemporary international politics in her speech, *Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (Buy One, Get One Free)*, where she says: “Democracy has become [The Modern American] Empire’s euphemism for neo-liberal capitalism.” This speech is an example of Roy’s personal anti-globalisation message: “Some of you will think it bad manners for a person like me, who has been entered in the Big Book of Modern Nations as an “Indian citizen” to come here and criticize the U.S. Government. Speaking for myself, I’m no flag-waver, no patriot, and am fully aware that venality, brutality and hypocrisy are imprinted on the leaden soul of every state. But when a country ceases to be merely a country and becomes an empire, then the scale of operations changes dramatically. So may I clarify that tonight I speak as a subject of the American Empire? I speak as a slave who presumes to criticize her king.” Here Roy illustrates the character of current U.S-led globalisation by describing herself as the citizen of an Empire. Roy A, *Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (Buy One, Get One Free)*, Speech by Arundhati Roy, New York City, May 13, 2003, Centre For Economic and Social Rights, www.cesr.org

⁶ Hilaire Belloc, *Sonnets and Verse*, 1923, from *The Oxford Book of Money*, *ibid*, p 309

⁷ Lindy Edwards describes the current state of Australian politics, explaining that although the Australian public is “fed up with economic rationalism”, the country is ruled by “an administrative elite in which the economic orthodoxy charges on unquestioned... They insist that economics is the only way of analysing issues facing government.” This illustrates Sly’s position, as a major cog in the outmoded capitalist machine still trying to run our country, desperate as it is for social and political change, *How To Argue With An Economist*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p 3

⁸ “People are often reproached for wishing money above all things, and for loving it more than anything else; but it is natural and even inevitable for people to love that which, like an unwearied Proteus, is always ready to turn itself into whatever object their wandering wishes or manifold desires may for the moment fix upon. Money alone is absolutely good, because it is not only a concrete satisfaction of one need in particular; it is an abstract satisfaction of all.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 1851, tr. TB Saunders, 1890, from *The Oxford Book of Money*, *ibid*, p 317

⁹ L Edwards, “Economic Rationalism’s Ideal”, *ibid*, p 76-9 Edwards reveals economic rationalism in all its seemingly pure and unaffected logic in this contemporary critique of the market-driven society.

¹⁰ “Wealth flows into the country, but how does it circulate there? Not equally and healthfully through the whole system; it sprouts into wens and tumours, and collects in aneurisms which starve and palsy the extremities.” Robert Southey, *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella*, 1807, *ibid*, p 188

Arundhati: What about making room for more equality, more fairness, more focus on stability rather than growth?¹¹ Surely, living in a country as bare and dry as this you'd be able to recognise the need for steadiness rather than blundering growth?¹² Tell me, Sly... can I call you Sly? Tell me what needs to happen to affect that kind of shift in attitude? What has to happen before people realise that we can't continue on this destructive path to unequal, uncertain material wealth... blindly fumbling forwards, hoping that someone will make smart enough decisions with up-and-coming technological advancements to erase the problems of the past and present?¹³

Sly: I'm not sure you quite understand the reality of the problem, darling. Can't you see, love? Things are rooted. Stuffed. We're up shit creek. By we, I guess I mean you – the rest of you. It's okay for me because I have connections, I know people and we've got it all under control. We are going to make sure that at least some of us survive. We *all* knew long before it got this bad that things were going to go belly up, so some time in the late 90's the important ones decided there was no way out for everyone – the whole human race, I mean - so the Stark Consortium pooled resources to provide humanity with a glimmer of hope by getting the cream of the crop out alive and starting anew someplace better.

Arundhati: Well, you see, I am coming from a time when the *whole* world still might have a chance, Mr Moorcock, and I need your advice. I know the situation isn't good. I know it looks irreversible. But I need to know how – in my lifetime - we can achieve a system that effectively limits our reckless pursuit of economic growth above all other values? How do we encourage and achieve smarter economic and technological decision-making? I want to know! How do we prevent the world I live in from collapsing to its knees?

Sly (confused): Look, lady, I don't know what kind of rubbish this is...

Arundhati: I know this is hard for you to grasp. I know it goes against some of your base assumptions in life... you're a capitalist - your beliefs are moulded by patriarchy, elitism, consumption, economic rationalism, globalisation. My world-view, on the other hand, is shaped by a strong belief in community values, including localised commerce, cultural understanding, and conservation.¹⁴

¹¹ The idea of steady-state economics is one alternative proposed by anti-globalisation, see Booth DE, *The Environmental Consequences of Growth*, Routledge, London, 1998, p 142

¹² Trainer T, "What Should We Do?", *Arena Magazine*, April 2000, p 42. Trainer is a well-known Australian limits-to-growth advocate: "For some thirty years an overwhelmingly convincing limits-to-growth case has accumulated, suggesting that the affluent industrial way of life we have in countries like Australia is grossly unsustainable."

¹³ Technological determinism is the belief that technology has a force of its own and will lead us in new and "progressive" directions. Capitalism provides support for this view because it means achieving unquestioned economic growth through new technological advancements that are beyond our control to stop or adapt. However, technological determinist views have been criticised for their lack of ecological consideration and strict focus on material progress above all other values. For example, D Elliott and R Elliott, 'Alternative Futures' from *The Control of Technology*, Wykeham, London, 1976, pp 196-235

¹⁴ The anti-globalisation movement is strongly motivated by community values and moves towards a localised system of government and economics. Norberg-Hodge H, "Shifting Direction: From Global Dependence to Local Interdependence", from *A Case Against The Global Economy*, Goldsmith and Mander (eds), Earthscan Publications Ltd, UK, 2003, p 242

Sly (scratching head): I'm not quite sure what you're trying to say...

Arundhati: I'm not your most-detested, radical-lefty, "Burn-Starbucks" anti-globalisation-nutter. I reel against the term, in a way, because I hate the negative connotations of being referred to as being anti-globalisation,¹⁵ but I can't deny that I am filled with a desperate yearning to experience a more value-balanced world – a world that accounts for and nurtures *everyone and* our precious environment. I don't want to scare you off, Sly. I'm not one of those window-smashing, money-hating anarchists you slur in full colour on the front page of your newspapers the day after WTO protests. It's just that I can clearly see the chance for change, the possibility of achieving a healthier, more balanced world. Please hear me out...

Sly: Yeah, all right. So you want to know how you're supposed to enforce some sorts of limits to economic growth? (Chortles) Oh, darling, you've got to understand you're talking to a bloke from a time and place where there was no way in hell anyone in my position would listen to that sort of crazy-talk. Economic growth is followed more strictly than most religious commandments, and our decisions for the future are mostly supported by arguments for cost-efficiency rather than any sort of moral ideals or broad-social foresight.¹⁶

Arundhati: Believe me, Sly; my world is not far from that which you know. Things aren't good, and there is little indication of any momentous change of attitude from those, like yourself, at the top of the socio-economic ladder who are all too addicted to money and power to ever dream of relinquishing any.

Sly: It should be of no surprise to you, my dear, that we – we of so much money and power (and confidence) - are reluctant to relinquish the influence this affords us. I don't think the change you want is going to come from us. I know we at the top obviously have more power to affect that kind of momentous transformation, but it would mean drastic consequences for those involved.

Arundhati: You mean it wouldn't suit your lifestyle if you had to give up some of the excessive riches you have?

Sly (affronted): Well ... I don't know why I should be ashamed of my success!?! I have worked my arse off to get where I am.

¹⁵ Brecher J and Costello T, "Introduction" from *Global Village or Global Pillage: Economic Reconstruction From The Bottom Up*, South End Press, Boston USA, 1994, pp 6- 7. The authors describe the "New World Economy" as "a disaster that is already happening", illustrating, with reference to specific anti-globalisation actions across the world, strong world-wide opposition to the globalisation of neo-liberal economic principles, driven by a shared desire for a return to grassroots economics and social systems based on community/village values.

¹⁶ Beder S, The author describes the prevalence of cost-benefit analysis as a decision-making tool in many avenues of social change and controversy, for example within government, industry, and public services. The use of cost-benefit analysis can be seen as an instrument of capitalism, as it narrows the focus on important issues and debates to a primarily economic perspective, allowing for potential financial burdens and gains to be weighed up before any decision is made. However, this type of analysis has been criticised for its lack of scope. See *The Nature of Sustainable Development*, Scribe Publications Ltd, Melbourne, 1996, 2nd edn.

Arundhati: Does it not concern you that you have succeeded only at the expense of starving masses and an increasingly pissed-off Earth?

Sly: This isn't singularly my fault, you know.

Arundhati: No, Sly, it isn't. It is the fault of a breed of thinking to which you have succumbed almost entirely. That mind-frame of the global capitalist - seeking to plunder the seas, forests, soils and all living creatures for copious bounties of precious resources to be speedily exploited and discarded so that a select few can profit outrageously. Why does it not grieve you to see the vast destruction left in the footsteps of yourself and your competitors?

Sly (patronising): It does, love. It does. Sure it does. Oh yeah. I get sad to see the trillions of crying little brown babies on the tellie. And it makes my skin crawl thinking about some of the crap that's been pumped out into the sea.¹⁷ That's why I don't swim off the coast of Perth any more, which was really a bugger in summer until I had my in-ground pool installed. Look. There's no use trying this "no growth" caper, love. No one will buy it. (Smiling) So to speak.

Arundhati: I'm not saying "no growth" Mr Moorcock. I'm saying that growth should be limited and tailored to suit our – increasingly desperate - needs. For example, we can adapt our idea of growth to apply not merely to economics, but also to other avenues of social and political concern. We should be pushing for growth in environmental conservation strategies and in the area of alternative energy technologies. We should be pushing for an increase in public education and a higher distribution of alternative media information.¹⁸ I understand that it is not necessarily compatible with the development of the free-market as we know it, but then, perhaps the success of the market should not be our number one priority right now?

¹⁷ Elton B, *Stark*, Sphere Books Ltd, London, 1989, pp 15-17 "Certainly Sly knew about the company's collateral, the profit and loss curve, its disposable assets... But that was all he knew. He saw his investment, purely and simply as a device by which to make money. What the company actually did was a matter was supreme in difference to him." Elton introduces Captain Robinson, a man working for one of Sly's companies, responsible for dumping ferry loads of sewerage into the North Sea, and in the following chapter Elton introduces a family who contact bowel irritations after eating mussels poisoned by the sewerage dumped from a vehicle of one of Sly's business holdings: "The situation is quite ironic really because people are usually so fastidious about their bathroom hygiene. They are happy to invest in a foaming blue flush which, although costly, is guaranteed to produce a sparking bowl and lemon scented toilet freshness that the whole family will enjoy. However anything that happens beyond the U-Bend is somebody else's business.... Mussels and oysters feed by filtering tiny particles out of the sea water these days that includes chemical waste, agricultural poisons and heavy metals. Also an awful lot of bacteria and viruses from human excreta, which cooking and cleaning does not always remove (cooking and cleaning the mussels that is, very few people cook and clean their excreta)." Elton uses this passage to describe the effects of global capitalism from three different perspectives.

¹⁸ Roy A, *Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (Buy One, Get One Free)*, Speech by Arundhati Roy, New York City, May 13, 2003, Centre For Economic and Social Rights, www.cesr.org, In her speech Roy suggests tactics for anti-globalisation movement: "We could reverse the idea of economic sanctions imposed on poor countries by Empire and its Allies. We could impose a regime of People's Sanctions on every corporate house that has been awarded a contract in post-war Iraq, just as activists in this country and around the world targeted institutions of apartheid. Each one of them should be named, exposed, and boycotted. Forced out of business. Another urgent challenge is to expose the corporate media for the boardroom bulletin that it really is. We need to create a universe of alternative information."

Sly (laughing): The market always has priority.

Arundhati: I know it does, but should it? The idea of economic and material progress has prevailed for decades now, and look where that has led us... do you think there is any rationality in the “Stark” solution of shooting a handful of dimwits into space for them to escape the terror they created!? We do still have a chance to change our priorities - not only in the way we run the market, but also in our decisions for future technological change. There is definitely more room for active, democratic public participation in the fields of economics *and* technology... it would achieve more equality, more understanding, more...

Sly: More room for bumbling lay-people to stuff things up, maybe! There is a reason for the existence of an elite, my dear. You can't trust a nation of idiots to run things. Especially when you have things like nuclear power stations to control.¹⁹

Arundhati: Which is why technology would become more democratic and more localised if the public were more seriously involved. Nuclear power would never be successful in a community practicing more self-sufficient goals.

Sly: Self-sufficiency has never been a good friend of the markets, love.²⁰

Arundhati: Obviously. The market has starved us of our ability to act self-sufficiently. But I think people are becoming increasingly frustrated with the system and are looking for ways to stop this one-way track to Riches For Some and Misery for Most.²¹

Sly: Well, no one gave a rat's arse in my time, love. Things got bad, and then things got worse, and still all the people you seem to reckon give a damn about this mess sat on their couches watching it all on the tube and blowing their noses on the useless empty plastic bags that they've spent ten years collecting in order to “Save The World”.

Arundhati: I think there is more power for people to affect change than you might know, Sly. As you sit up there in your cosy niche watching the panic and pain of the

¹⁹ Falk J, *Global Fission*, Oxford University Press, London, 1982, p 230. The author discusses the socialist utilisation of nuclear technology during the early twentieth century in the USSR, illustrating the problems of “capitalist-style” technologies that are inherently “technically sophisticated, large-scale technologies that [only] a heavily specialised technical elite could [operate or] devise” and are starkly opposed to socialist ideals of an equitable and decentralised system of economics and government.

²⁰ Goldsmith E, “The Last Word”, *The Case Against the Global Economy*, Goldsmith and Mander (eds), Earthscan Publications Ltd, UK, 2003, p 302. Goldsmith reveals a 1991 World Bank report admitting that “smallholders of Africa are outstanding managers of their own resources – their land and capital, fertilizer and water” but a reluctance to push for self-sufficient farming techniques is embedded in the World Bank's statement that “subsistence farming is incompatible with the development of the market.” The pattern of using “capitalistic” (i.e. centralised, highly-skilled and extremely expensive) technologies has been spread to developing countries that are rarely given the option to make their own, more appropriate economic and technological decisions. Sharon Beder also discusses this point in her chapter on appropriate technologies and transferring technologies, see *The Nature of Sustainable Development*, Scribe Publications Ltd. Melbourne, 1996, 2nd edn. p 200-294

²¹ Anti-globalisation actions include such events as “Buy Nothing Day” started in Canada by Adbusters Magazine which encourages people to “Curb Your Consumption”

masses you probably think we are just lost and confused and helpless. You bombard us with messages like “Who says you can’t have it all”²² and produce movies to sensationalise and celebrate the destruction of Earth²³, hoping that we will keep on buying, through desire and fear... but we see the paradoxical perversity of it all and we have more strength than you know.

Sly (mocking): Ooooooh, I’m so scared. Shaking in my boots. (Laughs) and what are you going to do?

Arundhati: I have stopped buying things I don’t need or don’t agree with. I grow my own fruit and vegetables and I no longer eat meat or genetically modified soy products. I do my best to boycott all companies that fail to make appropriate technological choices. I have installed solar power on my home and I re-use my shower and dishwasher water on my garden. I donate money to worthwhile charities in third world countries, and participate in community building events. I volunteer time as an environmental activist and I pick up other people’s rubbish. There are ways, you know, Sly... people just need to be encouraged, and forced to understand the entire situation and how we can help. Unfortunately “wealth is the relentless enemy of understanding”,²⁴ so it’s going to have to start with a shift away from that goal.

Sly: Yeah, well, good luck convincing the owners of Toyota and Exxon of that, sweetheart.²⁵ Good luck with your peace and love, one-hippy-can-make-a-difference tactics. I don’t think I can help you, unless, perhaps, you want to come with me? C’mon, this is quite an opportunity I’m offering you here... a once in a lifetime chance to get out of this hellhole for good. It’s only going to end badly, love, you may as well give yourself some hope.

Arundhati (laughing): I’d actually prefer to stay here, thanks Sly. We’ll overcome our problems better without you, I think. It’s like Albert Einstein said:

“The significant problems we face today cannot be solved from the same level of thinking that created them.” So, off you go, and take your narrow, money-focussed friends with you, and the rest of us will step on the brakes and clean up the mess...

The train jerks to a stop, and Arundhati’s copy of *Stark* falls to the floor. She wakes with a start and scratches her head as she inspects the empty carriage. No one is there but her.

²² Advertisement for BMW Motorcars, The Sydney Magazine, May-June 2004, p 1

²³ The recent film “The Day After Tomorrow”, provides a clear warning of the risks of ignoring global climate change, especially to the American Government, which refuses to acknowledge well-known and scientifically proven risks. However, from an anti-globalisation standpoint, the movie is merely a part of the capitalist system; it cost millions to make, and people will pay millions to see it, but in the end it doesn’t mean that the day after tomorrow all our problems will be solved. Byrnes P, The Sydney Morning Herald, Metro, Film Reviews, May 28- June 3, 2004, p 9

²⁴ JK Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 1958, from *The Oxford Book of Money*, ibid, p172

²⁵ Beder S, WebCT Material, Technological Choice, 1996. Beder discusses that our hopes in achieving appropriate technological and social progress is significantly affected by the decisions and actions of multinational corporations.

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