

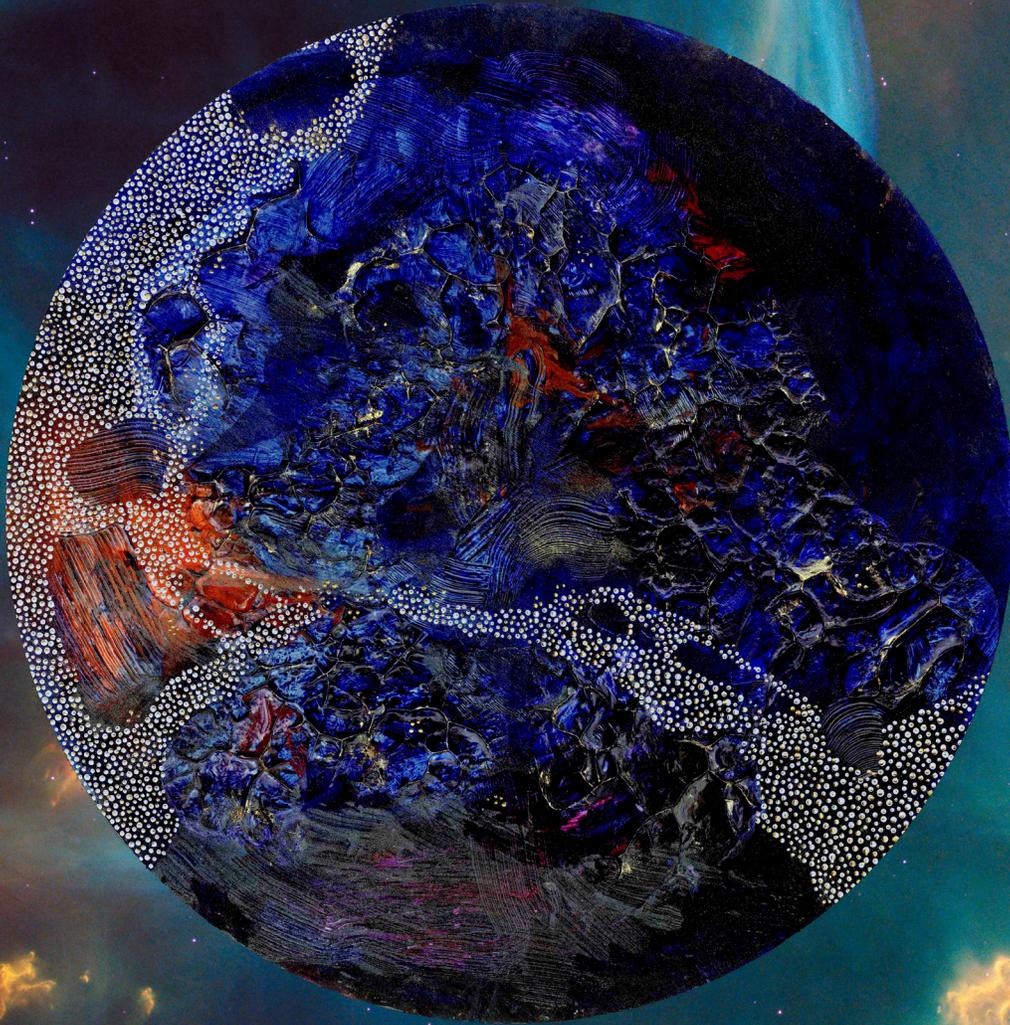


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A large crowd of people is silhouetted against a bright sunset sky. The people are standing on a reflective surface, likely a beach or a wet plaza, as their reflections are clearly visible on the ground. The overall mood is serene and communal.

A New Societal Contract

- in search for fresh ideas -

by Magnus Jörgel, Hank Kune, and Frank van Erkel

Context

The need to reaffirm our societal contract is seen by many people as a necessity. (1, 2) Times are changing very fast, and what once was experienced as solid ground is shifting under our feet. We need to cope with new technology, a changing climate, people adrift because of war or hunger, the perceived threat of being less in control. In the increasing fragmentation of society, some people like to think back to times when there seemed to be more stability. However, daydreams of how much better things used to be – nostalgia for a mythical past that never was – cannot be used as an argument to move backwards. Change is always difficult, and scary for many people: we know what we have but not what we will get. The choice to put our heads in the sand and hope for the best might seem like an option to some, but even at an individual level it cannot possibly work, not for ourselves and certainly not for our children; on a societal level this enthusiastic pursuit of illusion is a sure way to catastrophe.

The call for a societal contract is understandable, but we are convinced that it has to be a new societal contract. We should again explore how people want to relate to each other in our present society, in its myriad interdependences, and how our institutions and governments relate to us all.

So, what is a societal contract?

Societal contracts always relate to the specific time and context they serve: context is key. The content of the contract must reflect the time and context when it is used.

In prehistoric times, the contract between individuals was established in a “survival context”; on a simplistic level, it can be expressed as: you are more able to hunt than I am, so you hunt, and I provide fire and shelter. Later this evolved into notions of ‘hunter-gatherer’ societies where a division of labor maximized survival of the group. Agricultural societies refined this even further, in terms of a stricter and more extensive division of labor, once early settlements developed into cities, city-states, empires and eventually modern society.

The code of Hammurabi was an early example of how to codify precepts and practices into laws to guide behavior in society. The Buddhist king Asoka was said to have argued for a broad and far-reaching social contract. Islam teaches the concepts of welfare and charity is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Some argue that the Caliphate can be considered the world’s first major welfare state. (3) In a Judeo-Christian – and European – context, one of the first iconic stories in the Bible references the key question of social contracts, expressed in Cain’s “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Answers to this key ‘keeper’s question’ continue to influence our perspectives on what the individual owes his/her fellow human, and by extension, society. Choice is a key issue here. And the world was hard, it’s societal contract too: we know that the ‘sins of the fathers’ were passed on, from one generation to another. This idea, once anchored in popular culture, has taken on a new meaning with climate change today.

The concept of the social contract was originally posed by Glaucon in a dialogue by Plato. Al-

though there are in Greek society and Roman law, the modern concept came from the Enlightenment and from the mid-17th to early 19th centuries it emerged as a leading doctrine of political legitimacy. (4) The ideas of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke - writing in the 17th century – are still relevant in terms of the more philosophical aspects of not only the societal contract but also the deeper understanding of the state and its interaction with citizens. We do recognize that Hobbes had a rather pessimistic view of people and their capacity for independent responsible behavior; he believed that people must be compelled to ‘do the right thing’. While there is much evidence to the contrary, the vast destruction of 20th century wars gives evidence that there may be truth here too.

Thomas Malthus in the 17th century saw survival as “a scramble for scarce resources”, and emphasizes the difference between “those who have and those who need”. Slowly, scarcity and competition are built into the system, and “imagined dangers” are emphasized.

The Enlightenment brought us a new notion: the Individual, a concept which eventually sparked the Age of Revolutions, with diverse disruptive new perspectives: In America, it was ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’; in France, ‘liber-

ty, equality, fraternity’; Adam Smith gave us the ‘invisible hand of the market’ which eventually evolved from unobservable market forces that influence supply and demand in a free market into a law of nature celebrated in diverse postmodern neoliberal mantras. Today, the Individual, once a concept of breakthrough thinking, can too often be characterized as ‘despicable me’, and the ‘pursuit of happiness’ has morphed into entitlement. Fortunately, there are now voices like Swedish research Carl Cederström asking whether happiness should not be redefined as ‘a collective project’? (5)

Jean- Jacques Rousseau gives an example of how 18th century Europe saw the relationship between citizen, state and government – or rather the balance and reciprocal aspects of such a relationship – in his book “The Social Contract” (1762). (6) He argues that citizens cannot pursue their true interests by being egoists, but must instead subordinate themselves to the law created by the citizenry acting as a collective. However, he also believed that man must “be forced to be free” and he maintained that the people often did not know their “real will”; a proper society would not occur until a great leader (“the Legislator”) arose to change the values and customs of the people. (7)

1 One example is World Economic Forum (17 January 2018) “It’s time for a new societal contract”.

2 Kim Putters, Director of the Dutch Social-Cultural Planning Agency, is another: <https://www.eur.nl/en/news/kim-putters-advocates-new-social-contract-healthcare>

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare_state

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_contract

5 <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/9/4/17759590/happiness-fantasy-capitalism-culture-carl-cederstrom>

6 Rousseau J-J. *Le contrat social, essai de philosophie politique*. Amsterdam: Chez Marc Michel Rey; 1762. Rousseau J-J. *The social contract, or principles of political right* [English translation]. London: Penguin Books; 1968.

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_contract

The Industrial Revolution, with its hunger for raw materials and resources, energy and speed, standardization and novelty, set in motion a flow of technological and social innovations which still drive much of the world today. Social Darwinism, influential in the 19th and early 20th centuries, puts ‘fight or flight’ against ‘tend and befriend’ and believes social contracts are for the sake of each other (because of man’s worst nature).

More recent thinking about societal contracts resulted in the modern welfare state as it evolved (emerged) in northern and Western Europe. Intended as a bulwark against the kind of societal unrest that resulted in the Second World War (8), it took different forms in diverse countries. Among the many examples: the Swedish welfare state (folkhemmet) was all about education, health care, modern housing and equal opportunities – “do your duty, demand your rights”. Another example from Western Europe is from the Netherlands, where living and working together and social bonding was historically seen as essential for keeping everyone’s feet dry. Their welfare state is still based on the need to provide all residents with “bread, bath & bed” – also for refugees. Best known is perhaps the welfare state in the UK: a form of government in which the state protects and promotes the economic and social well-being of the citizens, based upon the principles of equal opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for citizens unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life .(9)

These examples all had the same overall goal: the creation of a more affluent society, suitable for the modern democratic society. All over the

world the same systems suiting the local culture and context came into effect. We have seen conceptual leaps before: the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution; and what we see now, in the naming of modern times as the Knowledge/ Information Society, Digital era, the Anthropocene, or other emerging notions we still don’t have a name for. In the emerging iconic marketplace, safety, comfort and luxury can be bought (if you have the money). Community must be actively practiced, and reinforced and reaffirmed on a regular basis in a world where Individualism is so highly valued, where people are told by media to believe that bureaucrats are ineffective, crowds irresponsible, women are helpless, every setback is a crisis, failure disrupts instead of teaches, and is therefore ‘impossible’.

While the intention was to protect the weak, today they favor the strong: or have they always done so. Noblesse oblige. We have accepted this for the common good. But values change, along with the times. And appetites too. We need to keep asking the Keeper’s Questions.

There was a general consensus in these countries that this was important. But consider Angela Merkel’s “wir schaffen das”, a recent example which turned out to question the consensus she assumed it was based on. In 2018 the French gilets jaunes continue to pose these keeper’s questions in ways that cannot be ignored: according to commentators, “Protests like the gilets jaunes movement occur, in part, because the French feel that, to be seen at all by their highly centralized government, they have to take to the streets.” (10)

Our societal institutions no longer seem to pro-

vide the value they were created for. Some are outdated, others dysfunctional, and some aspects are more or less obsolete. (11) But repair is easier than renewal, rhetoric easier than rethinking. And who is willing to point the finger at their own institution and say: we are obsolete, let’s pack things up and make room for something new.



It does indicate, of course, the need for a conceptual framework of its own: a new societal contract.

At the same time, libertarian thinking (as iconized in Donald Trump’s America) demands (argues) that everyone can – and must – realize his/her own individual happiness; in fact, is compelled to (and responsible for) achieving this. There should be no centralized support for this; those who don’t achieve it are losers, and must bear the consequences of their incapacity to lift themselves. In all things, the market rules; but of course, you

8 Judt, T, Thinking the Twentieth Century (2012), Penguin Books

9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare_state

10 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-yellow-vests-and-why-there-are-so-many-street-protests-in-france>

11 Expressed in diverse presentations by senior European civil servants in Brussels, from 2016-2018

12 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Industrial_Revolution

can only get what the market offers. As street artist Banksy put on a wall in London: “Sorry, the lifestyle you ordered is currently out of stock”. Is this a building block for thinking about a new societal contract?

Lifting capacity

Past contracts had the fundamental goal to lift society, and people living together in that society, to a higher level, to the next phase. First from sometimes appalling poverty, into a new society, where the citizen was thought of as an important part of creating a more productive society, state or corporation. This lifting capacity was a product of economy, ideology, ethics and education.

There was once a time where education was designed to keep people as dumb and as obedient as possible. The shift from the second industrial revolution (12) to the third industrial revolution meant that there was a higher demand for a healthy, educated workforce. The societal contract could fulfill that need for that time, in a balanced program between state, corporation and citizen. This led to the rise of human resources – and seeing humans as resources. For many years, this worked out to the benefit of the many, and was one of the most important parts in the success of the third industrial revolution. (13) Now, we are already embarked on a 4th revolution, where we must acknowledge that humans

have resources: talents, skills, knowledge, energy and entrepreneurial drive to invest in an inclusive 'contribution society'.

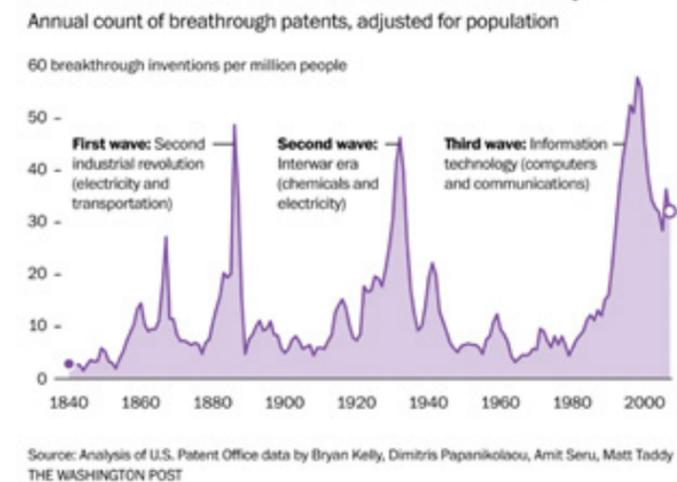
The contracts that emerged (or were created) to suit the conditions for the 19th and beginning of the 20th century were mostly outcomes from 1st and 2nd industrial revolutions, with a focus on aspects such as taxation, industry, labor regulation, literacy, education, and bureaucracies. It's also the era of the great public works creating infrastructure for the whole society: think of drinking water, sewage systems, electricity, rail systems, and highways.

After World War II they still worked relatively well, but society and technology developed further: the welfare state was being developed and society entered a new era. An enormous growth in social democracy, emancipation, participation, education which also led to more individualization. This phase brought us the teenager as rebel, make love no war, greed is good, the cult of the individual, and more recently: the revenge of the nerds, identity politics, and fake news. Many of these developments took place to a large degree outside of the governmental context, and many of these institutions no longer fit our time (think about the downturn of trade unions, churches, housing organizations). It ends with the absolute marker of the end of ideology – the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Was this the 'end of history', as Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed? Clearly not. But it did signal the neo-liberal market driven capitalist ideology memes much to the forefront of attention as 'winners' of the contest. And together with the triumph of technology – especially Information and communication technology

– it set the scene for public values of today.

When we take a closer look into the question why the social contracts were revisited, we notice that a new social contract was often preceded by wave of innovation (see the chart below where innovation is measured by an increase of the number of breakthrough patents). And, looking back, we notice that those waves of innovation created also, after some time, societal disruption, lead to societal reorganization and forced rethinking of the existing social contracts and the core values they were based upon. The path from breakthrough innovation to widespread use of product by society can be a long ride. Nikola Tesla invented the electro-magnetic motor in 1888, but only the recent development of better batteries made practical production of hybrid and electric cars viable – partly because it looked like requiring us to change the society and the economy.

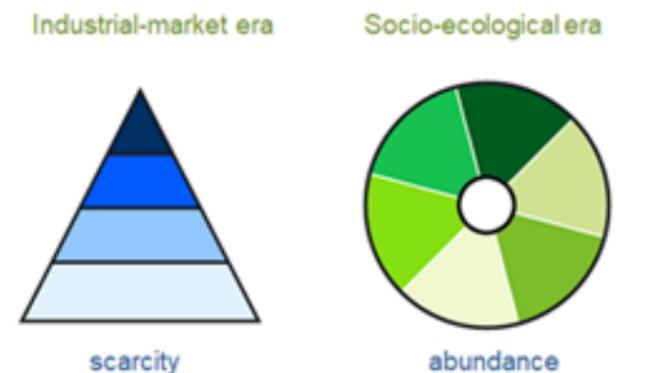
For our knowledge society, the communication **When the most influential U.S. inventions were patented**



technology is a relevant example. How fast do new ideas and new notions spread? In pre-Gutenberg times: dissemination of knowledge could take a lifetime. After the original Gutenberg

moment, dissemination could take place in a decade. With the Internet: dissemination is possible in a few weeks or months. Today, memes disseminate in an instant. The 'instant' has become a new measure of time.

We are in a period of transition and adoption. So based on the recent third wave of breakthrough innovation patents, the spurs of disruption, the shifting public values (think about the 'Black Piet' discussion in the Netherlands) (14), and the unrest in the society (think also about the 'gilets jaunes' in France and the sharpening political division in the USA), we believe this supports the need for a new societal contract.



We believe we are moving into to the next phase. Information technology speeds up further individualization and gives way to a total different worldview. The difference with the previous industrial

revolutions is that those have been contextualized within a hierarchical way of looking at the world, today we move very quickly into a network, or circular, society with completely new demands and possibilities.(15) Like previous transitions, parts of the existing societal contracts need an update, some need an overhaul, but many are obsolete and need to be completely re-imagined.

It's the Anthropocene – will silicon and superintelligence save us?

Watershed events were not the only shapers of societal contracts. New (and fundamental) thinking about what actually constitutes growth, development of how we can organize our society and a new holistic approach to development means that we have an opportunity to develop something new.

Let us consider a few of the mega-changes that are ongoing; not only third wave in patents or the fourth industrial revolution(17), broadening the scope to try to see some of the effects of the on-going development of industry and technology, and also society, ecology and even humans (transhumance, technological enhancement, superintelligence).

We are moving into a completely new epoch – the Anthropocene (18), the era where mankind

13 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_Revolution

14 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/14/black-pete-scandal-dutch-silent-sinterklaas>

15 See for example Josephine Green in Brave New Interfaces- individual, social and economic impact of the next generation interfaces (Jan Cornelis and Marleen Wynants eds), 2007. See also <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/> (2018-08-13)

16 Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1, see Kelly; B., D. Papap Nikolaou, A. Seru en M. Taddy (2018) Measuring Technological

changes the earth in such a way that, among other things, the climate itself will change the way we can inhabit the earth in the future. What will change? And will we go from ego-system to eco-system embracing the doughnut economy? (19)

Footprints; the ecological footprint we leave on a daily basis change fundamental aspects of our lives and will force us to create completely new ways of living. We see the first citizen movements trying to reduce our footprint. Can we conceive of positive footprints too – positive footprints for the next four generations?

Migration; one effect of the changing balance in the planet's ecological systems are the new migration movements, due to conflict, economic realities, and climate change. Major climate migrations have only just begun, and are expected to increase in the near future. They bring anger and fear to countries where migrants come, but can also help solve economic problems related to aging societies.

Urbanization; we see movements into cities- urbanization- on a scale that never have been observed before, although the move per se has been ongoing for hundreds of years. (20) This massive move of people will in itself demand new ways of both organizing our society, but also on what kind of reciprocal balance is needed in our society, combining this mega-trend with the dramatic ongoing changes in demographics we see some extremely demanding challenges. (21)

Deregulation. We have experienced a rapid re-direction, privatization and deregulation of our

common assets during the late 1900's and early 2000. (22) How does this clash with attempts to battle complexity with regulations within the governance context?

Technology. This aspect rapidly accelerating. Will CRISPR-Cas in the garage and corporate hubs for genetic modification change the nature of nature in ways with unintended consequences? Will AI lead us to a singularity moment before we have adequately thought about its consequences? Or can we learn on the fly, and allow the pros to outweigh the cons?

Outsourcing responsibility. Will superheroes save civilization and deliver us from harm's way? Are super-heroes just an alias for superintelligence? Can we outsource responsibility, to super-heroes or superintelligence, or our children and theirs?

Let us be perfectly clear: we authors strongly believe that we have to embrace new developments and new challenges, because the old methods, old systems and old values simply can't cope with them sufficiently. We are in the open doorway of an new era, ready to step through, whether we know exactly what it entails or not. The pressure on our societies will grow, and the demands for resolute solutions from citizen will grow louder – if what we have in place is not sufficient, then what could be some ways forward?

What relations have to be dealt with in a new societal contract?

We are experiencing a period of transition into a new era. Considering what we have discussed

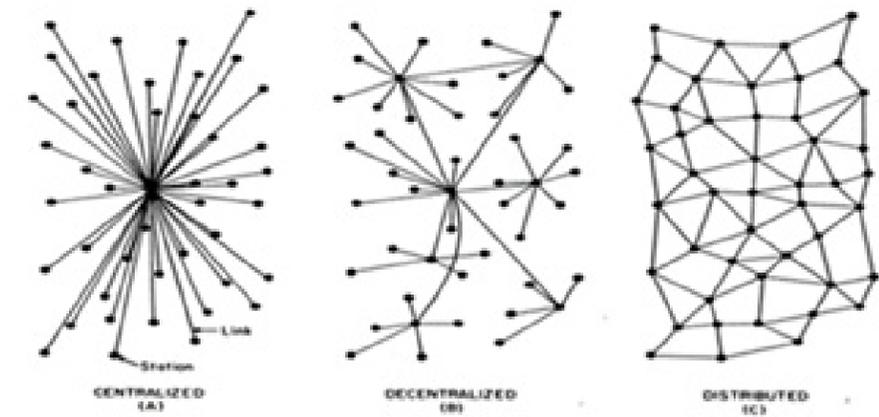


FIG. 1 – Centralized, Decentralized and Distributed Networks

above, the old traditional hierarchical structures dissolve and are replaced by a networked system or even networks of networks. In this system the nodes are important but are also less constant. This has the potential for more equality, but also more complexity. However it gives us an unprecedented opportunity to develop and disseminate fresh thinking about new societal contracts.

When the dynamic in a system increases, rapid change is possible but so is instability. Looking at the main players in the system, we see that because of this changing pattern, government, citizens, companies and entrepreneurs are re-defining their roles.

Governments realize that they can't 'control' developments as they used to, nor can they deliver the services society needs in the way they would like to. An example is the way the EU is trying to

deal with the refugee problem. Being a 'democratic' government sets limits to how far they can act as a 'corporation' or deal-maker. Not everything is a negotiation, trade-off, compromise or deal, not everything can be dealt with by caveat. So they are looking for ways – again – to increase commitment from citizens and citizen groups, stimulate self-organization in society, and privatize non-essential parts of the government.

Companies transform and have difficulties to keep up with innovators and disruptors – think about the hotel industry and Airbnb or taxi and Uber: new business models with unintended consequences which themselves disrupt society. Citizens and government are far more critical of big corporations (especially after the banking crisis) and they expect corporations to create more societal capital.

Citizens are empowered partly because of social

Innovation over the Long Run, NBER Working Paper No. 25266.13

17 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Industrial_Revolution

18 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropocene> and Sverker Sörlin, *Antropocene- en essä om människans tidsålder*, 2017.

19 See Otto Scharmer: "Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies" and Kate Raworth: "Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist"

20 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbanization>

21 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_ageing and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_demography and further on

media to form pressure groups, want to regain territory from the government and take more initiatives and sometimes provide services or products themselves (supply energy for themselves, crowdfund local initiatives or new social startups). The consequences are not always predictable, or desirable. With this transformation comes friction, uncertainty, instability, shifting values and social unrest. Rapid development also sets public values adrift, and people demand new ones.

The promise of a bright future?

Friction is valuable in a period of transformation; struggle, change, insecurity, failing fast, ambiguity, new beginnings - these are essential for moving to the next phase in development. There are no quick fixes, no magic bullets, and nothing lasts forever. Since things break easily (like trust), we need to co-create systems that build on trust. People are trying to do this now with blockchain

technologies – at least they are experimenting with blockchain to test if it can establish new stability in trust-based systems. Due to ICT developments and the use of social media, society can move from centralized to decentralized much quicker than we could imagine even 10 years ago. The transition to networks can be seen in many different activities; examples of distributed network are the production of electricity (23) in smart grids, the collection of knowledge in large arrays, and the use of AI in diagnosing disease. New forms of democracy are being developed: Liquid democracy (24) is just one interesting example. With the help of smart technologies, block-chain and networked distribution systems, democracy in its present form can be transformed into something new, better suited to the societal challenges of today and tomorrow. (25)

When a new generation contributes actively to these conversations, many voices are raised and relevant perspectives for a new social contract can be experimented with and explored. Students

across Europe going on strike for climate raise questions about more than climate change alone – questions about the resilience of our societal institutions and systems, and our ability to take action when needed. With the strong growth in smart citizen movements, both at local and (inter)national level, the possibilities to express ideas about inclusion, contribution and gender, racial, and generational equality have already had a direct and fruitful influence on how governments address citizens' concerns. Modern ICT, smart use of social media and easy access to internet-based platforms make it possible for people to make their voices heard and their ideas known. This is especially true for the young. But not exclusively: a new generation of seniors, brought up as Baby Boomers, will use this too, while woman of all ages are joining the public conversation. There are possibilities to improve representative democracy, but also to subvert it (think of Cambridge Analytica); there are forceful ways to create new forms of participatory democracy, but also distract or deny it; to broaden the range of people who can co-create such opportunities, or have access to them, or limit this access.

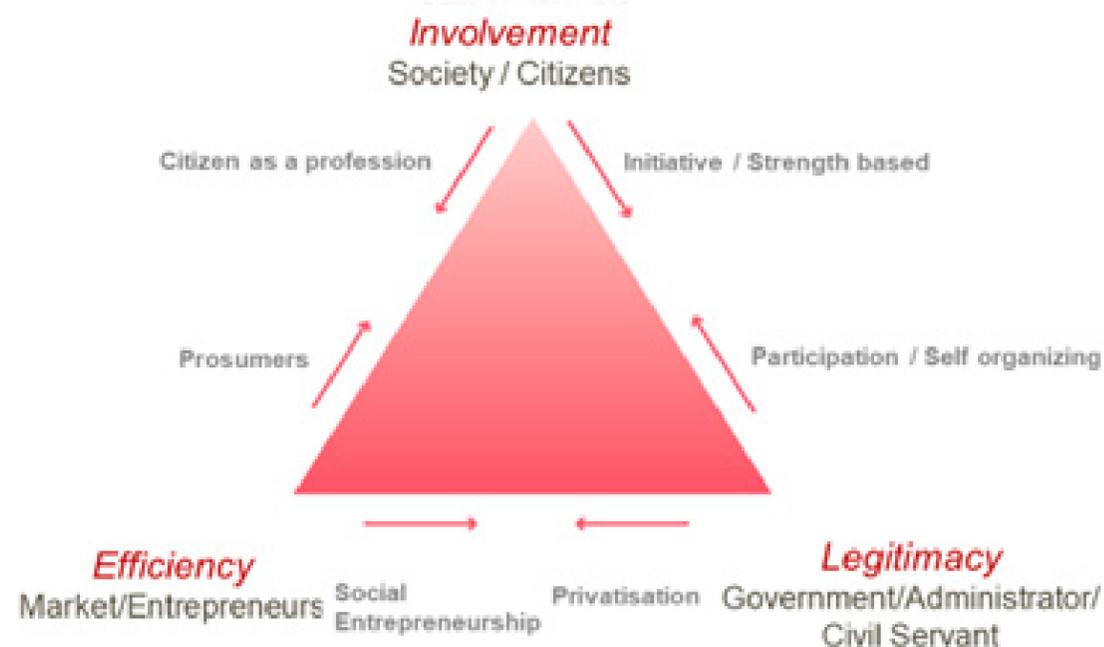
There will be opportunities for all members of a society to make meaningful contributions to decision-making, but will they trust the system enough to do so?

We need a broad conversation about new societal contracts, and we also need examples to show that they could work, and what it takes to make them work. For the short term, the first lessons learned from the sharing economy(26), the maker's movement, "the 100 mile diet"(27), show that there are many ways forward. For the middle and long term, we need imagination, courage, rethinking – and lots of experimenting.

To start the conversation: what issues could a new societal contract consider? Here are six possible pointers as starting points:

A new look at democracy. Perhaps something along the lines of 'liquid democracy', 'reimagined democracy'(28), 'Carbon Democracy'(29), or concepts yet to emerge.

Universal basic assets (UBA) (30) – a fundamen-



youth https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_pyramid. (2018-08-13)

22 Ola Olsson, det nya samhällskontraktet (2013), Ekonomisk Debatt 4/2013.

23 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4678120/> and also https://ay14-15.moodle.wisc.edu/prod/pluginfile.php/79470/mod_resource/content/1/smart%20distribution.pdf (2018-08-13).

24 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delegative_democracy and <https://medium.com/@memetic007/liquid-democracy-9cf7a4cb7f>. (2018-08-13)

25 <https://www.democracy.earth/> and <https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/meedenken/ruimte-initiatief/> see also https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5990/2168126.pdf (2018-08-13).

26 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharing_economy (2018-08-13).

27 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_100-Mile_Diet (2018-08-13).

28 <https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/reimagining-democracy/democracy-for-all-en.pdf>

29 See for example <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/dec/29/carbon-democracy-political-power-in->

tal set of resources every person needs access to. This needs to encompass much more than a rather narrow definition of 'income'. This is not the same as universal basic income (UBI) (31).

Entrepreneurial drive as a key factor for new societal contracts. This should be social and societal entrepreneurship that drives initiatives and the implementation of new ideas; individualism alone is not the answer.

The new commons. This is the mental and emotional commons of 21st century thought. It is the future as a shared commons. It is the planetary commons where climate change and pollution in the Anthropocene knows no borders.

Universal basic possibilities is yet another new avenue of approach for the discussion.

Midcentury. 2050 is just 30 years – not even two generations – away. Quo vadis – where are we marching to? What kind of world do we want to leave for our children and grandchildren?

In an open discussion, the balance between the individual and society, between corporations and the state, may shift. Individuals may want more freedom and ability to influence societal developments, society may want more agile government providing smarter services to society, or more corporations taking real societal responsibility. We believe that with a basic set of universal assets and possibilities, the individual and collective (network) will be able to use one of our most underused assets – entrepreneurial drive – to stimulate innovation. This would lead to new ways of organizing our key assets for quality ed-

ucation, health care, well-being, gender equality, clean water and energy, and reducing inequalities. (32) The balance between the individual and the collective, between centrality and periphery, power and energy, between Gross National Product and the Happiness index.

Beyond purely economic perspectives, any new societal contracts must overcome the fragmentation of society in order to come to an understanding about a new set of valid public values. As we well know, many people – and many organizations, especially in the business of government – are most at home thinking about the short term. There is a strong bias for short-term thinking. As Dennis F. Thompson of Harvard University's Department of Government writes, "Democracy is partial toward the present. Most citizens tend to discount the future, and to the extent that the democratic process responds to their demands, the laws it produces tend to neglect future generations. The democratic process itself amplifies this natural human tendency".(33)

As many voices now say, we have to 'hack' the democratic process.

Beyond this, other questions arise: what about rights for rivers? In Australia, New Zealand, India, Columbia, and Ecuador, rivers have been recognized as legal entities with legal aspects of 'personhood'.(34)

What about rights for migrants? What about animal rights? Rights for AI? These discussions have already started. Sophia – a 3-year-old humanoid robot – was granted citizenship in Saudi Arabia.(35) Sophia was named the world's first

UN Innovation champion by the UN Development Program (UNDP) and will have an official role in working with UNDP to promote sustainable development and safeguard human rights and equality.

Who speaks for the yet unborn generations? In North America, the Iroquois Nation famously recognized the need to consider whether their decisions would benefit their children seven generations into the future. (36) Apocryphal or true, this form of stewardship has seen some modern contractual forms for government. Finland's Committee for the Future (37) and the Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales (38) – which requires public bodies to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change – express the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being. Less extreme than the Iroquois, perhaps, but the intention is there.

the-age-of-oil-by-timothy-mitchell (2019-01-11) and <https://sites.uci.edu/technoethno/2014/05/22/review-carbon-democracy-political-power-in-the-age-of-oil-by-timothy-mitchell-2/> (2019-01-11)

30 <http://www.iftf.org/uba/> (2018-08-13).

31 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basic_income (2018-08-13).

32 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

33 <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=5&ved=2ahUKEwi0NiB5vffAhX-IC-wKHSSqCrMQFjAEegQIBhAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdash.harvard.edu%2Fbitstream%2Fhandle%2F1%2F9464286%2FRepresenting%2520Future%2520Generations-Barry%2520final.doc%3Fsequence%3D2&usq=A0vVaw231ExzvuU0rl6M-RhH2ZPou>

34 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/rivers-get-human-rights-they-can-sue-to-protect-themselves/>; <https://e360.yale.edu/features/should-rivers-have-rights-a-growing-movement-says-its-about-time>

35 <https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/technology/meet-sophia-the-3-year-old-humanoid-robot-16812416>

36 <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/seventh-generation-principle>

Our unanswered questions

We appreciate ancient monuments, have respect for buildings that stand for centuries, and traditions that still serve us well. However, in many ways, our institutions and our convictions, our thinking patterns and assumptions, are stuck in the 20th century.

We have seen in this short article how the original 'brother's keeper' question can lead to many other questions that need individual and collection reflection. For a conversation about a new societal contract, a list of Keeper's Questions is indispensable. A sample out of so many:

How far do my responsibilities to neighbors go?

And to strangers? To the community, to society as a whole?

What will it cost?

What's in it for me?

What needs to be done? How can I contribute?

If I don't do it, who will?

If nobody does it, what happens then?

Do I care? Is it important for me? Is my well-being dependent on yours?

Should government look out for us and our future well-being? Should it be left to civil servants, or politicians in proverbial smoky back rooms, or perhaps to industrialists in proverbial ivory towers, or to Internet billionaires? Or – at the other extreme – should we leave it to the wisdom of the crowd? Should you and I have a say in this, and – if so – how?

It is about difficult choices. Trying to hold on to what we used to know is natural, but if we hold on too long, we will be swept along and may become victims of change, instead of being part of its development. The transition from one era to another is always challenging, and even more so today in our noisy communication spaces, with their notion that everything moves faster than ever before; where every instant something new impacts our brain, and no truths last more than an instant or two (and this is the new 'forever').

A new societal contract is needed to meet today's and tomorrow's challenges. This new contract needs to take into account the developments occurring today, technological and societal; but the new contract also needs to prepare us for and help with future challenges. Social contracts have served us well, balancing the different actors and their wishes for freedom and responsibilities. A new societal contract needs to address and build on the emerging balance between economy, ecology, government, citizens, and technology.

In his extensive pamphlet about 'rebalancing society', Henry Mintzberg argues for a pluralistic society and the importance of balance for its three basic sectors—public, private, and plural (the civil society): "We have to leave behind the linear politics of left, right, and center, to understand that a balanced society, like a stable stool, has to rest on three solid legs: a public sector of political forces rooted in respected governments, a private sector of economic forces based on responsible businesses, and a plural sector of social forces manifested in robust communities." (39)

We propose to discuss this more broadly and propose some initial protocols for a new societal

contract, building on some of the basic questions discussed here: the consequences of the emerging Anthropocene, the questions we ask of democracy, the rise of AI and superintelligence, a worldwide awareness of extreme climate events, the neglected individual's call for attention.

Who should participate in this broad discussion about future societal contracts, and who should take the lead: Acknowledged thought leaders, vested interests, Internet bloggers and vloggers, political tweeters? What about teenagers and pre-teens and 75+plussers? Is there such a thing as a 'European societal contract'? Or: an Asian one? An African one? One Societal contract for knowledge societies, one societal contract for the whole world?

Do we want our worlds to fall apart every few years – dependent on political cycles, business cycles, disruptive technologies, and the next new thing? Considering the shelf-life of new ideas in the 21st century, we ask: How long should a new societal contract last in a rapidly changing world? A decade? A generation? Beyond midcentury? An ongoing and agile evolution?

Our keeper's questions remain, and in every generation it need to be considered anew. Broad reflection is needed, and deep reflection too, so please respond to this article and let's think about this together.

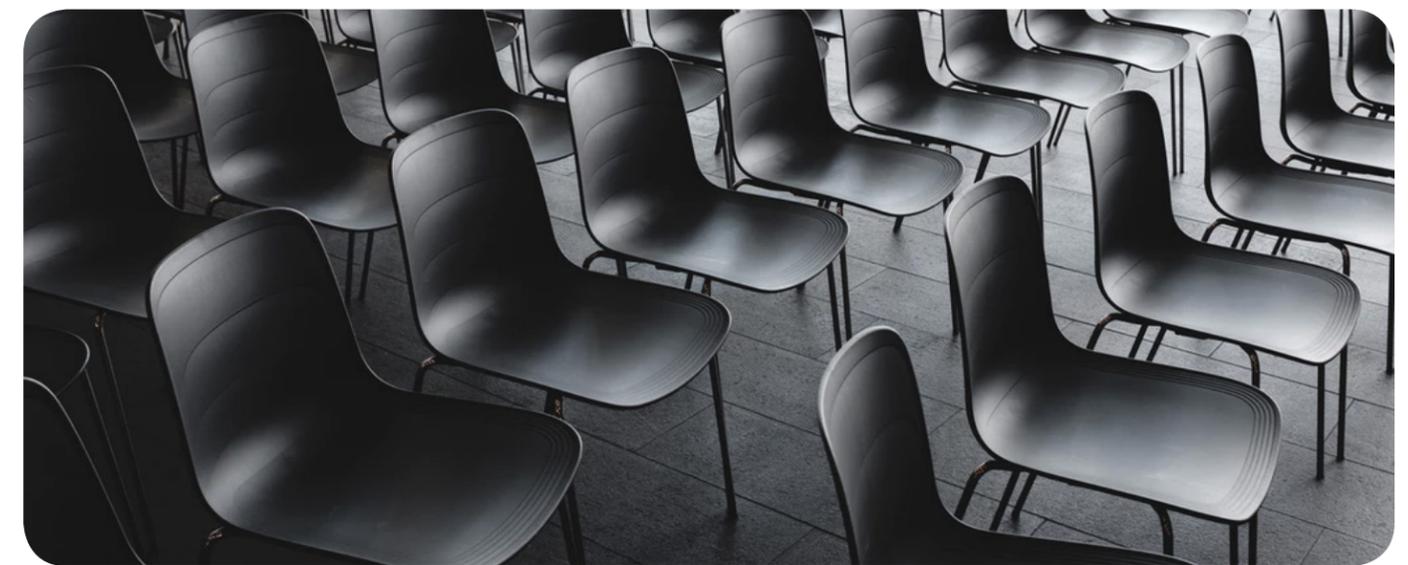
Magnus Jörgel (magnus.jorgel@gmail.com)

Hank Kune (hankkune@educore.nl)

Frank van Erkel (frankvanerkel@hotmail.com)

Conclusion: Building worlds that won't fall apart in a few years

A societal contract tells a story, and in today's world, it's all about the stories we tell – and those we choose to hear. Not all of today's stories inspire us, or invite us to contribute actively to societal renewal. Many narratives in the popular media revolve around fear, imbalance, outrage and entitlement. Hollywood cinema has been dominated for more than a decade by comic book-based fantasies about super-heroes who battle to save the world; they are popular the world over. But do we really want to outsource this to super-heroes and wait for them to fix the world for us? Or for emerging superintelligence and the next generation of AI to take the responsibility out of our hands?



37 <http://www.fdsd.org/ideas/the-committee-for-the-future-finnish-parliament/>