

FOREWORD

I've never had to write a foreword like this one. And that's largely because I've never come across a book quite like this one. What's more, I never knew anyone remotely like David Fleming.

I honestly can't remember which particular Ecology Party Annual Conference it was where we first met. 1977, perhaps? But what I can remember is the joy of falling in love with David's intellect. With his spirit. With his crazy imagination.

As 'David and Jonathon', we then set out to capture the essence of green politics at that time, and to articulate it in ways that we hoped would set the world alight. Especially in the General Election Manifestos of 1979 and 1984.

We failed, of course. But neither of us ever stopped trying—for me, to this day; for David, till his still painfully inexplicable death in 2010. He was, in short, a true soul-mate.

That said, he could be the most irritating man on Earth! The work that you're about to venture into was in the making for more than thirty years. Finished as many times as it was started, and still unfinished at the end. It grew, shrank, grew again. The irony of needing 404 different "essay-entries", spread over 575 pages, to convey the basic principles of 'lean thinking' was all too apparent to David himself. But a startling combination of whimsy, perfectionism and mulish obstinacy ensured that the final endpoint he longed for, with the computer set finally aside, never came.

When David died, I worked my mourning way through *Lean Logic* all over again, in a forlorn effort to be with him in his words. And I've just done the same again, joyfully this time, to work out whether or not it would be possible to write a suitable foreword.

I put it like that because I know that *Lean Logic* will not be to everyone's liking. I used to think that David was wilfully making it hard for people by eschewing a conventionally logical narrative, by disappearing with self-indulgent abandon down intellectual rabbit holes of every conceivable kind, teasing, meandering along, and sometimes deliberately obfuscating.

He wasn't. That was just the way his mind worked, forever playful and provocative. He loved to wind up rather more earnest members of the Ecology Party like no other person I knew, intent on overcoming what he saw as a deeply problematic 'humour deficit'. *Lean Logic* is the way it is because that's how David was, gloriously eclectic, effortlessly holistic.

It may not work, therefore, as a new reader starting on page 1 and looking forward to getting to page 577 with hardly a break in between. See it more as an idiosyncratic almanac, an apothecary's storeroom, to be roamed around with as much curiosity and irreverence as you can muster.

I think the best I can do is to offer one or two aids as readers set out on their journey—a couple of walking poles, a few reference points (not so much a map, as that would be entirely foolhardy), a torch for some of those darker moments.

For me, the starting point has to be the one thing that most bugged David: today's dynamic, endlessly inventive but ultimately suicidal *market economy*. David was always quick to recognise the strengths of that economy, but following in the footsteps of Karl Polanyi and a host of heretical economists writing in the 1960s and 70s, he also recognised, very early on, that its dependence on exponential economic growth had already sown the seeds of its inevitable demise.

This inherent need for eternal per capita growth will not go away—and yet, of course, it is impossible to sustain it in a finite world. This is the central problem of the market economy. If it does not sustain its growth, it will collapse, because unemployment will rise without limit, and both private incomes and public finances will fail. And yet, if it does sustain its growth, it will collapse even more dramatically, owing to the depletion of fuel and materials, the breakdown of soils, environment and climate.

So far, so unexpected. Many share that same analysis, and many alternatives have been advanced to avoid that

kind of collapse, all entailing some kind of reform of that market economy: a rapid adoption of zero-growth policies; ‘progressive degrowth’; an ethically-based advocacy of voluntary simplicity; the rather more pragmatic ‘circular economy’. David was sympathetic to all of these ‘half-way houses’ but saw them ultimately as forlorn efforts to avoid the central insight of his work: that collapse is now inevitable.

Even back in the 1970s, he became convinced that it simply wouldn’t be possible to transition from today’s crazy world to a genuinely sustainable world by dint of incremental reform. He saw collapse as both inevitable and *necessary*, in order to set ourselves on a better path. What really mattered to him was what was going to happen *after* that “coming climacteric”.

As will soon become apparent, David subscribed enthusiastically to the ‘peak oil hypothesis’: that global supplies of oil either already had peaked, or soon would peak, precipitating price rises and economic chaos as disruptive as anything that happened back in the 1970s—including the collapse of a system of food production largely dependent on inputs derived from fossil fuels. This has been a great big juicy bone of contention for many in the green movement (with me on the other end of the bone to David!), but it was a critical part of his overall thinking.

It is not about wrestling with the controls of economics to force it in the direction of degrowth, but about getting ready for the moment when the coming climacteric does the heavy work of degrowth for us; when the goods, materials, food and services—whose life-preserving growth has caused so much guilt—turn out to be not there. The informal economy that must take over is still tragically weak. Its development is intensely urgent. Degrowth will come on us all too quickly.

Hence the idea of the “Lean Economy”—as the only way of maintaining stability in an economy that would no longer be growing. In that respect, *resilience* is seen as critical (“a key property of the Lean Economy, and a key property of resilience is diversity”), to which he returns on many occasions.

Working closely with the Transition Towns movement, he adopted the language of “managed descent”

as the best option we could hope for, with both individuals and communities needing to embrace the principles and practice of a lean economy. Without that kind of narrative, he felt that people would *never* focus on the real alternative: to get the local economy moving as a resilient, self-reliant system, based on a radically different way of doing things, making things and exchanging things, on “reciprocal exchange” and on “the celebration of culture”.

And that’s the point where David’s work becomes completely distinctive—in its exuberant exploration of what he meant by *culture*, both individually and collectively. In effect, culture becomes a direct substitute for the market economy—“The reciprocal obligation of common purpose which will fill the space vacated by the market”. Even religion becomes a critical part of “building and sustaining the relationships of social capital”. For David, trust was the cornerstone of this kind of living culture, nurtured by those reciprocal relationships and obligations. Pretty much everything got dragooned into this overarching sense of culture, including religion, the arts, play, food, and what he called “manners”. And he drew on his wide knowledge of history to provide some sort of parallel.

All societies other than the market economy acknowledged, at least to some degree, that they could not make sense of their practical needs unless they made sense, first of all, of the community—and the culture which defined it, and which they were not aware of as anything different from the way they lived every day. Community is culture’s habitat.

It’s impossible to exaggerate the importance of this dimension of David’s work. All sorts of apparent excursions and tangents link back to his belief that “culture today is decorative, not structural”, just as he saw contemporary multiculturalism as having become “an attenuated tactic” rather than a lived reality. Many of the interventions that he believed needed to be made are based on building trust and cultural diversity at the local level, reinforcing old skills whilst creating a new economic vitality to protect what people really value in their communities. And what is characterised today as ‘unacceptable inefficiency’ would be an important part of that.

All of which depends, of course, on people caring for other people as the only way of maintaining social cohesion, on triumphing over the kind of “individual speak-for-yourselfism” that is so ruthlessly promoted at every level of the market economy.

To be honest, I was never entirely convinced that David himself completely subscribed to this benign and sometimes idealistic view of human nature. But he told himself that he did, and remained a passionate defender of democracy despite all its manifest inadequacies in terms of expediting the transition to a more sustainable world. He was a caustic critic of all those who espoused different shades of “green authoritarianism”, which he defined succinctly as a “guarantee of failure”.

So, in summary, here’s what I think is perhaps the most important of the different ‘logic flows’ in *Lean Logic*, which I hope will be of some assistance to readers as they navigate their way around this unusually structured *tour de force*:

Our contemporary model of progress has come to depend entirely on achieving year-on-year economic growth, indefinitely into the future. If societies cannot keep on growing, collapse is inevitable. If societies succeed in growing, collapse is also inevitable.

↓

We’re already in critical danger. Indeed, it’s no good thinking that collapse can be avoided, as all attempts to reform the growth paradigm are doomed to failure. The best we can do is “manage our descent”, conscientiously cultivating

those habits of mind and practical behaviours that will help fashion a good life post-collapse.

↓

Prospects for that post-collapse good life depend on putting culture at the heart of tomorrow’s lean economy. Culture based on trust, reciprocity, civility and “good manners” will be the direct substitute for today’s market economy; resilience and diversity are critical characteristics of that kind of economy.

↓

We must therefore do everything we can to nurture humankind’s intelligence and creativity, and fight as hard as we need to to protect our democratic entitlements. Without that, autocracy and dictatorship loom.

If you just keep that kind of logic flow in mind, all else starts to resonate, especially in the extensive margins of *Lean Logic*.

It is of course tragic that David never had much of a chance to present the essence of his lifetime’s work in ways that he would have wanted—with the book out there to be read by all he encountered. But it’s also something of a relief! One of my last (and fondest) memories of David was watching him trying to present ‘a potted version’ of the Lean Economy, on a panel of five people, in just 20 minutes. It was not a communications success, as he spoke faster and faster to beat the clock! But rarely have so many beautiful, elegant ideas been uttered, within such a short period of time, with such power and passion.

JONATHON PORRITT