

POSTCAPITALIST WORK: BALANCED JOBS AND EQUITABLE REMUNERATION

SERIES: TOWARDS (A BETTER) POSTCAPITALISM
A HANDY HOW-TO GUIDE

by Michael Albert

méta Working Papers

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Postcapitalist Work:

Balanced Jobs and Equitable Remuneration

Michael Albert

SERIES

Towards (a Better) Postcapitalism: A Handy How-To Guide

méta Working Papers' series "Towards (a Better) Postcapitalism: A Handy How-To Guide" publishes solicited policy papers on aspects of how would a non-dystopian postcapitalism look like. The series focuses on three 'pillars':

Production | Allocation | Decision Making

i.e., how could/would postcapitalist *production* be like (and who would own the means of production), what shape would the *allocation* of goods take (and which alternatives to the market economy may be explored), and what would be the main tenets of postcapitalist *decision making* and *democracy*.

In this paper, **Michael Albert** addresses the first pillar, i.e. production/work.

Michael Albert is a founder and current member of the staff of **Z Magazine** as well as staff of Z Magazine's web system: **ZCom**. Albert's radicalization occurred during the 1960s. His political involvements, starting then and continuing to the present, have ranged from local, regional, and national organizing projects and campaigns to co-founding South End Press, *Z Magazine*, the Z Media Institute, and ZNet, and to working on all these projects, writing for various publications and publishers, giving public talks, etc. Albert is the author of 21 books. Most recently these include: *Fanfare for the Future* (ZBooks), *Remembering Tomorrow* (Seven Stories Press), *Realizing Hope* (Zed Press) and *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (Verso).

Owners gone. So, who decides what to do and how to do it? And why should we believe whoever decides will decide well? Put differently, out with the old boss, out with class hierarchy, out with class rule. In with what?

Will those who work finally govern their own work lives? Will their decisions fulfil their needs and desires? How does postcapitalist participatory economics answer these questions?

With appropriate influence for those outside their workplaces, postcapitalist workers ought to decide their own work lives in their workers councils. Out with capitalist ownership, out with coordinator monopolization of decision making, out with class rule and class hierarchy. In with workers' self-management.

Can we give believable substance to such a positive prediction? Can we say what self-management involves? Can we say how workers and consumers can successfully orient and organize themselves?

Current work organization is so ubiquitous that it appears to us like water in a fishbowl appears to the fishes swimming in it. We see it as natural, inexorable, and permanent. In fact, however, current work organization is not natural, much less ideal. So, what is this

ubiquitous setting for our current productive efforts? Can we see it? Can we name it?

Any and all economies involve combining effort, equipment, resources, and knowledge to generate “goods and services” that people in turn benefit from. We produce our social product by way of “jobs.” Jobs, in turn, amalgamate tasks. My job has tasks. Your job has other tasks. “Division of labour” is how we combine tasks into jobs to conduct production.

We call the way capitalist (and also twentieth century socialist economies) combine tasks into jobs the “corporate division of labour.” It is the sea we work in. But how can there be “a particular way” to combine tasks into millions of jobs?

Well, here is one way. To create a job, combine various tasks together such that the resulting combination is doable by a person and contributes to the agenda of the person’s workplace, and such that the job has either overwhelmingly empowering or overwhelmingly disempowering tasks chosen so that the overall effect on each worker of each job is either to empower or to disempower.

And here is another way. To create a job, combine various tasks such that the resulting combination is doable by a person and contributes to the agenda of the person’s workplace, and so that all jobs have a mix of empowering and disempowering tasks chosen so that the overall effect on all workers of every job is to convey comparable empowerment.

Heard for the first time, the above paragraphs likely need some unpacking. First, what is an empowering or a disempowering task?

Relatively speaking, an empowering task is one that makes its “doer” more knowledgeable and skilled. An empowering task increases confidence. It uplifts and invigorates. It reveals involved dynamics and processes of work. It connects its “doer” with other empowered “doers.” It positions the empowered “doers,” as a group, above the disempowered “doers.”

Relatively speaking, a disempowering task is one that makes its “doer” less knowledgeable and skilled. It reduces confidence. It exhausts and depletes. It obscures involved dynamics and processes of work. It isolates its “doer” from other disempowered “doers.” It positions disempowered “doers,” as a group, beneath empowered “doers.”

So what? Well, when the corporate division of labour combines disempowering tasks into disempowering jobs for about 80 percent of employees, and combines empowering tasks into empowering jobs for about 20 percent of employees—does it make any sense to substitute just one word, “worker,” for the word “doer”?

My answer is that it does not. We should understand “doers” as two things, two groups, two classes. Doing so let’s us understand that in the corporate division of labour an empowered “coordinator class” rules over a disempowered working class. To instead use the one word, “worker,” for both empowered and disempowered “doers,” obscures the key reality that in the corporate division of labour an empowered few rule over a disempowered many.

And do we see this hierarchy in actual economic life? Of course we do. We see capitalism’s coordinator class of managers, lawyers, and financial officers below owners but above workers. We see capitalism’s coordinator class of doctors, accountants, and engineers at

times clash with owners above, and virtually always clash with workers below. More, we also see this class division in economies that eliminate owners above, but that retain the corporate division of labour. In these “coordinator economies,” the empowered doers become the new boss in place of the old boss. The new coordinator boss sets agendas. It deliberates and decides. It excessively remunerates itself. Such economies are postcapitalist, having eliminated private ownership of means of production but theirs is not a postcapitalism we should embrace. We easily see this class arrangement unless something blocks our view. We easily see it, that is, unless we quite fixedly subscribe to a dogma which says it simply cannot exist. If we fixedly say there are only two classes, then we see only owners and workers. If owners don’t rule we deduce workers do rule. If our concepts include nothing more. Our eyes can’t see anything else.

But what are we to do if we see all the above about capitalism and about coordinatorism and we still want postcapitalist work to be classless? What do we do if we want all the “doers” in our sought postcapitalist economy to be of one sort? What do we do if we want everyone who does a job to be capable, caring, confident, and self-managing by virtue of the implications their jobs have for their consciousnesses, skills, connections to others, connections to decision making, and confidence? What do we do if we want every economic actor neither systematically above nor systematically below other economic actors? What do we do if we don’t want 2 percent on top due to monopolizing property, but we also don’t want 20 percent on top due to monopolizing empowering work? What do we do if we want workers all together to collectively self-manage their own work lives? What then?

Clearly, if we want all that, we must reject the corporate division of labour. Yes, the corporate division of labour is ubiquitous now. Yes, the corporate division of labour seems to be how things are and how things must be. But nonetheless, we cannot put all the empowering tasks into one set of jobs, and put all the disempowering tasks into another set of jobs, and by that choice think we are going to attain classlessness. We know better. That approach structurally ensures that those doing the empowering tasks will dominate those doing the disempowering tasks. More, this will occur even if all the “doers” initially want participation, democracy, and equity. A class rule outcome is built into the corporate division of labour. If we keep that familiar structure, we wind up with its implication, class rule. Luckily, however, once we recognize this huge liability of the corporate division of labour, it is quite straightforward to see what we must advocate in place of it. If empowering tasks elevate whoever those tasks are confined to, then the road to no longer elevating one class above another is to disperse the empowering tasks among all doers so all doers become comparably empowered workers.

It is true that all socially valuable empowering tasks have to get done. But we don't have to have some people do a bunch of empowering tasks and nothing disempowering. Similarly, all socially valuable disempowering tasks have to get done. But we don't have to have some people do a bunch of disempowering tasks and nothing empowering. Our alternative to the corporate division of labour, is to have everyone do a job that contains a mix of some empowering and some disempowering tasks such that the overall empowerment effect of fulfilling any one job's requirements is comparable to the overall empowerment effect of fulfilling any other jobs' requirements.

A person who is a surgeon in capitalism would, in a participatory economy, do some surgery but also spend some time dealing with bed pans or doing whatever other tasks balance their job's empowerment implications. A person who cleans bed pans in capitalism would, in a participatory economy, clean bed pans but also spend some time doing surgery or whatever balances their job's empowerment implications. Poetry aside, the first now will not later be last, nor will the last now later be first. Rather, the first and the last will in our sought post-capitalism, be alike in their work empowerment, neither above nor below the other.

Hold on. After a moment for thought, someone will say, "I don't want to go to that hospital." Or similarly, "I don't want to attend a university where professors must clean, and cleaners teach. I don't want to fly in a plane where pilots hand out drinks, and people who hand out drinks pilot. The images appear scary, but to address the guiding idea, we have to take it for what it says, not for misreadings that we fear. We aren't talking about changing everything overnight. People need to learn. And we aren't talking about each person doing all tasks, which is impossible. Nor are we talking about each person doing things they are not able to do. That would be suicidal. All worthy and needed tasks should get done, and get done well. We only urge that we apportion them differently.

Let's take our critic's concern head on. We urge that unless we balance jobs, we will wind up with a domineering coordinator class and a dominated working class. The critic in time agrees but then argues that that is just too bad. It is the way economics must be. There is no workable, worthy alternative. We don't like to age and die. Too bad. It's the way it is. Similarly says the critic, after we get rid of owners,

we don't like having roughly 20 percent rule and 80 percent obey. Too bad. It's the way it is. We have no choice. Be mature. Accept your plight. We don't always get what we want. But what is the basis for saying, tough luck, class division is just the way it is? We can't have classlessness. Deal with it.

Pushed to explain, our critic explains that class division is a necessary price we must pay to get work done at a sufficient level of competence and at a sufficient volume of output to attain the lifestyles we want. Our critic tells us to balance jobs would forego too much productivity and the lost productivity would more than outweigh any modest social gain. And our critic urges that it isn't only coordinator class people eager to defend their advantages who espouse this argument. Many workers who labour below the coordinator class believe the same thing. Case closed.

Unconvinced, in reply we point out that the critic's view is rather like the view of many women and many Black people in the U.S. just sixty years ago, say, who doubted their own capacities or inclinations, and in any event it is quite like the view of most white people in the U.S. sixty years ago, that very nearly only white men were then surgeons and professors and lawyers and so on, because only white men were capable of it.

A compelling response to our critic becomes evident. Subordination of workers, like subordination of women and Blacks, derives from alterable circumstances that delimit workers before they even enter the workforce and then even more instructively also once they are in the workforce. So, we say, imagine we implement household circumstances and schooling that aims to unleash everyone's talents

and fulfil everyone's abilities instead of household and school circumstances aiming to prepare 20 percent of the population to make decisions, and 80 percent of the population to take orders and endure boredom. Would the extra productivity that would come from the full expression of the capacities of the 80 percent newly doing balanced jobs offset the lost productivity due to the 20 percent newly having to spend some of their work time doing disempowering tasks in similarly balanced jobs?

First, of course it would. Second, even if it wouldn't for some odd reason in some other epoch or on some other planet, so what? Volume of productive output should not be our sole criterion of success. If we have to give up some productivity to avoid, say, ecological nightmare, of course we should. If we have to give up some productivity to avoid working ourselves into exhausted deadening depletion, of course we should. And if we had to give up some productivity to attain dignity, equity, and participation for all, of course we should. In fact, however, no such sacrifice is needed to balance jobs for empowerment and thereby end the denial of potentials of four fifths of the population for what ought to be a very obvious reason. To have balanced jobs will in sum unleash rather than reduce productive capacity.

But what would balanced work roles actually look like, and how would they be determined? They will look like combinations of roles and responsibilities undertaken as a sum of tasks composing one's job. The critical difference from now will be that instead all my or all your roles and responsibilities being nearly exclusively empowering or nearly exclusively disempowering, for each of us some will be empowering and some will be disempowering.

A question surfaces. If a job is a mix of tasks, how does the mix of tasks in each job get chosen? Answer, in a given workplace its self-managing workers council apportions tasks into balanced jobs by whatever method it opts for. Different workplaces might do this somewhat differently. The only requirement from workplace to workplace is that each attains sufficient balance so the result is an empowered workforce. For example, perhaps each year, in some workplace at some ordained time, existing apportionment of tasks into jobs is revisited. Maybe there have emerged some new tasks. Maybe there have emerged some technical or organizational changes. And so maybe some reassignment of tasks among jobs occurs, as needed. Some workplaces may do this more often than others. Some workplaces may do more assessment, or decide final apportionment after more deliberation, with more exactitude, or using different voting procedures. Whatever detailed patterns emerge from experience, as a new or an established worker, what is my situation? I apply for or if need be I switch to a balanced job that I will be capable of doing well, and that I want to do. Nothing unusual in that.

There are additional details and aspects of course, addressed in longer works, but for now here is a particularly vexing unusual implication. Our envisioned workplace has no owner. Our envisioned workplace has no coordinator class. Our envisioned workers don't have different bargaining power than one another. A question arises. What will determine each worker's income?

Well, what are our options? We have by our choices so far already eliminated that people get income for their property, called profits. That option is gone because such ownership is gone. We have also eliminated that workers get income for bargaining power, unless we

are prepared to say, because there are no significant differences in bargaining power, that everyone will always and only earn the same amount, period, which we will see, we do not want to say. So, what is left?

First, we could choose that people get income for the contribution they make to the overall social product by their own efforts. I produced that large pile of stuff. I should get a comparable valued large pile of stuff as my income. Second, we could choose that people get income for need, regardless of their efforts. I say I need this and that,

I should get this and that. And third, we could choose that people get income, assuming they work, for their duration of work, intensity of work, and onerousness of conditions of work doing socially valued labour. I expend so much time and effort. I should get a share of output in accord. Some socialists support the first option. Some socialists and many anarchists support the second option. Advocates of participatory economics support the third option and call it “equitable remuneration.” Note, these are norms or values. To choose one over another makes sense when we feel one has better overall implications than another.

To get income for your contribution to the social product, the first option, means you earn more if you are born with particular productive talents, or if you get to use better equipment, or if you happen to be producing something more valuable, or if you happen to have more productive workmates. It leads to wide disparities of income, and then of wealth, that owe nothing to the actual effort of each person, and owe everything, instead, to luck in the genetic lottery, the equipment lottery, the job lottery, or the workmate lottery. Some people

think this is desirable. Advocates of participatory economics feel it is, instead, unwarranted to reward luck and, more, that to do so generates debilitatingly wide disparities. Additionally, advocates of participatory economics realize that there are no positive and otherwise unattainable incentive effects of remunerating output per se. You can't change your genetic makeup to seek higher income nor does your managing to get access to better tools with someone else winding up with worse tools or your angling to produce more valuable items and someone else having to produce less valuable items do anything for society that your getting the worse tools and someone else getting the better tools or your producing the less valuable and someone else producing the more valuable items doesn't do. And the competition, ill feelings, and very different incomes that result are a serious debit. Ethically, it is unwarranted for someone with great reflexes or a great voice to earn a fortune on top of their lucky genetic endowment. Economically, it is similarly unwarranted unless if the person didn't earn more, they wouldn't use their endowment. But we will see that that widespread belief is actually false. There is more to say, of course, as with every element of this necessarily relatively short article, but as usual, for concision, let's consider the next option. Remuneration for need.

Of course, everyone believes in remuneration for need to a degree. If one can't work in a good economy, and in fact even often in our current economy, the economy doesn't ship one off to starve, or shouldn't, at any rate. But surely a good economy can do much better than that. If one can't work, one could receive a full and not just a partial income. More, no one pays for many need-determined basics like health care. So, need certainly plays a role. But need doesn't alone play

a role. We don't all get whatever we say we need with no attention to how much that is. If we did get whatever we say we need, for that to work, people would have to curb their own desires to responsible levels. They would likewise have to drive their own workloads toward responsible levels. However, people would have no way to know how much consumption would be legitimate. They would have no way to know how much work would be appropriate. Also, the economy writ large would know that people want/need certain things, but it would not know how much we want/need those things. For that reason, the economy would not know where to apportion productive capacity to best fulfil people. Without belabouring these matters that are dealt with, like everything else in this essay, at great length in other places, perhaps we can make the main point about these rejected options best by making a case, however summarily, for our preferred remuneration for duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labour.

Equitable remuneration does not say that everyone gets equal worth of items from the social product. If you choose to work longer, or harder, or even under worse conditions you can earn more than average, so as to then consume items of greater than average value. You can also opt to work less than average because you value greater leisure more than more stuff. The point is, your budget for consumption derives from your duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labour. Your inclination to work longer, or harder, or to endure worse conditions derives from your desire for more consumption as compared to your desire for more leisure. More, how much you want things, and how much the populace as a whole wants things, is made evident from the amount of income people willingly allot to purchase things.

The advocate of participatory economics ethically advocates this choice because it is one norm for all, it generates only modest differences of income, and it rewards what one has control over, one's actions, and does not reward luck of endowment or circumstance. The ethical point is a matter of values, not of logic or proof. We get income for what is in our power to affect, not for what is ordained by luck. We get the benefit of income for that which warrants benefit, that is, for the sacrifice we make working longer, harder, or at unduly onerous tasks. The situation is economically advocated because it conveys needed information about people's preferences and also provides appropriate incentives to get wanted production done. An added economic benefit is that if the economy properly values all items, then our willingness to work longer or less long, and our willingness to pay more or less for some item, tells the economy what it needs to know, which is our preferences. In short, we have reason to provide that which we have control over, how long, how hard, and how willingly in bad conditions, we agree to work producing socially valued product.

However, some new questions arise. What stops me from doing a job I am unable to do well? Why can't I work really hard doing that job, and earn a lot, even as I am wasting society's resources because I do it poorly? Also, why will I utilize my genetically endowed talents since I don't get more income for doing so? For that matter, why will I become, for example, a doctor even as part of my balanced job, since I can do something simpler and earn as much?

Let's succinctly answer while necessarily leaving longer treatment to the many available fuller presentations of participatory economics. I can't do a job I would not do well because if I can't produce commensurate to properly utilizing resources, inputs, labour time, etc., I am

not doing socially valued work, at least not for the full duration of my effort, and so I won't get income for the full duration of my effort. I personally might want to do surgery, or sing, or whatever else, but if I am not sufficiently good at those pursuits, I won't get such a job doing them because doing such a job I wouldn't contribute socially valued labour. Likewise, I can't work real hard digging holes and filling them as a clever way to earn good income. And I can't play saxophone, say, or tennis, or brain surgery, or do lots of other things I have no capacity for, because doing such things I would not do socially valued labour, and would thus not be remunerated or even employed in those pursuits. On the other hand, you would be likely to, though you could choose not to, utilize your unusual ability to sing, or to calculate, or to design, or to do whatever else, not for a higher rate of remuneration per hour, which is simply not available, but because you gain pleasure from fulfilling your talents and you take pleasure in benefitting others and being socially appreciated for doing so. You will become a doctor, in a balanced job and for the normal rate of pay, and assuming you have what it takes and would like to be a doctor, because you will be more fulfilled doing what you are good at and what you enjoy and what you are appreciated for, rather than doing something you are less good at and don't enjoy, even if it is for the same income per hour and per intensity, and of course because in a good postcapitalism, the training involved is paid rather than your having to pay for it.

So, consider yourself. Let's say you are graduating high school. Let's say you would like to become a doctor because you like biology, you want to aid the sick, and so on. To become a doctor, however, you have to go to college, then to medical school, and then you have to be an intern, and only then do you finally become a doctor. We are told

that in capitalism, to get you to go to college instead of straight to work for Jeff Bezos packaging items, and to get you to go to medical school instead of being a custodian in an apartment building where people like Bezos don't know your name, and to get you to be a doctor instead of a receptionist where you get to get a Bezos wannabe coffee, and to get you to be a doctor instead of a coal miner where you die daily en route to an early final death, we have to pay you \$500,000 a year, instead of the \$50,000 salary for the other mentioned pursuits because, well, without that big salary you would reject being a doctor and instead opt for one of those other pursuits.

Really? Let's test the assertion. Imagine God appears before you and says you must choose now, high school graduation day, and your choice is final. She tells you she is going to lower the salary you will receive as a doctor a step at a time. She says you must choose when it is low enough that you will forego college, medical school, interning, and doctoring to pursue any of the other mentioned options. You can take your pick. But your decision is real and permanent. She will make it so.

Ready, says God? Okay, your salary as a doctor will be \$400,000? Still want to be a doctor? Okay how about \$300,000? Hanging on? Okay, \$200,000? I predict you will then ask God, "How low a salary can I survive on, because until it gets below that level I am not switching. I am staying out of the coal mine." Am I right? Of course. And so much for the myth about why people earn what they do. It is not a bribe to get them to do what they otherwise would reject. It is extortion by them to get as much as they can based on their bargaining power. Now add to the hypothetical picture that all jobs have a

balanced mix of tasks, and that early school is free and later school is paid, plus equitable remuneration for all work. You do the math.

More questions arise. We have workers and consumers. What we all together produce and what we all together consume must mesh. We call this allocation. How does it happen? More, how does it happen in a way that doesn't subvert the self-management, classlessness, and equity of reward and circumstance we have sought with our other institutional choices? What allocation system will let us properly value items? What allocation system will let us properly apportion influence? What allocation system will deliver equitable shares of the social product? All while supporting rather than subverting a productive commons, workers and consumers self-managing councils, class less balanced jobs, and equitable remuneration?

These are questions for another essay in this series. But I feel I should here acknowledge that nothing offered above should alone fully convince you that jobs balanced for empowerment are worthy, possible, and even essential if we are to escape class rule. Nothing offered here should alone fully convince you we can implement equitable remuneration for duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued work and maintain it consistent with the rest of our aspirations. What the above paragraphs hopefully do accomplish, however, is to succinctly intimate that such claims may be true, and to succinctly provide some evidence that they are true, and thus to succinctly provide you reason to consider the involved issues more fully both via longer presentations of participatory economics and via your own thought and experience.

Can we sum up? To this point we have advocated, including our prior essay in this Meta series, a productive commons, council self-management, balanced job complexes, and equitable remuneration. Advocates of participatory economics claim these are four critical features we must attain for economic life to be classless, self-managing, solidaritous, and equitable. But can these features be a scaffold to which movements can add contextual details that emerge from future experience so as to arrive at a new participatory economy? Yes, that should be possible if we are correct that the features we have so far advocated are essential and will have to be filled out, and can be. No, at least not yet, because so far we have left out an equally critical aspect of economics that should itself be part of the essential core scaffold before experience starts adding to it. We call that last feature allocation and we propose for accomplishing it what we call participatory planning. And while allocation is a topic for another essay in this series and especially for longer treatments elsewhere, we can at least mention some implications of our already proposed goals for workplace organization and remuneration for what we need allocation to accomplish.

To have successful self-managing workers councils with their teams and individual members, and to have successful consumers councils with their living units and individual members, postcapitalist allocation must not only give workers and consumers appropriate say over their production and consumption, but must also provide accurate and sufficiently comprehensive information upon which workers and consumers can base their decisions. Allocation must therefore deliver information about the relative values of items of all kinds where the values delivered account for personal, social, and environmental effects as well as for the desires of producers and consumers.

Allocation must also allot to workplaces income appropriate for the whole workplace workforce in accord with their collective duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labour and must also determine what is, in fact, socially valued labour. Finally, allocation must not by its logic impose on workers and consumers a necessity or even an inclination to act contrary to their own freely developed needs and potentials. It must not cancel diversity. It must not subvert solidarity. It must not violate equity. It must not move us from ecological sustainability to civilizational suicide. In fact, by its intrinsic implications for what we do and how we do it, allocation like our other proposed postcapitalist economic institutions must actually enhance solidarity, protect and even promote diversity, facilitate equity, deliver and utilize self-management, and finally enable ecological sustainability.

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It has been noted that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, invoking the need for serious reflection on the end of the existing order and a transition to a postcapitalist way of life. Yet the future of the world economy is but one of the aspects of postcapitalism. After all, capitalism itself might be *prima facie* an economic system, but it has evolved into a comprehensive political, cultural, anthropological and international order. Postcapitalism, however it might evolve, is not merely the modification of an economic system; it will prove to be a new political, cultural, anthropological, civilisational paradigm — a new era indeed. A dystopian one, a utopian one, or anything in between. And the turbulences of the gradual transition are to be witnessed by all. The oligarchic decline of liberal democracy engenders countless variations of authoritarian tendencies; the supply chain of tributes for the global minotaur are increasingly interrupted; novel desiderata for emancipation are articulated; the chasms between megacities and provinces nurture silent, cold civil wars; the emergence of a non-Anglophone, non-Atlantic, non-liberal, non-bipartisan state as the planet's largest economy is just around the corner, overturning a two-centuries-old order; the changes in global demography and geopolitics are vertiginous; climate change is threatening our very existence. Transformations of gigantic proportions radically reshape the world before our very eyes.

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