



Keynes as a post-growth economist

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ABSTRACT

Some key aspects of J.M. Keynes's economics are reassessed, showing how they fit with and can add to a modern post-growth economics. While Keynes favoured growing the economy in the short-run, he also saw the potential for a post-growth economy in the long-run. He implied that the realisation of this economy would be consistent with the ending of capitalism itself. There are different versions of Keynes (this partly reflects the volume and range of his published work as well as the tendency for his own thought to evolve over time in response to particular events) and the interpretation given of his economics is inevitably partial and potentially contentious. However, the ideas presented provide an indication of the relevance and importance of Keynes's writings for post-growth economics debates. Keynes's vision of long-run economic transition contains some weaknesses and there remain issues in applying his ideas to problems in the present – this includes the notion of 'Green Keynesianism' as a response to the challenge of climate change – but there are still valuable lessons to take from Keynes. Modern post-growth economists are therefore encouraged to engage with his ideas.

1. Introduction

There is a lot of discussion now on the need to rethink the economy in ways that take seriously the planetary limits to growth (O'Neill et al., 2018). To keep growing the economy risks adding to environmental damage. Indeed, it raises the real possibility of increased non-human and human deaths. The interlinkages between pervasive economic inequalities and destructive climate change call for deep-seated reform. This reform does not just entail a rejection of growth as an economic goal but also the contemplation of futures beyond capitalism (Pirgmaier, 2017; Jackson, 2022; Hofferberth, 2025).

This paper makes a particular intervention in the above discussion. Specifically, it reassesses some key aspects of the economics of J.M. Keynes, showing how they fit with and can add to a modern post-growth economics. While Keynes wanted growth to occur in the short-run, not least to resolve unemployment, he also believed in the merits of a post-growth long-run: one where people would lead better lives not by pursuing more money and wealth but by enjoying ample free time. Keynes was confident that the economy would evolve towards a post-growth state. This evolution would entail a move beyond capitalism. While Keynes remained a staunch liberal and an avowed opponent of socialism, he retained a radical vision of long-run economic transition.

The economic writings of Keynes are voluminous, complex and varied. They evolved over time in response to particular events and

covered many different topics and themes. This makes it difficult to make general statements about his economics. It also means that any interpretation of Keynes's economics – including that contained in this paper – is inevitably partial and potentially open to dispute.

The discussion below only deals with parts of Keynes's writings. It is not a definitive guide to all of what Keynes said. Rather, it is an effort to set out some key ideas he posited in some selected works that have relevance and significance for post-growth economics. Keynes did not get everything right – for example, he underestimated the scope for the growth imperative to persist and capitalism to endure long into the future. Nonetheless, there is value in revisiting aspects of his work. This value extends to identifying reasons why capitalist economies are a long way from the future that Keynes hoped for and expected to be achieved.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section considers Keynes's vision of a post-growth future. The third section identifies some gaps and weaknesses in his thought including in relation to how he saw capitalism evolving towards a post-growth economy. The fourth section reflects on key lessons from Keynes's thought for post-growth economics. The fifth section considers critically what others have termed as 'Green Keynesianism' as a response to climate change. The sixth section concludes.

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2. Keynes's vision of a post-growth future

Keynes combined an interest in economic theory with engagement in concrete policy matters. He exposed the flaws in neoclassical (or 'classical') economics – these included the latter's view of the economy as a self-equilibrating system and its questioning of state intervention to tackle problems such as unemployment. In his most famous work – *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (Keynes, 1936) – he showed how new economic ideas were needed (ones focused on the question of 'effective demand') if the problems of the economy were to be understood and then countered. These ideas have been developed by Post-Keynesian economists (Lavoie, 2009). In policy debates, among different contributions, Keynes assessed whether reforms advocated by leading politicians could work (Keynes and Henderson, 1929) and in the context of war, considered the possibilities for creating and sustaining an armaments economy (Keynes, 1940). Keynes retained a clear focus on creating a better economy: one that not only sustained people in work but also enabled them to flourish as human beings.

In some of his work, this focus took on critical significance – that is, it became a means to articulate a radical vision of the future, in which people would come to achieve better lives by rejecting the values and practices of present-day capitalism. This vision was most clearly set out in Keynes's 1930 essay, 'Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren'. This essay was originally presented to different student audiences (Skidelsky, 1992: 234; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012: 15; Eich, 2024: 13–14). It aimed to provoke. On the one hand, it sought to shore up support for capitalism – in particular, it warned of the dangers of radical change in the present and rebuked those arguing for socialism as well as fascism as solutions to society's problems. On the other hand, the essay highlighted deep flaws in capitalism and the need to move beyond it. Keynes used the essay to outline the possibility for a post-capitalist future: one he thought society was on course to achieve.

Robert Skidelsky (1992: 237), in his biography of Keynes, describes the 1930 essay as 'a provocation, a *jeu d'esprit* aimed at clever young Wykehamists and Etonians'.¹ He states that it summarises 'many of the ambivalences in Keynes's own thinking and psychology'. These ambivalences include Keynes's views on capitalism – while he regarded the latter as the best system currently available to satisfy human needs, he also saw it as imposing high costs on society. These costs included not just frequent economic crises that led to job losses but also immorality and the restriction of human freedom and joy in life. In the essay, Keynes outlined his views on why capitalism was necessary for achieving abundance but also why capitalism needed to be overcome in the long-run. As Skidelsky writes (Skidelsky, 1992: 237), despite its apparent non-serious and whimsical nature, the essay 'gives a better idea of what went on in his [Keynes's] own mind than his more academic or specialised pieces'.

Keynes showed how if growth could be restored capitalism could deliver both higher living standards and shorter work hours. He was optimistic that the sharing of the proceeds of growth under capitalism could benefit both capital and labour. He predicted that, in the future, the 'economic problem' (Keynes, 1963a: 365) of scarcity would be solved. As evidence of this fact, he anticipated that people would only be required to work a fifteen-hour week in 2030 (Keynes, 1963b: 369). The coming post-scarcity economy would transform life from a constant treadmill of more work and consumption into a 'paradise of leisure' (Skidelsky, 1992: 237).

In the 1930 essay, Keynes rejected the idea of wants as unlimited. Neoclassical economics makes the assumption that people always want to consume more. Their wants can never be fully satiated. This assumption leads to the idea that constant growth is needed to satisfy the

unlimited wants of people *qua* consumers. Keynes took a different view. He argued that, once people had met their 'absolute needs', they would give up on more consumption (Keynes, 1963c: 365). He suggested that 'relative needs' – linked to 'the desire for superiority' and status-seeking – were inconsequential and that increases in the incomes of workers and capitalists would lead both to 'choose' more leisure hours.

In addition, Keynes rejected the idea that money was the root of happiness. Rather, he stressed how its pursuit eroded the quality of life and was corrupting of the moral character of people. For workers, waged-work was a direct barrier to well-being (it prevented leisure that they valued over work – Keynes, like neoclassical economists, regarded work as a 'disutility'). For capitalists, the quest for more money – driven by the profit motive – was a limit to free expression and creativity.

Keynes referred directly to the 'love of money' as a 'somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease' (Keynes, 1963d: 369). No one – worker or capitalist – could hope to lead a healthy and fulfilling life while his or her main intention was to acquire more money. As Skidelsky (1992: 234) states, Keynes's condemnation of the 'love of money' was shaped by his reading of 'Freud's reflections on the pathology of money'.

Keynes felt that an aesthetic life – one based on free creative activity – was the basis of a good life. His vision of progress in society entailed not more work and more consumption but the extension of activities that had their own intrinsic value. His reference point was the Bloomsbury Group (Skidelsky, 1992: 237), who spent their time indulging in the arts (e.g. poetry writing, painting, sculpture and musical composition). The growth of artistic talents was to take the place of the growth of material wealth.

In the essay, Keynes showed how the activities he openly disapproved of – i.e. those involved in making money – were needed to create the better future he thought possible and achievable (Skidelsky, 1992: 236). Capitalists pursuing their own 'love of money' would drive investment in production, and in turn, raise growth. Workers earning and spending money would also help the economy to grow. Keynes thought that money-making activities would have to be accepted for some time to come, despite their moral costs for society:

For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to every one that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.

(Keynes, 1963a: 372)

Darkness in 'the tunnel of economic necessity' would only be temporary, however – it would be eventually replaced by 'daylight' in a more affluent and leisured-filled future. Keynes, in short, saw the 'love of money', and with it, growth, as necessary evils – both were needed to create a future where time could be spent by people not loving money but rather loving the freedom that leisure could bring. In the move to such a future, Keynes argued, capitalism would be gradually phased out.

In other work, Keynes elaborated on some similar themes. In a 1933 essay, he focused on the benefits of 'national self-sufficiency', arguing that the priority given to the expansion of trade and production in the world often imposed costs on nature and ecology (Keynes, 1933). Some restrictions on trade and production, entailing a degree of economic isolationism, could help to promote societal well-being while protecting the natural environment. He warned that the rule of money and 'financial calculation' over life led to houses and cities that were barely habitable. The destruction of 'the beauty of the countryside' and the 'shutting off [of] the sun and stars' due to pollution were symptoms of an economic system that measured the value of everything by the ability to pay (Keynes, 1933: 187). The idea and goal of limiting growth was, therefore, retained by Keynes.

In *The General Theory*, Keynes ([1936] (1973): 374) also reflected critically on 'the motive of money-making'. He implied that this motive

¹ 'Wykehamists' are present and former pupils of Winchester College (a public school in England). 'Etonians' are present and former pupils of Eton College (another public school in England).

could help to tame some ‘dangerous human proclivities’ such as ‘cruelty, the reckless pursuit of personal power and authority, and other forms of self-aggrandisements’. ‘It is better that a man should tyrannise over his bank balance than over his fellow-citizens’, Keynes remarked wryly. This suggested he had moved on from his position that the ‘money-making passion’ was always morally bad and that its only utility came from its positive link to growth – at least, it had some relative value in taming some other psychological and moral vices. Yet, Keynes still insisted that this passion needed to be kept within limits (it must be ‘subject to rules and limitations’) and that it would be desirable if society could progress to a point where its influence was removed. He still held out hope for the realisation of ‘the ideal commonwealth’ where the sordid activity of money-making would be replaced with the intrinsic pleasures of the arts.

Keynes realised that in the transition from an economy based on money-making and constant growth to one based on non-money-making activities and no growth, there would be challenges to overcome. In particular, there were ingrained habits of thought that blinked thinking about the future. They made people think that goals such as continuous production and expanded trade were normal and necessary (Keynes, 1933: 177–78). New ideas about the operation and purpose of the economy needed to be promoted instead. Keynes also reflected on the adjustments that people would have to go through in the move to a post-growth future. The working class had become inured to working for a living, while the capitalist class had become accustomed to accumulating capital and making profits. These ways of acting would have to be negated if the benefits of leisure were to be realised more fully.

Keynes (1963a: 366–67) gave the example of middleclass housewives who suffered mental breakdowns from not working and used this example to illustrate the potential difficulties people in general would face in adapting to a post-growth environment. ‘To those who sweat for their daily bread leisure is a longed-for sweet – until they get it’, Keynes (1963a: 367) wrote. He, however, remained optimistic that suitable adjustments in habits and behaviours could be made and that people would come ‘to live wisely and agreeably and well’ (ibid.) in a future dominated by leisure time.

Keynes (2013, 65) has become famous for his saying that ‘in the long-run we are all dead’ (Eich, 2025). This saying has associated Keynes with the idea of the future as a dead zone – a state not for living but rather one where humanity faces death. It has allied him with a pessimistic view of change. It has also helped to convey the impression that Keynes was an economist of the short-run – one obsessed with constantly reflate the economy so that it could achieve full employment. Economists were seemingly to provide advice on how best to maintain people in employment (at least, until they retired or worse died).

Yet, a closer reading of Keynes – one informed by a study of some of his wider writings – present a different side to his thought. In fact, Keynes was positive about the possibilities for progress in society – he saw the long-run as a state that could and would support and indeed enrich human life. This state would entail not constant full employment but the move to a position of ‘full unemployment’ – it would mean expanding the time for people to develop their talents and to achieve well-being.

In envisaging a post-growth economy – one in harmony with human nature and nature in general – Keynes also saw scope to overcome capitalism itself. Keynes (1933: 183) wrote scathingly that the ‘individualistic capitalism’ of his day was not ‘intelligent’, ‘beautiful’, ‘just’, or ‘virtuous’. It failed to ‘deliver the goods’ and people were inclined to ‘dislike it’. This dislike encompassed not just its capacity to malfunction economically but also its inability to support meaningful human activity as well as a clean and life-supporting natural environment. Keynes stopped short of arguing that capitalism needed to be overthrown – rather, he favoured policies to humanise it and to ‘save it from itself’. This meant managing it and directing it towards full employment. It also meant mitigating its inequalities – redistribution would not only help to boost the spending of those with lower incomes but also curb the waste

linked to luxury consumption (Keynes, 1973: 372–73). Keynes, however, also saw that society would live better by ditching capitalist ways of living and that progress would entail achieving a post-capitalist economy. In this respect, Keynes remained a subversive thinker: one committed to getting rid of capitalism, at least in the long-run.

3. Assessing Keynes’s long-run vision

Politically, Keynes straddled a divide between seeing capitalism as the best of all possible systems in the short-run and highlighting the merits of what he termed as the ‘ideal social Republic of the future’ (Keynes, 1933: 186) which entailed going beyond capitalism. His 1930 essay reflected this politically ambiguous position. On the one hand, it offered reassurance to his student audiences and the public in general that better times lay ahead (Marglin, 2021: 847n). The Great Depression could be overcome by wise policymaking and capitalism could be made to deliver for ordinary people (Mann, 2017). On the other hand, the essay provided an indication of the radical change needed to improve how life in society was conducted.

Where Keynes was clear was in his rejection of radical socialist agendas, including those linked to Marxism. Keynes regarded Marx as a minor intellectual figure and one who had contributed little positive to economic and political thought (Keynes, 1963b: 300). He also had little time for the Labour Party and was directly hostile towards the broader labour movement – he remained a supporter of the Liberal Party and a committed member of the intellectual elite (Keynes, 1963a). Keynes (1963c: 324) declared boldly and publicly that, in ‘the Class war’, he was ‘on the side of the educated bourgeoisie’. Any ‘violent change’ (Keynes, 1963a: 359) or ‘a phase of violence or quasi-violence’ (Keynes, 1933: 192) in society was to be deplored. The working class shared with the capitalist class interests in preserving capitalism and a task of Keynes was to persuade the working class of this fact. Rather than succumb to the allure of Marxism, the working class was to support the liberal cause of a reformed capitalism.

At the same time, however, Keynes retained a radical mission. Growing the economy was not an end in itself, but a means to bring forth the end of capitalism. Beyond his arguments in support of growth under capitalism (he thought that full employment and a more equal distribution would help to grow the economy), there lay a ‘radical Keynes’ intent on bringing an end to both growth and capitalism. As Skidelsky and Skidelsky (2012: 18) write when commenting on his 1930 essay, ‘Keynes wanted to ensure that the capitalist system worked at full blast so as to hasten the day when it would come to an end’. His focus on growth in the short-run had an ulterior long-run motive: one aimed at fundamentally changing society from one based on money-making to one based on cultivating great art and beauty in nature.

The radicalism of Keynes’s thought, however, faced obvious problems. Specifically, Keynes never fully anticipated how growth might continue and capitalism persist (Negri, 1988). He missed, in other words, the extent to which the short-run (i.e. characterised by growth in the economy) might extend into the long-run and delay, perhaps indefinitely, the realisation of a post-growth and post-capitalist economy.

Firstly, Keynes missed how workers might be enticed to consume more by things like advertising, meaning that even assuming they had bargaining power to reduce working hours they might not pursue them. The increase of ‘relative needs’ (or better, relative wants) – wrongly discounted by Keynes – might then act as a prop to capitalism and a means to prolong working hours (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012). Secondly, Keynes failed to see how capitalists would go on wanting to be capitalists. He implied that they would come to have enough of making money and instead would switch to other non-money making activities such as in arts. This ignored the system-wide pressure on capitalists to keep making money and the direct effect of this pressure in sustaining capitalism.

On this last point, Keynes imagined that capitalism could be

humanised – this would entail not just governments intervening to manage aggregate demand in the economy but also capitalists taking ethical responsibility for sharing with workers the rewards of growth. He failed to anticipate how capitalism would take a regressive turn and inequality increase at the expense of lower living standards and static working weeks for workers. One aspect of the neoliberal era of capitalism (based on a rejection of the previous ‘Keynesian’ policy consensus) has been that capitalists have acted unethically by appropriating the rewards of growth for themselves, meaning that Keynes’s long-run vision has appeared a pipedream (Friedman, 2017). This fact is something that Keynes might have anticipated if he had considered even more critically the enduring role and motives of capitalists.

Another related problem concerns the relative timidity of Keynes’s reform agenda. While he regarded a future beyond capitalism as both necessary and desirable, he failed to offer reforms that would truly disturb the capitalist order. He, on occasions, argued for a wider transformation in the economy. Notably, in the conclusion of *The General Theory*, he contemplated the ‘comprehensive socialisation of investment’, hinting at a wider role for the state in managing and controlling assets (Keynes, 1973: 378). This would be important in securing full employment – governments, for example, could create employment directly by hiring people to build socially useful things like houses and roads (this was to be preferred over make-work schemes that contributed no value to society) (Keynes, 1973: 129). Keynes, however, made clear his opposition to wide-scale nationalisation:

It is not the ownership of the instruments of production which is important for the State to assume. If the State is able to determine the aggregate amount of resources devoted to augmenting the instruments and the basic rate of reward to those who own them, it will have accomplished all that is necessary.

(Keynes, 1973: 378)

Keynes was happy for private companies to determine their own decisions over investment and he baulked at the state owning productive assets. He clarified that ‘the necessary measures of socialisation can be introduced gradually and without a break in the general traditions of society’ (ibid.). These ‘traditions’ included the preservation of private ownership. Keynes was content to see capitalism evolve with the greater part of the economy privately owned and was unwilling to go along with socialists who argued for collective ownership, including the formation and expansion of worker-owned firms. Gradual change under private ownership was to be preferred over any wider state or worker-control of the economy.

Keynes had written previously that he was ‘in favour of retaining as much private judgement and initiative and enterprise as possible’ (Keynes, 1933: 185) and that any ‘economic transition’ needed ‘to be accomplished slowly’ (192). While as highlighted above, he thought the protection of capitalism would beget forces that would lead to its downfall in the long-run, he overlooked how its protection (including via the upholding of the rights of capitalists to direct investment and consumption) might prevent the future he wanted to see realised. This was all the more ironic given that Keynes in his 1930 essay had seen the realisation of this (post-growth and post-capitalist) future as a reason for the working class and society in general to support capitalism against those arguing for its immediate abolition. Below we will see that, despite the shortcomings in his thought, there are still key lessons to draw from Keynes, not least in understanding how to potentially develop and advance a modern post-growth economics.

4. Learning from Keynes

To start at a general level, Keynes’s economics is relevant to post-growth economics in resisting neoclassical economics. His ideas on the non-self-equilibrating tendencies of the economy leading to the persistence of involuntary unemployment and his stress on the importance of uncertainty in creating economic instability help to expose gaps and

flaws in neoclassical economics (Lavoie, 2009). With the application of insights from Keynes and the wider Post-Keynesian economics literature, for example, there is scope to challenge mainstream environmental economics, particularly its predictions and responses to climate change (Keen, 2020).

Keynes himself wrote on issues of energy production and population growth that are also of relevance to post-growth economics debates. Firstly, he offered a critical commentary on W.J. Jevons’s take on the ‘Coal Question’ (Jevons, 1865). For Keynes, Jevons’s argument about rising coal consumption running ahead of its supply was ‘over-strained and exaggerated’ (Keynes, 1936: 519) – his sentiments in this respect can complement critical responses to Jevons’s ideas found in modern ecological economics (Clark and Bellamy Foster, 2001). Secondly, Keynes (1937) examined the relationship between population and demand, showing how the slowing of population growth could harm living standards. In this way, he addressed issues around limits to population and the distribution of income that have attracted interest among some post-growth economists (Kallis, 2019).

Following the discussion in previous sections, there are other more direct points to take from Keynes. These relate to how the future of the economy is envisioned. Keynes suggested that capitalism was not timeless but rather time-limited and how it should and would give way to better (post-capitalist) future. In making this point, he showed how capitalism inflicted harm not just on human well-being but also on nature. Growth under capitalism would be at the ultimate expense of the talents of people and the natural environment. It was important, in this sense, to see and realise futures beyond capitalism. Keynes remained resistant to socialism – he wanted capitalism to be reformed so that it could better meet the interests of people. Like socialists, however, he contemplated that capitalism would not mark the end of history and that a better future lay beyond it.²

In reimagining the future, Keynes recognised the need to limit the scale of production and consumption. He was against forms of conspicuous consumption because they created waste in society (part of the case for redistribution, again, was to reduce the wasteful consumption of the affluent). He wanted production to focus on the fulfilment of ‘absolute needs’ and encouraged the use of technology to reduce working time. Keynes favoured something like a ‘stationary state’ – in common with J.S. Mill (1965: 756), he recognised that the termination of growth would not herald the end of progress; to the contrary, it would mark the beginning of a new era of human flourishing: one reliant on leisure-seeking rather than on constant toil and money-making. Keynes also built bridges to Marx’s vision of a communist future by suggesting that a better life would entail reducing the time that people would be required to work.³ A shorter working week was a prerequisite for a better society.

² Responding to Crotty (2019) who sees ‘socialist’ elements in Keynes’s writings (see also Fuller, 2019), Konzelmann et al. (2021: 591) suggest that Keynes’s politics were ‘too subtle and complex’ to be linked to any particular ideological position. He was neither pro-capitalist nor a socialist. This interpretation has merit to the extent that it reveals the nuance in Keynes’s writings and his seeming willingness to change his position depending on the circumstances of the day. However, at least in relation to his 1930 essay, it fails to capture the (often latent) radical politics of Keynes – as the above discussion has shown, Keynes foresaw that capitalism would come to an end and that a better future existed beyond it. On this, the claim that ‘he [Keynes]... envisaged capitalism changing, but with no suggestion that it would disappear and be replaced by another economic system’ (Konzelmann et al., 2021: 598–99) can be challenged. He definitely did envisage capitalism being replaced – indeed, ironically, he was overly confident about its replacement, ignoring factors that would allow it to endure (see below).

³ Marx (1992: 959) had set out a vision of a future communist society in which technology would extend the ‘realm of freedom’ at the expense of the ‘realm of necessity’, affording workers the opportunity to self-develop in activities of their own choosing. The overlap of this vision with the one offered by Keynes is striking (Spencer, 2024).

Unlike Marx, however, Keynes thought that this society could be attained without a revolution; instead, it would be delivered by capitalism itself. He remained, as mentioned above, an overt and vocal critic of Marx.

The above comments are instructive for developing post-growth economic arguments. Firstly, they show how Keynes can teach us that the problems of capitalism (both economic and moral) are systemic rather than contingent in nature. In effect, these problems cannot be fully resolved without going beyond capitalism itself. An important lesson from Keynes's writings is to recognise the need and benefit of securing a post-capitalist future.

Secondly, Keynes rejected the focus on 'scarcity' as a universal and permanent problem of humanity (this focus was to become the hallmark of neoclassical economics following the approach set out in Lionel Robbins's famous 1932 book). Rather, he brought into focus ideas around post-scarcity and realising an economy that fulfils human needs beyond just the material dimension. Building an economy where everyone had enough to live comfortably meant growth in the short-run but it also entailed realising in the long-run more free time for people. Keynes offered a liberal argument for a post-scarcity economy – one where people would be able pursue their own ideas of the good, without the obligation to make money. The lesson of Keynes around delinking welfare improvements from growth can inspire and strengthen a modern post-growth economics.

Thirdly, there were clear ethical and political aspects to Keynes's economics. Rather than offering a dry and technical account of the economy, he saw how the economy was intimately linked to issues of ethics and politics. Ethically, there were questions over what the economy was for – Keynes saw growth as an intermediate rather than an ultimate goal and he implied that its achievement would pave the way to its negation. Equally, there were ethical questions over how capitalists acted towards workers – believing in a form of shared capitalism, Keynes wanted capitalists to pay workers higher wages and to grant them shorter working hours. This was not just the right thing to do – it was also necessary in facilitating the move to a post-growth economy that would benefit everyone in society. Politically, there were questions over how the economy distributed the rewards of growth – Keynes, as mentioned above, envisaged the sharing of the rewards of growth between capital and labour. The point of growth was ultimately to scale back the economy to activities that were essential to life. These aspects – both ethical and political – offered the basis for an economics that was antithetical to neoclassical economics. The political economy approach offered by Keynes can be seen to provide lessons for modern post-economics – in particular, it can signal the need for an economics that is relatively open and committed to change, including in the direction of a post-capitalist future.

Obviously, there are areas where it is necessary to move beyond Keynes but here lessons can still be learned from his thought. The aspect of growth as a 'Faustian bargain' can be considered in particular (Eich, 2024). Keynes suggested that growth was necessary in the short-run to create the possibility for a better long-run. He seemed not to realise, as commented above, how this bargain might persist and preclude the change he wanted to see happen.

Yet, the lesson here is not to accept the continuation of growth but to plot a way to overcome it. It is important to retain Keynes's arguments for change and his vision of a better future. This means not just engaging with Keynes's case for pro-growth reforms under capitalism but also giving due weight and attention to his ideas about transcending growth and with it, capitalism. Here there is scope to link Keynes's thought to modern ideas, including those relating to the goal of 'de-growth' (Hickel et al., 2022). Keynes's commitment to a post-growth future, in short, can be used to support a radical transformative agenda in the present.

This support, of course, still implies going beyond Keynes in respect of the reforms needed to transform the economy. Keynes's vision of a 'capitalist road' to the extinction of capitalism was far too optimistic – indeed, by seeking to protect capitalist ownership, his ideas risked

prolonging capitalism rather bringing forth its demise. He failed to see how realising his own vision of the future entailed reforms aimed at shifting ownership from capital to labour and how these reforms would face resistance.⁴

Joan Robinson (1962) suggested that, as far as reforms were concerned, Keynes was not radical enough. He was too focused on the volume of investment and employment to consider questions over their direction. In *The General Theory*, Keynes (1973: 379) declared that: 'It is determining the volume, not the direction, of actual employment that the existing system has broken down'. Robinson's criticism was that the achievement of full employment can involve 'good' and 'bad' forms of investment and employment – for example, it could involve high levels of investment and employment in the production of weapons of mass destruction. This could be at the cost of other kinds of production that were more socially useful (e.g. house-building) – indeed, it may come at the literal cost of a loss of lives if 'military Keynesian' funds an active war effort. The problem for Robinson (1962: 92: *emphasis in original*) was that Keynes 'falls into fallacy of supposing that there is some kind of *neutral* policy that a Government can pursue, to maintain effective demand in general, without having any influence upon any particular demand for anything'. In this case, Keynes could have supported environmentally destructive production if it created jobs. He could have also supported, as he did if only half-jokingly, the employment of the unemployed in state-sponsored and socially useless hole-digging (Keynes, 1973: 129).

Robinson's argument was that Keynes had overlooked how the state needed to direct its spending more deliberately and precisely (planning had to be aimed at socially useful ends), and how the direction of investment and employment mattered for the success of the economy (including in its capacity to support meaningful productive activities). Robinson also hinted at how wider goals such as ecological sustainability would require the state to direct investment and employment. Her criticisms showed how the pursuit of a post-growth and post-capitalist economy would entail deeper reforms than Keynes had been willing to admit.

Some modern writers have interpreted Keynes as a supporter of 'open experimentation' (Eich, 2025: 377). While the future would bring about a move away from capitalism, its realisation would entail people 'experimenting in the arts of life as well as the activities of purpose' (Keynes, 1963a: 373). Yet, evidently, Keynes's openness to experiments was limited. For example, he ruled out experimentation in state ownership of productive assets. He also rejected socialist reforms aimed at replacing capitalist forms of ownership. Keynes's support for reforms remained bounded by the capitalist present. Ironically, this support has distracted from the powerful case that Keynes made for thinking about and realising a post-growth economy beyond capitalism.

5. 'Green Keynesianism': Squaring a circle

One aspect where Keynes's name has been invoked recently, if not always in a fully consistent way, is in relation to notions of 'Green Growth' or a 'Green New Deal' (Pettifor, 2019). Here certain kinds of growth have been encouraged to forestall or reduce the effects of climate change. Instead of focusing just on any growth, there is a focus on building more resilient and less carbon intensive infrastructure (including energy production and transport systems), which would enable the economy to grow at a more sustainable level. People could also be employed by the state to remedy coastal erosion, build new flood defences and re-wild the countryside. The employment added could, in line with Keynes's ideas, reduce unemployment; however, it could also help to bring about a more habitable planet while progressing well-

⁴ Keynes differed from his contemporary, Michal Kalecki (1943), in ignoring the political constraints on policymaking, including policies in support of full employment.

being in jobs that are meaningful.

'Green Keynesianism' suggests a key role for governments in managing and countering climate change. It goes against more catastrophic views of the future that suggest society is doomed to face deep hardship and potentially a high loss of life (both human and non-human) – instead, it suggests ways to respond collectively and via state action to a warming planet. It also offers a basis to plan for the future – it places an onus on governments to develop policies that will help secure an economy that not only ensures full employment but also protects people and the environment. It revives the idea of Keynes of responding to crises by managing the economy directly.

The merits and demerits of Green Keynesianism can be debated (Eich, 2024). On the plus side, it provides some room for discussion about what kind of policy responses might be needed to ensure a more sustainable economy. It can help to expose some of the dilemmas (particularly faced by the state) around re-orientating production and consumption – it can also bring to light the direct tensions in harnessing the support and investment of the private sector (including private finance) in achieving a 'green transition'. On the negative side, Green Keynesianism puts out of sight the Keynes of the long-run – specifically, it misses the stress Keynes himself placed on overcoming growth and putting the sustainability of society and the planet ahead of money-making linked both to wage-labour and capital accumulation.

The point is that Green Keynesianism by itself reproduces the same obsession with growth that has contributed to climate change. It fails to recognise how there might be a need to see a future beyond growth and how Keynesianism itself might entail going beyond a growth economy. It sustains, in short, a narrow view of Keynes – i.e. the Keynes of the perpetual short-run – and misses the rich vision that Keynes offered of a post-growth and post-capitalist long-run.

For post-growth economics, the criticism of Green Keynesianism is that it is too conservative. As mentioned above, it reproduces only one part of Keynes and misses another more radical aspect of his thought. A new post-growth, post-Keynesianism is needed in this sense – one that recognises the need to re-orientate and redirect production, while advancing the conditions for a well-being economy beyond capitalism.

The idea of 'saving the planet' is not about protecting the world as it is but rather about transforming it (Mann and Wainwright, 2018). It means disturbing the existing order of things, inclusive of how the economy is owned and controlled. It means taking on vested interests and putting the needs of people before those of profitmaking (Hofferberth, 2025). It means taking Keynes's long-run vision seriously but also rethinking radically the conditions for its creation and reproduction. It also means not waiting for this vision to happen, but actively seeking its realisation, including by mobilising collective support and action for it.

On this last point, E.F. Schumacher (1973) can be referenced as a critic of Keynes (Chick, 2013; Eich, 2024). While he sided with Keynes in developing an ethical critique of capitalism, he also rejected some of Keynes's ideas. In particular, he resisted Keynes's commitment to growth in the short-run and rebuked the broader pro-growth orientation of Keynesianism of whatever hue. If the morals of capitalism were wrong, as Keynes had established in writings, then they needed to be resisted in the short-run rather than be tolerated in the hope that they would pave the way to a better long-run. The morally damaging effects of capitalism had to be repelled for all time (Schumacher, 1973: 24–25). Schumacher's own brand of 'Buddhist economics' went further than Keynes's economics in rejecting growth under capitalism. Instead, he proposed a radical refocusing of the economy around meaningful work and leisure. This proposition overlaps with modern post-growth visions, though with a greater focus on the remaking of work (i.e. turning it from drudgery into a joyful activity) (Mair et al., 2020).

In summary, it can be argued that Green Keynesianism has the right goal but not necessarily the right approach. It aims to establish a sustainable economy but retains the belief of growing the economy as a way to avert an ecological disaster. It captures the need for change but lacks

the ability to see how change – including addressing the climate emergency – requires society to rethink the economic system in ways that conventional Keynesianism will not allow. Ironically, the limits of Green Keynesianism can be exposed by returning to some critical aspects of Keynes's own thought around the need to think beyond growth. At the same time, however, there is scope to develop this thought, both by drawing on the ideas of other writers like Schumacher and by inputting ideas from modern post-growth economics.

6. Conclusion

There are different versions of Keynes. This is because his writings ranged across many different subjects and also altered over time. Any attempt to interpret Keynes, therefore, invites controversy and possibly criticism. Notwithstanding this point, the contention of this paper is that there are elements of Keynes's economics that are consistent with a post-growth economics. These elements are clearest in an essay Keynes published in 1930. Unfortunately, he never revisited this essay, but there are grounds for thinking that the ideas in it influenced Keynes in his later work.

In the essay as well as in some subsequent writings, Keynes stressed the need to grow the economy but he also emphasised how growth would pave the way to a post-growth economy. He rejected the idea of a constantly growing economy and instead favoured a move to an economy that would support growth in human artistic achievements and which allowed nature to flourish. His criticisms of growth focused on its association with money-making and its privileging of work and consumption over leisure. He looked forward to a future where people would be able to live freer and more nourishing lives, without growth and without capitalism. This was apparent when he referred to the merits of 'national self-sufficiency' and when he reflected critically in *The General Theory* on the moral progress that would be achieved by ending the desire for money-making.

There remain weaknesses in Keynes's thought. He implied that capitalism would sow the seeds of its own downfall when history has shown that it has persisted. Keynes underestimated the extent to which capitalism would create the conditions for its own reproduction and thwart the move to the long-run that he himself coveted.

Despite these weaknesses, Keynes's ideas retain utility. In particular, his vision of overcoming capitalism can help to invigorate and galvanise modern post-growth economics debates. His visionary thinking can help to highlight the radical intent of a post-growth agenda. It can also help to underline the urgency of its realisation.

Presently, Keynes has a marginal place in discussions about post-growth. He is most likely to be focused upon in policy approaches advocating growth that is beneficial for the environment. These approaches – often dubbed Green Keynesianism – suggest the advantages of growth in the short-run but the danger is that they end up supporting growth on an ongoing basis. This leads to a loss of focus on the goal of post-growth. This is bad not just for promoting a more sustainable economic future but also for restating and renewing the long-run vision of Keynes. The message of this paper is that, in developing modern post-growth economics, there are still things to learn from Keynes. Learning here can also include seeing and thinking beyond Keynes, albeit in ways that are consistent with his commitment to and demand for a post-growth and post-capitalist future.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

David A. Spencer: Investigation, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

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Data availability

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