

Funding the Future

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Light is often treated as something sentimental at Christmas. That is a mistake.

Light is not decoration. It is understanding, care, energy and life itself.

In this final talk in my Christmas series on light, I draw together the ideas explored over the past few days to argue that light is a public good — one that modern economics routinely ignores. When societies withdraw energy, time and care from people and institutions, decay follows. Austerity is not efficiency. It is the systematic removal of light from systems that need constant maintenance to survive.

I explain why ignorance is dangerous, why confusion benefits power, and why economic myths persist when they are left deliberately in the dark. I also explore how modern capitalism steals light in subtler ways: through long hours, artificial rhythms, permanent urgency, and the denial of rest, daylight and recovery, all of which damage health, wellbeing and social cohesion.

This is not a religious argument. It is a reflection rooted in economics, care and the shared insights of many wisdom traditions that recognise vulnerability, dependence and mutual responsibility. Light appears where people care for one another, and choosing care is choosing light.

This talk asks a simple but urgent question: will we design our economy and our society to keep the lights on, or will we continue to accept neglect, exhaustion and decay as normal?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8uHyLHcJ-c?si=GqjKBdksJ0exDdma>

This is the audio version:

<https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=j4nvc-1a02c21-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&>

This is the transcript:

This is the last of my talks about light that I've been putting out over Christmas, and I want to pull together the themes that I've been talking about.

At this time of the year, many cultures do, of course, talk about light, and that's not because it is sentimental to do so, nor is it because we're at the winter solstice alone. What we are talking about is the fact that scarcity sharpens our understanding of what matters, and light is precious at this moment precisely because it is threatened.

Light is much more than to do with decoration then. We surround ourselves with lights at Christmas. The whole of the Christmas story from the Wise Men onwards is about being led by the light. Candles, streetlights, trees, windows, we put light everywhere, and this isn't trivial, but it is a reminder that light reassures us and that the darkness unsettles us.

Light is, as I mentioned right at the start of this series, understanding. I've argued throughout it that light represents awareness, enlightenment, quite literally.

In contrast to be in the darkest, to be confused, frightened, and powerless.

Learning is the act of turning towards light, and it allows us to see systems as they really are and to refuse comforting illusions.

This, of course, is why it is so important in my thinking, and this is why ignorance is dangerous. Societies in the dark are easy to manipulate. Fear thrives when understanding is absent. Economic myths survive because they are poorly lit, and confusion benefits power. Politicians love that, and they hate light because light challenges the very basis of the power on which many of them rule.

Light is seen as hope in most wisdom traditions, and I think that is the important message of Christmas, because let's be clear, Christmas is not just a Christian story. This is a time of the year when every major wisdom tradition has a festival because we're talking about the winter solstice, and the return of hope, and light in that sense provides us with reassurance that meaning survives both hardship and darkness, that care is possible even when circumstances are bleak, and that hope is not naive, but necessary.

These traditions do not celebrate domination. They emphasise vulnerability and

dependence and mutual responsibility. What they say is that light appears where people care for one another. But light in this context is not just a metaphor; it is the source of life itself, and let's not forget that. All our food, our work and production depend upon light. Labour is transformed sunlight. Economics ignores this at its peril, but too often it does. Modern economics tries to abstract our economic system away from life itself. It treats people as if we are costs. It treats energy as an ultimately costless input into the economic system, and it treats growth as an end in itself, and that, of course, has a limit to it, which that economic thinking does not recognise. The result is that this detachment of economics from light creates harm.

Without energy, everything decays; we know that. Entropy dictates it. Bodies, buildings, institutions; care is the work of resisting that decay and care in this context, and in reality, is applied light. And as I've argued earlier in this series, austerity is the opposite of this process of care. Austerity withdraws energy from systems. It accelerates breakdown. It leaves people exhausted, and then it blames them for failing. But this is not efficiency. It is neglect.

The counterbalance to this is not only the light, but it's also recognising that human beings need light to heal from the processes of austerity that have been imposed upon them. They need light to heal physically, psychologically, and socially. Denying people time, rest, and daylight does damage their health, and that is what neoliberalism does to us. We now know this to be true. It's undeniable; medical science shows it.

And we're suffering the theft of light as a consequence. Modern capitalism does that in subtle ways. It does it by imposing long hours, especially at this time of the year. It imposes artificial rhythms on us. Sometimes that is about staying up late when our natural cycle should be to go to bed with sunset. It could be about working on shifts, and it is also about creating a sense of permanent urgency when we do have a need for rest and to go slow, to stop even, and just literally watch the world go by. As a consequence, modern capitalism steals the process of light and time from us in a way that is not progressive.

Light in this context is a public good. It shouldn't be a privilege, although it is in far too many places, which only the very wealthy enjoy.

Nor should time be that privilege.

Access to daylight, green space and rest is political. Urban design, working hours and housing matter then. Care must be designed into society. It's a theme I talk about often, but this theme is new. I haven't talked about light in this way before, but I think it's essential.

This is the question that Christmas quietly asks of us. Christmas does not ask us to believe anything specific, in my opinion, because there are many faith traditions and many interpretations of every single faith tradition that exists. What it does ask us to

do is something different, and which all of those faith traditions, I think, do in their own particular way, and that is to notice fragility. To notice vulnerability, to notice the need, to care, to slow down, to recognise dependence, and to choose care over indifference, and that's what Christmas is about.

This is the real choice we face. The question is not whether the world is dark; it often is. The question is whether we accept responsibility to bring understanding to keep our systems functioning and to care for one another. To choose the light, in other words, to keep the lights on. That means we should be investing in people, maintaining institutions, and valuing care and resisting decay. This might be quiet work that goes on behind the scenes. It may not be glamorous, even, but it is absolutely essential.

This is the choice we need to make. Light is not neutral. Who we illuminate matters. Who we ignore matters just as much. A politics of care is a politics of light. It refuses abandonment. It is a positive choice to illuminate the dark, to bring the light into it, not as a spectacle, but as a presence, as understanding and as care. This is the responsibility that this season has reminded us of, and that is why I hope you had a good Christmas, and that's why I chose to talk about light this Christmas, because light is something that we can take with us everywhere all the time and appreciate.

Go out there, enjoy it. Take a walk. Just sense the well-being that is generated as a consequence. If you can't walk, get someone to wheel you to the window or whatever it might be. But the point is to get your share of the light because that's the message of Christmas. And thanks for listening to or viewing this series. We've enjoyed your company.

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