

Beyond the “growth” doctrine

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“Society has been locked into thought dominated by progressivist growth economics; the tyranny of these has made imaginative thinking outside the box impossible. [...] But our ever increasing consumption is not sustainable; sooner or later we will have to give it up.”

Serge Latouche¹

“Economic Growth” is an oft-repeated mantra in our times. A majority of contemporary political and economic elites, right wingers as well as many leftists² still adhere to the growth doctrine neglecting its many disadvantages.

Destruction of the social fabric

Growth-based capitalist societies are dominated by consumerism, degrading the citizens into atomized, apolitical individuals that care only about themselves. As Erik Olin Wright rightly observes³, the dynamics of capitalist profit-driven market competition impose a strong pressure on capitalist economies to grow in total output, not just in productivity. Profits are made from selling goods and services and the more a capitalist firm sells, the higher the profit. Capitalist firms are therefore constantly attempting to increase their production and their sales. Enormous resources are devoted to this specific task, especially in the form of advertising and marketing strategies, but also in terms of government policies that systematically facilitate expansion of output. In sum, this creates a strong trajectory of growth biased towards increased production.

In a growth-based capitalist society, free time is given zero value because it does not result in a commodity that can be sold on the market. A dynamic of ever-increasing consumption supported by cultural forms creates alienated and mechanistic individuals detached from the collectivity. In other words: humans capable of autonomous thought are transformed into mindless machines turning heteronomously the giant cogwheel of economic growth in the name of growth itself.

Increasing inequalities

Increasing social inequalities is another negative effect that constant economic growth has on society. According to Jason Hickel, London School of Economics, the world’s richest 1 percent have increased their profits⁴ by 60 percent in the last 20 years, while global economic inequality is in its peak for the same period — a period during which the global economy has been constantly growing. These negative effects of the growth doctrine were already noticed in 1897 by Errico Malatesta, who in his book *At the Café* wrote⁵:

“These evils [social inequality, poverty, unemployment] generally are more intense in countries where the industry is more developed, except if the workers themselves didn’t manage, through organizing at the working place, resistance or revolt, to achieve better living conditions.”

¹ mondediplo.com

² Ibid

³ Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*. 2010. Verso Books. p66

⁴ www.aljazeera.com

⁵ Errico Malatesta: *At the Café: Conversations on Anarchism*, Freedom Press 2005, p. 30

More than a century later, George Monbiot maintains that⁶,

“the old excuse, that we must trash the planet to help the poor, simply does not pass. For a few decades of extra enrichment for those who already possess more money than they know how to spend, the prospects of everyone else who will live on this earth are diminished.”

The doctrine of constant economic growth contributes to increase of inequality and injustice, and the wealth that is produced is often illusory: even for the rich, this kind of society is neither comfortable nor pleasant, but is, on the contrary, permeated by cynicism and violence.

Perhaps it is time to start thinking beyond the growth doctrine and to reject the infamous thatcherian slogan that “there is no alternative” to capitalism. Instead, we should strive towards quality rather than quantity and cooperation rather than competition.

A society beyond economism

In order to be able to imagine and to create a society that is not based on constant economic growth, we have to move beyond economism, that is, narrow mechanistic and consumerist thinking. This means to oppose in theory and in practice the dominance that the economy has in all spheres of modern life as well as in our minds and to subordinate it to the political, in order to reflect real human needs and desires.

An alternative to both capitalism and the nation state, is the autonomous society. According to Cornelius Castoriadis, an autonomous society cannot be established except through the autonomous activity of the collectivity⁷. Such an activity presupposes that people strongly value something other than the possibility of buying a shiny new gadget. On a deeper level, it presupposes that the passion for direct democracy, freedom and public affairs will take the place of distraction, cynicism, conformism, and consumerism. Also it requires the replacement of the national and global centralized institutions of governance with the establishment of autonomous self-managed polities⁸.

An autonomous society is based on solidarity, equality, self-determination and democracy. The needs of the society are determined by the citizens and not by artificial market mechanisms and dogmas. Large-scale polluting and depletable energy sources will be replaced by small-scale renewable ones, aimed at local self-rule and sustainability. This presupposes, among other things, that the “economic” cease to be the dominant or exclusive value.

The price to pay for liberty is the destruction of the economy as a central value and its replacement with the passion for political participation. Otherwise, the price humanity will have to pay for the wasteful consumerist lifestyle that the growth doctrine promotes will be much higher. Many scientists warns⁹ that the Earth will not be able to maintain for much longer the conditions for life as we know it if our economies continue to function in the same way. A growing number of people however, are now starting to get dissatisfied with this consumerist lifestyle, since, as it appears, constant consumption is not good enough reason to live.

⁶ www.monbiot.com

⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis, Democracy and Relativism. 2013. p59 (available online at www.notbored.org)

⁸ en.wikipedia.org

⁹ www.extremetech.com

Self-limitation

Contemporary techno science is reflected in the famous slogan, “if it can be done, it will be done, no matter what the consequences.” This logic is strongly intertwined with the growth doctrine. The essence of this way of thinking is that it does not matter whether we need something or not; a reason will be made for creating it and means found for selling it.

Castoriadis poses the question of self-limitation¹⁰ of the advances in technology and knowledge, not for religious reasons or for totalitarian ones (he points at the fact that Stalin decreed that the theory of relativity is anti-proletarian), but for reasons that have to do with political choice, that is, with thinking. In other words: to break with the heteronomy of techno science that is dominating contemporary society’s imaginary and to replace it with an autonomous thinking that opens up many horizons. The emergence of citizens capable of individual and collective conscious self-limitation is of crucial importance to taking society beyond the growth doctrine. This can only be done by common people through opening spaces of participation and emancipation that can embed responsibility and autonomy in every sphere of human life.

¹⁰ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Democracy and Relativism*. 2013. p62 (available online at www.notbored.org)

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