



Growthmania and the Culture Gap

Paul R. Ehrlich

In my last post I discussed what has long been clear to all who wished to look, that the current growthmanic economic system cannot be sustained. The excuses for attempting perpetual growth in measures of well-being that are based on a combination of increased population size and per-capita consumption will not stand up to scrutiny. One excuse is that there is no need to worry because the market will take care of problems by itself should biophysical limits be approached. This is perhaps the most interesting idiocy; it basically means “internalizing all the negative externalities” – finding ways to compensate for costs imposed on those not involved in commercial transactions. And these unaccounted-for externalities are ubiquitous and growing in magnitude. Accounting for them might include automobile manufacturers paying compensation to all people suffering respiratory diseases originating from tailpipe emissions, perhaps by paying a special tax (“Pigovian tax”) that finances government health care or other health-related social goods or services. Or making car owners pay taxes for the loss of biodiversity, climate disruption, loss of esthetic values, etc. imposed on all of today’s societies and many future societies by their activities. Such solutions are sometimes employed, but you can see even in these simple examples that the basic internalization program involves great difficulties.

I suspect that if all externalities, especially those imposing social costs on future generations, were internalized, growth probably would already have stopped long ago. But sadly, it’s not possible (especially politically), even in obvious cases such as those discussed above. And even if there were political will (which there is not – the word “tax” is politically toxic to many people and politicians), externalities like the social costs to future generations of the impacts of climate disruption or population and species extinctions are both impossible to compute and (if they could be calculated) likely impossible to compensate. Thus, it is not reasonable or intellectually honest to rely on the market to address these externalities adequately.

In addition to market self-regulation, growthmaniacs offer other fundamentally implausible arguments for the possibility of eternal growth, contending that technological miracles, growth restricted to services, substitution of made capital and labor for natural capital, and so on will get around the physical limits of our finite world. The arguments often require

repealing the laws of nature. For instance, those laws tell us that even service economies can't grow perpetually; services involve energy mobilization, physical infrastructure to support the services, and populations of people to be served, expansion of all of which already show clear signs of ecological constraints. Even growth in knowledge faces, at least in the extreme, physical limits, since energy and materials are used to make and run the brains, books, computers (or robots) required to generate it, distribute it, and store it.

How to make well-being, however actually defined, grow in the future (or at least not decline markedly) is the toughest challenge we face. The “degrowth” movement¹ represents one proposed answer to this challenge, but it and related ideas of ecological economics have gained almost no traction against the old “growth is the answer” paradigm. One can imagine if humane population shrinkage and a reduction of consumption among the rich could be started soon, and the human enterprise dramatically reduced in scale over the next century or so, there might be a hope of keeping well-being (newly defined) growing for a long time. It might be possible if strenuous efforts were made to counter the most serious environmental and social problems. A world with fewer people, with a much more equitable division of resources, a sensible economic system, and a new definition of well-being might persist for millennia or more.

People could enjoy sex, good food, learning, natural beauty, sports, and helping each other, and feel better about it all the time. They would not lack for challenges. The most serious would likely be dealing with the inevitable decline in quality and safe access to non-renewable resources. An ongoing program of technological advancement would be required to maintain the well-being of such a society, since human beings tend to exploit the low-hanging resource fruit first.² But at the least it would seem that such a society could hold together much longer than one like today's on its business-as-usual trajectory – if ways can be found to suppress resource wars (possibly nuclear) and terrorist acts (also possibly nuclear). No small order, but there seems no other choice.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/growthmania-and-the-culture-gap/>

¹ E.g., <http://slate.me/1fA1ZQR>

² Davidson DJ, Andrews J, Pauly D. 2014. The effort factor: Evaluating the increasing marginal impact of resource extraction over time. *Global Environmental Change* <http://bit.ly/1gz9ewG>.