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Economic Growth is a meme – a learned idea that we can change and mature

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Recently I came across a half page ad in a major newspaper on my morning ferry commute: *“Rubber Bands Have Feelings Too – a screenplay by Helina Clarke.”* From Advertising Standards Canada, the byline read *“creativity is subjective, the truth isn’t.”* I laughed out loud. Brilliant! Truth in advertising is a key challenge in the sustainability movement as the pressures for creative greenwashing are everywhere. If only it were as easy as the ad proclaimed. The struggle to represent sustainability honestly is one reason that I joined the [Qualicum Institute \(QI\)](#), which recently became [a node](#) of the [Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere \(MAHB\)](#). These organizations, along with others, are working to demonstrate the clash between economic growth and ecological overshoot in order to prevent societal collapse.

Although economic growth is a cultural meme of our own creation—a malignant social construct, as Bill Rees would call it—the tradition is passed on as if it is unchangeable. It is our current economic model that serves as the overarching strategy dominating our communities and overriding the way we interact with the natural world. The trouble is, economic growth is a belief system and set of practices that aims to achieve—every day—ever more goods and services, forever. This requires evermore raw materials and energy from the economy of Nature, not a limitless source. While growth may have served many of us well, we’ve been bumping into ecological limits for some time now and unless we discover a continual supply of resource rich planets that we can use, we’re in trouble. While greening economic growth may, over the short term, seem to improve some aspects of our damage to the planet, it won’t be enough. Green growth like many other environmental initiatives in our struggle towards reining in the human endeavour, still falls under the umbrella of growth.

Sam Harris, neuroscientist and author of the *Moral Landscape*,ⁱ notes that memes are different than genes in that memes are communicated. Memes do not travel with the gametes of their human hosts. “*The survival of memes therefore is not dependent on their conferring some actual benefit on individuals and groups.*” And here I emphasize Harris’ words, “*It is quite possible for people to traffic in ideas and other cultural products that diminish their well-being for centuries on end.*”

If economic growth is the trafficked idea, the cultural products that are pushed as part of the growth meme include things such as a debt based monetary system, a globalized economy where the necessities for life may travel across the world instead of being produced locally, policies to prop up fossil fuel production and all the jargon of a “green” economy. The resulting offshoots of the “good life,” such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss—to the extent that the loss is being termed the sixth mass extinction—actually diminish our well-being, to put it mildly.

In British Columbia, the QI has come face to face with growth as an unquestioned assumption during public consultation processes for local government community policy documents (e.g., Official Community Plans and Regional Growth Strategies). For the most part, *automatically planning for growth* is viewed as a requirement of the *Local Government Act* (provincial regulation under which local governments operate). That interpretation of the *Local Government Act* means it would be illegal for a community or a region to set and maintain limits to growth through land use designations that are based on ecological carrying capacity. In other words, sustainability would be illegal!

With this in mind, the QI sought legal advice through a foremost lawyer specializing in local government matters. Acting in his capacity as an author and lecturer on British Columbia planning law and practice, and a member of the College of Fellows of the Canadian Institute of Planners, the lawyer replied that this provision does *not* mean that growth must be accommodated even if growth wants to come. He provided a number of examples on how limits to growth might be established.

While tackling growth as a legal requirement remains a challenge, there are many examples where local governments in British Columbia are working in a positive direction. For instance, agricultural plans that focus on food security and regional production capacity are becoming common place. Urban Forest Management Plans are another example of recognizing the services that nature provides as *living infrastructure* (e.g. stormwater management). There are also efforts to set aside lands around community watersheds in order to protect drinking water quality and quantity – an unquestioningly important endeavour. And one community, Qualicum Beach, has actually recognized limits with the following inclusion in their Official Community Plan (OCP): “*Carefully managed growth and development while maintaining a sustainable and high quality of life based on the land use build-out policies contained in this OCP that project a potential capacity of approximately 12,000 people.*”

Recognizing that economic growth is a cultural meme means recognizing it is a product of our creation that can be changed in favour of a new system. There is every reason to create a new meme

– a system that recognizes limits, can better manage our less productive tendencies such as greed, territoriality and aspects of denial, while at the same time capitalizing on our strengths such as empathy and cooperation.

To do this, we need to develop skills that involve stepping outside of a system in order to better evaluate its weaknesses. Theoretical physicist, Douglas Hofstadter, describes this process elegantly using a simple word puzzle that he gives his readers to solve.ⁱⁱ In the process of working on the puzzle it becomes clear that two types of thinking are possible. The first mode involves the application of the rules that are given in an attempt to find a solution; this is working “within” the system. The second mode comes after some time, when one begins to notice elements about the puzzle itself (for instance, that a certain combination of letters can never be achieved); this is thinking “about” the system. With respect to economic growth, applying a myriad of green initiatives is working within the system. Recognizing that growing something forever collides with basic physical and biological principles is thinking about the system.

Kohlberg describes a similar process in his psychological theory of moral reasoning.ⁱⁱⁱ The theory contains six stages of moral development founded on concerns with justice, and at each stage of development there is a greater ability to respond to moral dilemmas than at the previous stage. At the most developed stages five and six, one must step outside of the current system in order to think about solutions to moral dilemmas that are universal in nature. Also called the level of post-conventional morality, thinking at this level requires an ability and willingness to step back from society and its existing rules to consider the rights and values that it ought to uphold. Universal principles are defined in order to achieve justice for all humanity.

Economic growth is a cultural meme, and while it’s a pervasive meme that makes it hard to see our way clear, it’s not in our genes and can be changed. There are many other ways of being if we are willing to step outside of the system for a moment and think about solutions. The QI, as [a node](#) of the MAHB, is currently exploring ways to best challenge and change this meme. One idea calls for great thinkers, those not afraid of having big, unorthodox, and outside-the-system thoughts, to come together to market a new meme—one to replace our dominance over nature and denial of science-based limits in favour of a system that operates on shared, limited abundance, and universal empathy for others, other creatures, and the world we share.

ⁱ S. Harris. 2010. *The Moral Landscape: How Science can Determine Human Values*. New York Free Press.

ⁱⁱ D.R. Hofstadter. 1979. *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid. A Metaphorical Fugue on Minds and Machines in the Spirit of Lewis Carroll*. Penguin Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Kohlberg's_stages_of_moral_development#Further_stages.

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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/economic-growth-meme/>