

Conference proceedings

Change without fear

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The degrowth concept challenges deep-rooted notions. In the eyes of most people growth still signifies progress. This must be recognized in order to turn the world in a sustainable direction. Our common culture, media, the political debate and the daily talk of people are founded in an understanding of economic growth as positive, just like people enjoy seeing how children grow up, or vegetables grow in the garden or trees in the forest.

We must also understand that political leaders may be aware of the dangers of tomorrow but are unable to act as long as people fear what a change may mean. Basically, this is why the Copenhagen summit on climate change failed.

The facts of global warming, deforestation, water scarcities etc. have been known for a long time in academic and activist circles, and certainly by us “prophets of sustainability”. But the awareness of the general public and media is mainly a result of the recent “climate crisis”. The political system has reacted to the crisis by taking limited steps, far from sufficient. Some measures may even convey the false message that the situation is under control.

The new knowledge and the steps taken or suggested have also rallied special interests that oppose them and try to block further change. The climate sceptics have been very active; the lobbyists in Washington, Brussels etc are working overtime. Many products have also been superficially changed in an effort to cover up the fact that by and large, business goes on as usual.

But the rallying of all these forces also indicates that the claims of the prophets of sustainability can no longer be ignored. Their issues have gained a place in politics, forcing politicians and experts to take a stand on them. I note, e.g., that professors of agriculture now debate eco-farming, claiming that this will deplete the soil of nutrients and that the harvests will not suffice to feed the world. True or false, this engagement is a good sign. Similarly, wind power is no longer regarded as a far off possibility; the current issue is rather the technical issue of feeding the variable output into the power grid. The engineers involved are not opposed, they are trying to contribute to the solutions. Sustainability issues are entering the “big debate” – except when it comes to discussing “economic growth”.

But the warnings are often accompanied by frightening visions of a very bleak future. Sometimes from those who sound the warnings, but more often from those who oppose change. These are pictures of dire poverty – that we will be “living on dirt floors and chopping our own firewood”. Evidently many people are frightened and there is a risk that such messages backfire and create mistrust rather than activity.

It is important to stress that the warnings are issued for a business-as-usual development. So far they are probably correct: if we do not change direction, we are facing large, probably devastating problems. But if we heed the warnings and do change direction, we may find satisfying solutions. As academics and activists our most important challenge now is to demonstrate the possibilities, not to cause more alarm. We must show not only what needs to be done but also that it can be done without undue hardship. And that our society should not fear change but go about it resolutely. We must make it clear to the public and politicians that it is possible to create a good life for everyone in the rich countries during the next decades. Some of the comforts and habits of today would have to be given up but psychological and social research shows that it need not make us unhappier. And it can probably be done within the fundamental rules of the market economy. But some conditions have to change and that already challenges special interests. They tend to scare the public with dismal scenarios and obstruct necessary adjustments and it is vital that such propoganda is offset with solid facts.

I will outline this new task by presenting a few basic issues: the implications of technology, the meaning of a reasonable living standard/income versus less work and the required adaptation in daily life with examples from two central areas: mobility and housing.

In the first place I trust that technology can go a long way to solve the problems of resource restraints and emissions. There are innumerable examples of everyday improvements in efficiency which can make our products lighter, smarter and less resource demanding. The common references to nanotechnology as a saviour may be exaggerated, compared to the role of IT or the “green revolution” in the past, because it offers no new field but it may contribute to the advances in established fields. More important is to ensure that the improvements in efficiency are turned into lasting savings, avoiding the rebound effect, which often has offset previous technological advantages. One example is the Toyota Corolla, which has become 60% more fuel efficient over its lifespan – if calculated per weight of the car! But including the 80% increase in weight from 1967 to 2008, the resulting gain in performance is very limited.

In the second place, we need to discuss what a reasonable living standard is. Evidently people in the rich countries by and large enjoy a very decent living standard. We have enough to eat, we live in rather spacious housing and we enjoy a high mobility. We must stop grasping for more. The higher productivity at work, which we can expect, should rather be transformed into shorter working hours. This appears to be the most practicable way to stem the tide of overconsumption. In fact more leisure is perhaps the best reform politicians can offer in the next decades. If we eventually run out of natural resources, we may again have to work harder but this is a question for the coming generations. We must step on the brake.

We must also give more attention to the distribution of incomes. In the last decades the gaps between rich and poor have grown almost everywhere. This leads to luxury consumption and luxurious habits way beyond what the planet can endure and must be curbed, not just because what the very rich do is harmful to the environment but also because it sets a model for the rest of us. I can only agree with Herman Daly who has suggested that the income span must be contracted.

In the third place, after technological improvement and shorter hours and more equality, we have to adjust our daily life.

A Swedish study of how to limit global warming to 2°C suggests e.g. that the driving range must be curbed with about 30% (Åkerman et. al. 2007). George Monbiot, in a book focussed on CO₂-reductions, proposes a reorganisation of shopping so that goods in the future may be delivered at home rather than procured in shopping centres (he also suggests crash programmes to improve housing standards and a renewal of the energy production system) (Monbiot 2006).

Neither of these measures seems to impede mobility seriously. It is always possible to choose a more economical car. Studies of car pools indicate that participants cut down on the number of trips and mileage, presumably because they have to make a conscious choice for each trip. Another survey indicates that a great part of car drivers actually could choose other travel modes without serious negative effects – what prevents them from doing so is often ingrained habits and sheer convenience (Folksam 2008).

Monbiot, however, expects strong restrictions in air travel, much like the Swedish study. This would mean a reduction in holiday trips as well as business trips, perhaps the largest change in lifestyle that we would have to suffer.

Housing is a major sustainability problem for a number of reasons: large energy consumption, slow renewal and technical development and slow turnover because people get rooted. The housing situation varies between European countries, from just 2 people per dwelling in Scandinavia to nearly 3 in some countries. In Sweden nearly half the population today lives “spaciously” (meaning more than one room/capita, living room and kitchen uncounted); the situation in similar countries is probably similar. If one could achieve a smoother adaptation to the needs of the households in the existing housing stock, it should go a long way to satisfy people’s future needs (even if continued urbanisation requires more housing).

All of this means changes. My – very tentative – conclusion is still that they are not of a magnitude that should disrupt our ways of life. We would still be able to eat well, live comfortably, socialize and make

essential trips. It need not take us back to pre-modern conditions. All of this will be vigorously opposed. I like to think that I will in the future, still be able to take my daily shower and have a beer in the evening. But in a different perspective, the changes will also mean job losses, business losses and large challenges for governments. These are the political issues to be addressed.

To conclude: we have to reduce the fear of change in the public debate. We must advance from warnings to showing how to fare in a fair world: how to use technology wisely, how switch from more production to more leisure etc. Political leaders and their voters need to know all those things in order to offset the fear that the prospect of change always arouses.

References

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