

LMD print

subscribe now!

Le Monde diplomatique

english edition mondediplo.com

subscribe

back issues

search

maps

December 2003

► Contents

Quagmire and nightmare
 Russia's robber barons *
 'The Russians forget and accept everything' *
 Iraq: the fear of chaos *
 Who can resist the US? *
 Israel-Palestine: an exit strategy via Geneva *
 Why the initiative is so significant *
 Afghanistan: emirate of Herat
 Protectorate of Kosovo *
 A guide to nation-building
 Brazil: no economy without democracy
 Brazil: seeds of wealth *
 France: health as a commodity *
 International law: justice as a commodity
 US cities: the poor evicted *
 The world downscaled *
 Panama's home waters *
 At last, generic anti-AIDS medicine for sub-Saharan Africa

WOULD THE WEST ACTUALLY BE HAPPIER WITH LESS?

The world downscaled

What if the very idea of growth - accumulating riches, destroying the environment and worsening social inequality - is a trap? Maybe we need to aim to create a society that is based on quality not quantity, on cooperation and not competition.

By **Serge Latouche**

PRESIDENT George Bush told leading meteorologists last year: "Economic growth is the key to environmental progress, because it is growth that provides the resources for investment in clean technologies. Growth is the solution, not the problem" (1). That is not only a rightwing position: the principle is shared by much of the left. Even many anti-globalisation activists see growth as the solution for the world, expecting it to create jobs and provide for a fairer distribution of wealth.

Fabrice Nicolino, an environment reporter, recently resigned from the Parisian weekly *Politis* (which is close to the anti-globalisation movement) after an internal dispute over pension reform, an issue that has dominated French politics (2). The debate that followed illustrates the left's malaise (3). As a reader put it, the conflict happened because Nicolino had "dared to go against an orthodoxy common to almost the entire French political class, which says the only way to happiness must be through more growth, more productivity, more purchasing power and more consumption" (4).

After several decades of frenetic wastefulness storm clouds threaten. As our climate becomes increasingly unstable, we are fighting oil wars. Water wars will no doubt follow (5), along with pandemics and the extinction of essential plant and animal

species through foreseeable biogenetic disasters. In these conditions the expansive and expanding growth society is neither sustainable nor desirable. We must urgently consider how to create a society of contraction and how to downscale as serenely and convivially as possible.

The growth society is dominated and often obsessed by growth economics. It makes growth for growth's sake the essential aim of life, if not its only aim. This is unsustainable because it pushes the limits of the biosphere. Calculating the impact of our lifestyle on the environment in terms of how much of the Earth's surface each person's consumption uses reveals a way of life unsustainable in equal rights to natural resources and those resources' capacity for regeneration. The average person in the United States consumes 9.6 hectares, in Canada 7.2 and in Europe 4.5. We are a long way from planetary equality and even further from a sustainable civilisation which would require consumption levels below 1.4 hectares - even before accounting for population change.

TO RECONCILE the contradictory imperatives of growth and environmentalism, experts think they have found a magic formula, "ecoefficiency" - the centrepiece of the argument for sustainable development and its only credible aspect. The idea is progressively to reduce the intensity and impact of our use of natural resources until it reaches a level compatible with the Earth's recognised maximum capacity (7).

There have been improvements in ecological efficiency. But they have been accompanied by extreme growth, so that our overall impact on the environment has actually worsened. More products on the market cancel out the reduced impact of each individual item - the rebound effect. And though the new economy is relatively immaterial or anyway less material, it does not so much replace the old economy as complete it. All indicators show that our consumption of resources continues to rise (8). It takes the unshakeable faith of an orthodox free-market economist to believe that in future science will find solutions to all our problems and that nature can endlessly be replaced by artifice.

The planned demise of the growth society would not necessarily be grim. Ivan Illich once wrote that it wasn't just to avoid the negative side-effects of an otherwise good thing that we had to renounce our current lifestyle, as though choosing between the pleasure of a tasty dish and its risks. The dish itself was intrinsically disgusting and we would be happier without it. We need to live differently to live better (9).

The growth society causes inequality and injustice to rise; the well-being it does produce is often illusory; even for the rich, society is neither convivial nor agreeable, but an anti-society, sick with its own wealth. The high quality of life that most people in the North believe that they enjoy is increasingly an illusion. They may spend more on consumer goods and services, but they

forget to deduct the costs of these things: reductions in the quality of life because of poor air and water and a degraded environment. These increase the costs of modern living (medicine, transport), including that of products made scarcer (water, energy, open spaces).

Herman Daly has devised a measure, the genuine progress indicator, that adjusts a country's gross domestic product according to the losses from pollution and environmental degradation. In the US this indicator has shown stagnation and decline since the 1970s while GDP has risen continuously (10). "Growth" under these conditions is a myth, even in well-to-do economies and advanced consumer societies. Increase is more than compensated for by decrease.

So we are heading fast and straight for the wall without an escape route. We need to be clear about this. Downscaling our economy is a necessity. It is not an ideal, not the only objective of a post-development society or of that alternative world we believe possible. Let us make a virtue of necessity and consider the advantages of downscaling (11) for people in the North.

Adopting the word "downscale" will underline that we are giving up the senseless doctrine of growth for growth's sake. Downscaling must not be confused with negative growth, which is an oxymoron: it means progressing backwards. What the French call *décroissance* does not have an easy English equivalent since shrinkage, decrease and reduction all have negative connotations that *décroissance*, which means de-growth, does not. This says a lot about the psychological domination of free-market economics.

We have seen how even a slowdown in the rate of growth plunges our societies into disarray, causing unemployment and destroying social, cultural and environmental programmes that maintain at least the basics of a decent life for most people. So what would happen if the growth rate were actually negative? Like a work-based society without work, there would be nothing worse than a growth society without growth. The mainstream left will remain trapped within this thinking unless it can radically revise its most deeply held beliefs.

Downscaling can only be thought about in the context of a non-growth society, which we should attempt to define. The policy could start by reducing or removing the environmental impact of activities that bring no satisfaction. Many areas are crying out for downscaling: we could review the need for so much movement of people and goods across the planet and relocalise our economies, drastically reducing pollution and other negative effects of long-distance transport. We could question the need for so much invasive, often corrosive, advertising. We could ask ourselves how many disposable products have any real reason to be disposable, other than to feed the mass production machine.

Decrease does not necessarily mean a reduction in well-being. In

More about Serge Latouche.

Translated by Gulliver Cragg

* Serge Latouche is emeritus professor at the Université Paris-Sud and author of *The Westernisation of the World* (Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 1996) and 'In the Wake of an Affluent Society - an Exploration of Post-Development' (Zed Books, London, 1993)

(1) February 2002, Silver Spring, Maryland.

(2) *Le Monde*, 16 February 2002.

(3) *Politis*, 8 May 2003. Nicolino described social movements as a festival of corporatist whingeing and made derisory comments about people who wanted to retire at 50.

(4) *Politis*, 12 June 2003.

(5) Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars*, Southend Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002.

(6) Gianfranco Bologna, ed, *Italia Capace di Futuro*, WWf-EMI, Bologna, 2001.

(7) "The Business Case for Sustainable Development", World Business Council for Sustainable Development: Earth Summit in Johannesburg, August-September 2002.

(8) Mauro Bonaiuti, ed, *Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen: Bioeconomia*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2003.

(9) *Le Monde*, 27 December 2002.

(10) C Cobb, T Halstead, J Rowe, "The Genuine Progress Indicator: Summary of Data and Methodology, Redefining Progress", and "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" in *Atlantic Monthly*, no 276, San Francisco, October 1995.

(11) This aim does not really apply to the Southern countries: though they are affected by the growth ideology, they are not, for the most part, growth societies.

(12) See "Changer de Revolution", cited by Jean-Luc Porquet in *Ellul, l'homme qui avait (presque) tout prévu*, Le Cherche-Midi, 2003. See also Jacques Ellul on *Religion, Technology, and Politics: Conversations with Patrick Troude-Chastenot*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1998.

1848, when Karl Marx declared that the time was ripe for social revolution, he believed everything was in place for the communist society to be one of abundance. The astonishing overproduction of cotton fabric and manufactured goods was more than enough to feed, house and clothe the population, at least in the West. Yet there was far less material wealth then than there is now - no cars, planes, plastic, computers, biotechnology, pesticides, chemical fertilisers or nuclear energy. Despite the unprecedented upheavals of the industrial revolution, the needs of mid-19th century society were modest, and happiness, or at least the material basis of happiness, seemed within reach.

To imagine and construct a downscaled society that works, we must go beyond the economy. We must challenge its domination of the rest of life, in theory and in practice, and above all in our minds. An essential element will be the imposition of a massive reduction in working hours to guarantee everyone a satisfying job. As early as 1981 Jacques Ellul, one of the first thinkers to propose downscaling, suggested that no one should work more than two hours a day (12).

Another starting point could be the treaty on consumption and lifestyle drawn up by the NGO forum at the 1992 United Nations Earth summit in Rio, which proposed the Six Rs programme: re-evaluation, restructuring, redistribution, reduction, reuse and recycling. These objectives could lead to a virtuous circle of cooperation and sustainability. We could add more to the list: re-education, reconversion, redefinition, remodeling, rethinking and relocating.

THE problem is that values currently dominant, including selfishness, the work ethic and the spirit of competition, have grown out of the system, which in turn they reinforce. Personal ethical choices to live more simply can affect trends and weaken the system's psychological bases, but a concerted radical challenge is needed to effect anything more than limited change.

Will this be dismissed as a grandiose utopian idea? Is any transition possible without violent revolution: or rather, can the psychological revolution we need be achieved without violent disruptions? Drastically reducing environmental damage does mean losing the monetary value in material goods. But it does not necessarily mean ceasing to create value through non-material products. In part, these could keep their market forms. Though the market and profit can still be incentives, the system must no longer revolve around them. Progressive measures, stages along the way, can be envisaged, though it is impossible to say whether those who would lose from such measures would accept them passively, or even whether the system's present victims - drugged by it, mentally and physically - would accept its removal. Perhaps this summer's heatwave in Europe will go further than any arguments to convince people that small is beautiful.

English language editorial director: Wendy Kristianasen - all rights reserved © 1997-2007 Le Monde diplomatique.

Translations >>