

Homo Faber or Homo Ludens?

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In Search for a Better Life

There is a widely held assumption about the economy: it must keep expanding or we are in trouble. When questioned those holding this view are less assured that growth can go on indefinitely. So, while continued growth of the economy amounts to “common sense” for many, there is considerable hesitancy to believe this without qualifications. Of course, the popular reasoning goes, we will run out of oil and coal some time in the future, but other energy sources will appear. There is less confidence that a substitute for vital metals like copper will be readily available. And, well, rare earths are simply rare. We’ll have to deal.

When confronted with their uncertainties some take the offensive and claim that we need to “grow” more doctors, or that we need to “grow” to alleviate poverty, etc. Or, some enlightened entrepreneurs maintain, the circular economy (outputs become inputs), universally adopted, will save us. When it comes to food however, the veneer of confidence peels away and hydroponics or lab-created meat enters the conversation. If you are discussing these issues, and your friend has not abandoned you by now, then when you ask how climate change will affect both growth and resources, frustration may flash across your friend’s face, followed by fear and denial.

What can we expect when the other side of the coin of perpetual growth, is faith in Science?

For more than a decade, a European movement against growth is itself growing. In France, where it launched, it supports *décroissance*, translated into English as degrowth. *Décroissance* is more a direction than a program, more symbolic than literal and yet more anti-capitalist than not.

On the website of the think tank Research and Degrowth it says degrowth calls for “... a future where societies live within their ecological means, with open, localized economies and resources more equally distributed through new forms of democratic institutions. Such societies will no longer have to “grow or die.” Further, it proposes:

Degrowth does not only challenge the centrality of GDP as an overarching policy objective but proposes a framework for transformation to a lower and sustainable level of production and consumption, a shrinking of the economic system to leave more space for human cooperation and ecosystems.

How should we think about degrowth in the US, where a sizable proportion of our population has been experiencing, against their will and desire, degrowth? Degrowth, that is, as loss of homes, jobs and futures. If we concentrate simply on consumption,

then we are very far along the path to “shrinking the economic system.” For the poor, degrowth is poverty.

Degrowth, to be clear, is only one element of a new vision coursing through the dissident enclaves throughout Europe. With the debacle of the financial crisis, the imposition of austerity and the spread of marginal employment, the old system revealed itself to be nearly a corpse barely sustained by draining the economic prospects of the populace. In response, local initiatives developed by utilizing the once dormant social creativity of neighbors and friends: foreclosures were stopped, shut utilities turned on again, food distributed locally through gardens and common kitchens, banks occupied by spontaneous dance troupes and any number of other activities aroused otherwise private citizens to action.

We have here utopianism in action; it functions as a tool to pierce the deceptions surrounding us and, so, provides a glimpse of another way of living beyond the confines of consumerism. Refuting the hoax perpetuated upon us by the prevailing “common sense” of endless growth is this utopianism’s strength, and its weakness.

Our life’s choices across the board, the horizontal plane, so to speak, are checkmated and so, also, with the vertical, our desires are colonized. We are condemned to suffer imposed passions (aka programmed addictions) and circumscribed choices. And escapes, if we so foolishly try one of these routes, are clearly defined for us as routes to oblivion. Utopianism, by juxtaposing a vision of freedom in the face of this reality, present us with an overwhelming challenge that easily leads to despair and resignation. One can say this is its weakness: it opens before us an abyss.

Yet, the task before us, clearly perceived, oddly enough motivates a search for substantial change when we realize that we are not isolated in our condition. This is the strength that comes from recognizing that everything begins with us and nothing ends there.

It is precisely social creativity that gives us some insights into both what we have lost in our society and what must be cultivated to enrich a future society. The amazing range of projects undertaken in cultural venues, in schools and in reclaimed industrial spaces, all moving beyond simply insuring some semblance of survival, reveal the potential of people to transform their lives even in the most dire of circumstances. In fact, stressful circumstances propel desperate people into activities that they would have otherwise never contemplated. One of the most remarkable examples of this fact occurred in downtown Buenos Aires at the Hotel Bauen in March 2003. This twenty-two-story hotel was seized by its workforce when the owners declared bankruptcy and closed the hotel without paying the workers their back wages. They took a leap into the unknown (the abyss) and have struggled, with incredible support from the citizens of Buenos Aires, to keep the hotel functioning as a cooperative all these years.

What began as a means of economic survival over time transformed the Hotel Bauen workforce from isolated and disrespected individuals into competent and assured cooperators. And similar stories, though less dramatic, could be told by participants in a multitude of community-based ventures all over the world. These tales of transformation are like vignettes of a different life, premised on values submerged today under the weight of economic expediency, of bottom-line calculations that leave no room for humanity to flourish, much less to survive.

There is a proposed name for this other way of living. Some people are calling it “buen vivir” after the South American term that Bolivia and Ecuador have incorporated into their constitutions. In these countries the struggle against run-away economic development draws upon indigenous cultures, where the term originated. Buen vivir is not an ideology, nor is it a perspective, it is founded on animism, the belief that there is no separation between the spiritual and material world. Trying to translate this concept to the modern (Cartesian) mind is difficult. For instance, in traditional cultures the individual is securely embedded in rituals and roles, which in turn are embedded in nature. As flowers unfold, so too, for example, do rituals of fecundity. In over-developed industrial societies, on the contrary, the individual is primary and pitted against others; modern society dissolves community into the crowd, nature into landscapes and embellishes individuals with adornments of rank.

So, buen vivir is not easily translated into “the good life” or “well-being” precisely because association with individualism misconstrues these terms. The best way to understand buen vivir may be to see it not as something static, but active – a process of seeking a balance of individual attainments within community goals, all informed by a keen appreciation of the natural world.

Looked at it this way we immediately recognize the limitations of focusing on the economy, in the mainstream sense of productivism, and in the so-called oppositional sense of sustainability, or even de-growth. Let’s call this economism and coupled with it is the assumption that work is central to our definition of humanity: homo economicus at work is homo faber.

That work has become so central to our self-definition merely demonstrates how depraved our way of life is. It is no longer possible to refer back to traditional societies as the origin of homo faber; current research shows that life in hunter-gatherer societies was not “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” as Hobbes maintained. And while the peasants in the Middle Ages toiled more than Gauguin’s Tahitian neighbors, they still celebrated feasts and holidays galore, putting to utter shame the American two-week vacation, itself disappearing, like the weekend, with contracted labor.

If we want to supersede the notion of productivism – and this seems essential to free our imagination from the deadbolt culture of scarcity and sacrifice – then maybe we need to explore the notion of homo ludens as a pivotal concept. If we are in search of a

legacy that extends back to the wisdom of traditional societies (but doesn't take up residence there) then we can do no better than refer to play. Johan Huizinga who authored *Homo Ludens: a study of the play-element in culture* states on the first page:

Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing.

Play, and playing, conceived as central to our lives evokes what's missing in our society – to provide a short list: joy, abundance, conviviality and cooperation. Of course, one could argue that play too has been absorbed into the commercial nexus and deformed into its opposite – grim competitiveness and spectatorial profiteering. However, commercial sport and spectacular events generate their own calcified references and play, still, retains a connotation of childlike innocence. It's not serious. And that's precisely why it can be subversive, provocative and meaningful.

We need the elixir of joy to counteract the toxic diet of economic nonsense that starves those impulses we need to build a better way to live. If our intent is to overcome the acquisitive neurosis that plagues us, we need to find pleasure in useful endeavors without price tags. Likewise, righteous agitation exclusively on fixes and reforms – public banking, complimentary currencies, participatory budgeting, and so forth, even the mechanics of the commons – deflects us from fostering a selfhood based on the refinement of conviviality. Is there a better way to revolution than by imagining how we can all play better together?