

Getting beyond the world of growth

by Richard Slaughter

One day it would be interesting to sit down and assemble some of the most significant ‘signals of change’ generated over the last half-century by concerned people of all kinds and from different fields. In an alternative history that is perhaps now lost some of those signals would have not been dismissed as ‘loony left’, ‘Greenie fantasy’, ‘scientific nonsense’ and the like.

Nor would some of the world’s most powerful actors have succeeded so completely in promulgating global agendas founded on their own rather specific requirements and needs. With the exception of some well-intentioned philanthropists, dominant social and economic formations remain strictly business-as-usual and strictly here-and-now. Unless, like Silicon Valley, they deliberately set out to re-shape the future they are generally content to leave well alone. In fact substantive futures concerns seldom arise at all.

Warnings ignored

Back in that lost past those ‘early warnings’ and their associated policy proposals might have received serious attention. They could have been researched, reviewed, tested and some of the best rendered into common practice. Had that been achieved on any significant scale, our current reality would not be as it now is—pitched at the edge of an abyss. I realise, of course, that some readers, especially some of those working in the corporate sector, may object to what they regard as another overstated ‘gloom and doom’ view. As a relatively diligent scholar of these issues for some years, I beg to differ. The contradiction at the heart of

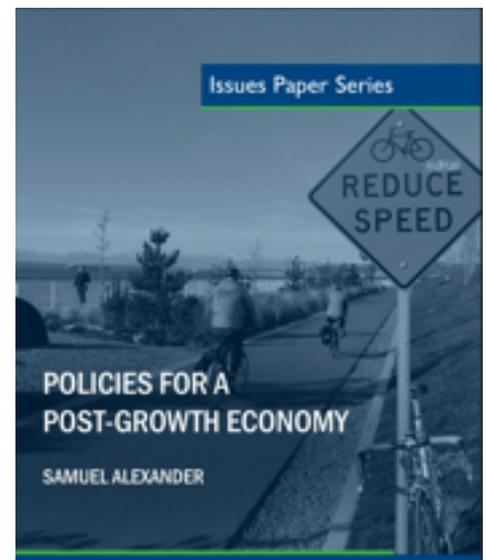
all our societies has existed for at least a century. Some of the early conservationists were among those who could see what would happen as the human enterprise grew and took over ever-larger swathes of the natural world.

Fast-forward to the 1970s, and expressions of concern reach new levels of clarity and coherence. You’d have to be pretty sure of yourself to feel able to dismiss Lewis Mumford (author of *The City in History* and *The Pentagon of Power*), Donald Schon (*The Stable State*), the editors of *The Ecologist* (*Blueprint for Survival*) and, of course, the Meadows team (*Limits to Growth*).

It turns out that such critiques and their associated social innovations were largely on the right track. But at the time they were widely ignored, frequently lampooned and firmly ruled out. The Club of Rome did what it could, but its cumulative diagnosis over a couple of decades of what it called the ‘global problematique’ was never accepted by the powers that be, despite various UN and other gatherings. The *Limits to Growth* (LtG) project itself was subjected to sustained abuse that has since been conclusively shown to be ill founded and wrong.¹ Hence in 2016 Australia the incumbent Prime Minister—who is certainly no villain—campaigns for re-election on the basis of ‘jobs and growth’ and having just committed the nation to spending Aud\$50 billion over the coming decades on a brand new fleet of ‘stealth’-equipped submarines. Few, if any, of these actors are bad people. They simply flow with existing mainstream ways of thinking and operating, long after these stopped making any real sense.²

Policies for a Post-Growth Economy

by Samuel Alexander. (2016), Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, University of Melbourne, 2016, Issues Paper 6. [Downloadable here.](#)



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Costs of change

Donald Schon helped to make sense of this several decades ago when he penned the following passage about ‘change’:

*... social systems provide for their members not only sources of livelihood, protection against outside threat and the promise of economic security, but **a framework of theory, values and related technology which enables individuals to make sense of their lives.** Threats to the social system threaten this framework. (Thus) ... a social system does not move smoothly from one state of its culture to another... Something must come apart in order for something new to come together. But for individuals within the system, there is no clear grasp of the next stable state —only a clear picture of the one to be lost. Hence the coming apart carries uncertainty and anguish since it puts at risk the basis for self-identity that the system had provided.³ (Emphasis added.)*

Despite half a century of Futures Studies, Applied Foresight and the rest, we still live in cultures and societies that cannot bring themselves to think ahead in any but the most off-hand, entertaining and informal ways. It is arguably this, as much as anything, that’s contributed to our deepening existential crisis. So what to do? One answer is to live as though there were no tomorrow. Which makes some sense as ‘tomorrow’ has indeed become problematic. Another is to fall headlong into denial and avoidance. This, most likely, is the strategy that appeals to the great majority of people who have not thought about these issues and, to be honest, don’t very much wish to.

Or you can seek out the most cogent, insightful and inspiring work that’s currently available. A diet of such material has its costs. You’ll find that you’re thinking and acting differently to many other people—which can be challenging. But the consolations are significant, as you may come to feel that you are beginning to get a handle on what’s happening and, furthermore, what can be done about it.

In fact there’s a great deal that can be done. One person who has taken up this challenge is Sam Alexander. He’s somehow managed already to pull off the near impossible. That is to set up a Simplicity Institute in one of the most conservative bastions of academic excellence—the University of Melbourne.⁴

Paradox and policy interventions

At the end of his short but impressive paper Alexander states the paradox that faces us all. It is that ‘a planned transition to a post-growth economy is both necessary and seemingly impossible.’ This reminded me of an aphorism attributed to E.F. Schumacher that ‘the problems of life cannot be solved; they have to be struggled with.’

Alexander’s paper lays out the lineaments of that struggle, and it does so with admirable clarity. The author starts by acknowledging that ‘most people, including most politicians, still believe that sustained economic growth, in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), is necessary for social progress, and that such growth is consistent with environmental sustainability.’⁵ Hence, ‘governments shape policies and institutions with the aim of promoting economic growth, giving society a pro-growth structure.’ Moreover, ‘this is supported by consumerist cultures

that seek and indeed expect ever-rising material living standards.’

Manifestly, that world is indeed coming apart, pretty much as Schon described. But what will replace it? Alexander sets out a series of what he calls ‘bold policy interventions’ that, if adopted, could lead towards ‘a stable and flourishing post-growth economy.’ Here’s where we encounter one of Jim Dator’s perceptive ‘laws’ of futures studies—namely that ‘any useful idea about the future must first appear ridiculous.’

In failing to comprehend that ‘the global economy is already in gross ecological overshoot’⁶ one can also sympathise with conventional economists and policy makers, most of whom necessarily work *within* existing social and economic frameworks. Far-out, bold policy initiatives are not what they do. So what is Alexander proposing? The list is as follows.

1. Explicit adoption of post-growth measures of progress.
2. Reduce consumption via diminishing ‘resource caps.’
3. Working hour reductions.
4. Rethink budget spending for a post-growth transition.
5. Renewable energy.
6. Banking and finance reform.
7. Population policies.
8. Reimagining the good life beyond consumer culture.
9. Distributive justice.
10. Sophisticated transition strategies.

Of course a bland list such as this cannot begin to reveal the detail or the thinking behind it. But it does provide a flavor of what’s being proposed. Moreover, there’s a fascinating section near the end that addresses what the author calls ‘hard truths about a top-down transition.’

Hard truths

It's a testament to the author's integrity that he's willing and able to outline some key factors that stand directly against the whole tenor and intent of the work. He puts forward three main points.

First, that 'cultures around the world, especially in the developed world, are not close to being ready to take the idea of a post-growth society seriously.' Second, that 'the powers-that-be would not tolerate these policies...' Third, that 'in a globalised world order, even the bold policies proposed above would be unlikely to produce a stable and flourishing post-growth economy.' Hence, 'it may well be impossible to implement a smooth 'top down' transition...' Which leads directly to a notion that's been around in the literature for some years but which has yet to make any perceptible dent on public awareness—that of a 'great disruption.'⁷

One could perhaps reach the end of such an account with sense of despair and resignation. But that's not at all where it leads. If such a transition is currently both 'impossible' and entirely 'necessary,' just exactly what do you do? His answer is two-fold. First, 'raise awareness about the limits to growth and the inability of

Notes

1. See Bardi, U. 2011 and Higgs, K. 2014.
2. See Steffen, W. et al, 2004.
3. Schon, D. 1971.
4. I used to work there myself and, despite various successes, was shown the door after only five years!
5. A point of view decisively rejected by Eckersley, 2016; also by Klein, 2015.
6. For anyone doubting this I recommend a careful review of Rees, 2014 and Oreskes & Conway, 2014.
7. Gilding, 2011 and Slaughter, 2010 provide similar analyses but rather different strategies of response.
8. I outlined some of these in Slaughter, 2010 and 2012 and other shorter works.
9. Trainer, 2012, provides a salutary reminder of just how demanding a transition to sustainability really is.

capitalism to resolve those limits.' Second, 'attempt to establish examples of the post-growth economy.' There's no doubt at all that there's plenty of serious work behind these summary statements to satisfy even the most ambitious social innovators. I could add a few more but will limit myself here to just two.

These are, first, to de-legitimise as many as possible of the practices and procedures that currently prevent entire populations from understanding their predicament. This might include creating and supporting more high-quality news and current affairs media (including media that ubiquitously streams well presented Earth Science data in readily comprehensible ways) and questioning/critiquing/retiring pretty much all forms of diversionary commercial advertising. Second, bringing forward as many transformative proposals as possible with a view to them becoming integrated within a multi-dimensional social project.⁸ As Trainer and others have already shown, nothing less will suffice to turn civilisation away from 'overshoot and collapse' to sustainability.⁹

Conclusion

It's rare to find work in this domain that successfully confronts the great interwoven issues of our time with a quiet but effective account such as is deployed here. In just 18 or so pages the author has provided a powerful and timely reminder that, yes, we are indeed in overshoot territory and, yes, the future looks more challenging with every year that passes. And yet the key is within the grasp of everyone since we are far from being helpless onlookers. Looking back to Habermas and others we just need to remember that we are all co-authors of the reality in which we find ourselves—and act accordingly. ◀

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