

Selling Green

by Lindy Davies

These days many people view “Economic growth” as an obscenity — for lots of good reasons. The United States seems besotted, as a culture, with a crippling addiction to more, bigger, louder and grander “stuff”, no matter what the consequences, even if we have to go to war to keep fueling it, no matter: we gotta have more stuff. Many of us recoil from the long-standing mottoes of capitalism, such as “The business of America is business” or “What’s good for General Motors is good for the USA” (what’s good for the USA also being good, one would guess, for the holders of trickle-down pans in the Third World). “NO!” shouts a growing movement of Greens, antiglobalizers, workers for peace, “No. We cannot afford any more “growth”; it is destroying our planet, and our culture. We must learn to live simply, to do with less.”

More and more these days, “the economy” is seen as some sort of malignancy. I think, however, that this notion stems from a misunderstanding of what “the economy” is and what it can and cannot do. Your Econ 101 text will introduce the “problem of scarcity” as the discipline’s primary concern. Economics, we are told, is the study of how people make choices to employ scarce resources, in order to satisfy unlimited desires. There will never be enough for everyone; scarcity (and the poor) ye have always with you. The fallacy in that is, of course, that while human desires are indeed unlimited, human material needs are actually quite modest; their full and ample satisfaction is well within the reach of modern technology. Therefore, if we could all learn to live more simply and harmoniously, we could learn to beat our SUVs into ten-speeds, and there would be plenty to go around.

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From a practical point of view, however, this strategy raises questions. Sooner or later one must consider how such an enlightened human future could be achieved. By self-sufficiency? Protectionism? Organic farming? Transcendental Meditation? Alas, it is (fortunately? unfortunately?) true, at any rate, that the question of who must give up what, to whom, on whose say-so, is quite difficult to sort out. And until such issues are resolved, to general popular satisfaction, we will have to recognize that a shrinking economy will tend to bring about a greater net amount of human misery than a growing one.

Exactly what do we mean by “economic growth” anyway? Is economic growth merely the endless piling up of stuff, with the attendant pollution?

That is how it is widely thought of — and that is, to a large extent, how it is incorrectly measured by the much-criticized yardstick of the Gross Domestic Product. But that's not what it is. People do not engage in economic activity in order to pile up stuff; people engage in economic activity in order to satisfy their desires. Economic growth, therefore, is the provision of increased levels of human satisfaction. Some human desires that the economy seeks to satisfy are our desires for breathable air, for clean water and for natural diversity. In order to satisfy those desires, while continuing to feed and house the world's people, the economy must grow.

But — if we allow the economy to grow, then will it not just go ahead and supply people with more of what they want? And, for crying out loud, they want grotesque gas-guzzling roadhogs! GI-Joe dolls with antiterrorist weapons! Reality supermodels on huge-screen digital surround sound! Slab o'Grease Happy Value Meal #5, with large Saccharine Slurpie! Don't people want precisely all those things that make our material culture unsustainable? Shouldn't people be protected from what they want? Shouldn't they be trained to want better things?

It would certainly be nice if more people wanted better things. I for one would be just as happy to never consume another Slab o'Grease Sloppy Value Meal, but I probably will. I get in a hurry sometimes. We're all doing our best. But there is a way — come to think of it — to influence people toward simpler, healthier, greener purchasing patterns. And we need not rely on the imposition of an official commissary. All we would have to do is to substantially increase the wages of all the lowest-paid workers in society.

What? Wouldn't that just enable people to scarf up more Roadhogs and Slurpies? No doubt they would — at first. But subtle changes take place as a community slouches toward affluence. Let's take a quick look at the markets for a few of our society's ugliest products:

Tobacco, and lottery tickets A no-brainer. These items are frequently bought simultaneously at the convenience-store counter. They are harmful. The vast majority of their consumers are lower-income people. When people are a bit more comfortable financially, they are far more likely not to smoke, and not to play the stupid lottery. That also correlates with higher educational levels, better self-esteem, and nicer teeth.

SUVs The marketing of sport-utility vehicles is a fascinating — and rather macabre — study in mass neurosis. SUVs are not hyped as being fast (they're not), fun to drive (they're trucks), useful for rugged terrain (most ads show them in urban or suburban settings; when they are shown off-road, the passengers rarely set foot outside their chillin' cockpits). No, SUVs are marketed as giving you Protection. They put a big, thick, steel

barrier between you and them. They are civilian tanks. They reveal, I believe, a profound level of insecurity, of barely-suppressed panic, at the tenuous state of our civilization, and the unimaginable dangers that lurk behind everything. No wonder they offer 'em for Zero per cent financing.

The Network News

The pitiful quality of the US public's main source of information about what's going on in the world has long been an easy target for pundits. But the broadcasts don't get any better. It bothers people, on some level, that news of the latest bombing of Iraq is reported with exactly the same intensity, in exactly the same number of minutes, as the latest Buttafuoco/Lewinsky steamer. But we don't have time — do we? — to delve deeper into the facts. The Network Anchor has paid dues, come up in ranks, seen things, and knows how to tell us what's important, whatever that is. And when the Anchor gets in over his head, he calls in Credentialed Experts. What choice do we have but to trust him, and them?

The Big Box Superstore

Civic-minded and green-thinking folks are Very Motivated to stop this juggernaut. Proprietors of high-end retail stores on rejuvenated Main Streets, touted by New Urbanists, scream bloody murder about the competition (are we not capitalists?). Yet, regular working people in towns are ambivalent. They notice that Wal-Mart does, actually, sell for less, and with what we're making, we can't afford not to notice that. Furthermore, while the Big Box only hires part-time for paltry wages, it is, at least, hiring — which in many communities is a big plus. So, the zoning decrees that prohibit our Home Depots and Mega-Marts are seldom a foregone conclusion. Go figure.

Disposable Diapers

I hate to admit this, but young parents (who are, after all, really quite heavily invested in the future of our planet) cringe a little every time they have to throw one of those awful things away. I mean, their volume actually increases (due to some bizarre petroleum-based technology) when they get wet. But what are the alternatives? We could — if we live in a hip urban area — hire a diaper service, but that would stress the Earth even more than the disposables. We could use cloth diapers and wash them ourselves in conventional washers and dryers — also quite expensive, both ecologically and on our MasterCard bills. So we're left with either handwashing the diapers in natural streams with organic soaps, or potty-training our children from birth. Or — I almost forgot — ordering biodegradable disposables on the Web, at triple the cost.

Chicken

If you eat animals at all, then you probably consume a fair amount of chicken. It is a very versatile and affordable source of protein. But you know as well as I do that the current crop of concentration-camp raised, salmonella-laced supermarket chicken is, pardon my bluntness,

ganky. If you don't serve it Well Done, it keeps you awake wondering whether it tasted right. It probably won't kill you, and it's (debatably) better than no chicken at all, but on balance, one feels that as a culture, we ought to be able to do better. And indeed, we can. Free-range birds taste a whole hell of a lot better. But they are, alas, a whole hell of a lot more expensive.

It's a funny thing about the economics of free-range chickens. It takes a considerable amount more land to raise them than concentration-camp chickens. But we have plenty of land. In the USA, we pay thousands of farmers not to use their land, year after year, so they won't grow too much of some commodity whose price we want to keep high — but what about a commodity like free-range chickens, whose price we'd dearly like to see get lower? Wouldn't it be cool to use some of that surplus land to raise them?

Raising free-range chickens also takes more labor than raising the ganky kind, but it's not like we're running out of labor. In fact, our political economy is chronically fidgeting over the question of that to do with all the extra labor — our huddled masses who can't seem to find anything gainful to do. I can't help but wonder whether if some of them were given land on which to raise free-range chickens, they'd have a fighting chance of figuring it out. I can go to my local Hip and Groovy farmers' market and pay three dollars a pound for chicken — or I can go to my supermarket and pay eighty-nine cents. If the Economy could close that gap by some appreciable amount, I'd be buying the free-range stuff — because it tastes a whole hell of a lot better, as we know. And if that came to pass, farmers' markets would become a force in the local (and — dare we imagine — national) economy! A wonderful fantasy. Any chance of it actually happening, anytime soon?

None at all, absolutely Zero — unless we use the Secret, Magic Formula: substantially increasing the wages of all the lowest-paid workers in society. That's the only way to enable significant numbers of people to do things like quitting smoking, ignoring the ridiculous lottery, using the eco-friendly diapering option, patronizing the high-quality Main-Street emporia and feeding their families wholesome food. Our daily lives are so loaded with the burden of making a living that we are barely able to pay attention to the vital questions surrounding our childrens' education — much less our duties as sovereign citizens in a democracy. We — the working people of the so-called middle class of this so-called greatest nation in history — are having far too hard a time finding time to do anything that might make us recognize ourselves as human beings, and not just automata, or livestock.

We must raise wages, without sacrificing freedom. Would it shock you to find out that we already know how to do that? That as a society, we could choose to do that, anytime we wanted? **GJ**