

*A Short Summary of “Economic Growth: The Wealth Creation  
Delusion” by John Stockford Stone*

Economics does not do what it says on the tin. We are degrading the planet’s natural capital and counting it as wealth creation. It is as if the inhabitants of a remote island felled all their trees for firewood (without replanting) then claimed the ephemeral heat from the glowing fire to be wealth creation (pending the ashes). This wealth creation delusion arises because we attribute money value to the capital degrading process.

A company which sells off its capital assets in order to create revenue will inevitably go bust, as will Gaia plc if we don’t hastily act to correct this anomaly before our growth driven economics drives us into nature’s bankruptcy court.

Degrading our natural capital by our methods of utility extraction includes the impact on the biosphere of pollution created during the processes of production and use; and then when we no longer gain utility from the things we have produced and trash them.

Production is consumer led; therefore growing our capacity to produce depends upon growth in our capacity to consume. So instead of placing a premium on the conservation of scarce resources we must consume more of them in order to keep the economic merry-go-round turning.

Karl Marx, in his mid 19<sup>th</sup> century analysis of the capitalist state, called religion the opiate of the people which sedated them from rising up against the exploitative ruling order. Today’s opiate addiction is consumerism whereby people are encouraged to value acquisition and shop-till-they-drop. Shopping malls are the modern cathedrals where worshippers gather to commune with the spiritual god of consumption and Sunday is every day. Now online shopping effortlessly brings deliverance to our own front doors. Heaven on Earth!

Consumerism enables the ruling elite to colonise shopaholic public minds, holding them in thrall to the pleasures of consumption; and diverting them, on pain of withdrawal, from questioning the system which is giving them so much pleasure; or from imagining and addressing the unconscionable consequences of catastrophic planetary systems failure. Just ask people if they are prepared to give up their cars to save the planet! That’s the stuff of fictional disaster movies! And all this in the conduct of a respectable, orthodox economics!

The ruling order constantly offers another comforting pipe to dream in the opium den of consumerism. When the money runs out they can borrow, thus reinforcing the belief that consumption is a limitless source of pleasure. There are of course a growing number of people who have become excluded from consumerist society and who struggle to gain access to the minimum resources necessary to sustain their lives. They are

unable to participate in the game, so rather than offering them a comforting pipe the ruling order offers them the cold shoulder of indifference.

Consumerism is vital to the growth economy: without growth in consumption the production machine would quickly grind to a halt, and the whole social, political and economic system constructed upon it would collapse. Growth-driven consumption on a planet with finite resources is a well-aired oxymoron which is nevertheless ignored and embedded in our textbook economic theory. Competition in these circumstances amounts to surrogate warfare which inevitably leads to actual warfare as nations' fight over diminishing resources, exacerbated by tribal, ethnic or cultural differences. The casualties and refugees are evident around the world. The UN forecasts a rise in world population from 7.5 bn. to 11.2 bn. by the end of the century; so the cruel casualty list will inevitably grow.

The critique traces the competitive roots of Homo economicus (economic Man) by linking anthropology to zoology and the patriarchal social order which favours strength, aggression and domination. During this historical journey natural capital, which originated as free-to-all common-wealth (the commons) has been appropriated into private ownership, conferring wealth and political advantage on the appropriators at the expense of the dispossessed and giving rise to the polarization of the social order into the owners of capital and the owners of their labour. Accumulated wealth also stems historically from the colonization of foreign territories, piracy, slavery, mercantile exploitation etc. Now the appropriators are the oligopolistic global corporations whose attempts to assert total control over political economy threatens to undermine democracy.

The present path of humankind, as outlined above, is headed toward an ever-increasing dystopia as nation states' adopt a bunker approach in attempts to isolate themselves from a turbulent world which has arisen principally through their own actions.

Our evolutionary social journey has seen transformation in our perception of existential nature and our place in it, from the supernatural which is to be placated, to a growing body of empirically verifiable scientific knowledge which we can employ. A journey which takes us from the simplicity of certainty to the complexity of probability! So now we must employ this enlightenment and discard the illogical economics which pursues aggrandisement by using methods which degrade the very system on which we depend for life – then fight over the scraps – and set a rational course to save the planet's predominant species (us) by transforming our activities into holistic life-affirming processes.

To bring about this change we don't need a better paradigm to replace the failed one, but a global network of interdependent economic practice which reflects the geological and biological diversity of the planet. A bottom-up network united by a set of common principles to enable human progress through the essentially interdependent objectives of "Peace on Earth" and "Peace with Earth". Above all we need to restore the global commons to redress the appropriation of natural capital. That could simply be done by charging a rental for the use of all natural resources (similar to land-value tax) and distributing it as a universal dividend to provide the population with a basic income. Such progress can only come about through a critical change in the system of oikos nomos (household management) dominated by masculine qualities of strength, aggression and domination, towards an oikonomia (economics) based on feminine qualities of empathy, nurture, cooperation and sharing. Such a philosophical change would enable a metabolic (change to sustain life) system of Gaian economics-for-all rooted in conservation and renewal. That may seem like an impossible challenge given the world scene, but nothing less than survival is at stake. So now is the time to test the substance underpinning that grand title we have bestowed on ourselves: Homo sapiens (Wise Man). We have the potential at our disposal, now do we have the wisdom to employ it?

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