

In many aspects, the world we live in is better than worlds of the past, at least if we focus on a short-term anthropocentric perspective. Modern science has swamped us with a wide array of advancements and the world recently appears to become more peaceful wherever capable, so-called democratic governments are in place. Is this world as good as it can get? Have the developed rich reached utopia and made it to the Pareto-optimum of human excellence, thus set a path for all to follow?

For those praising the day, it might be advisable to rejoice every single second of our current existence, as we have cheerfully set course for potential disaster. Happily and increasingly optimistic, we are racing towards a cliff. Without major cultural changes, Nietzsche's vision of the clever animal that invented knowledge and shortly after had to die is becoming reality. We are sleepwalking into a technologically restructured world without political discussion about what we are constructing. There is absolutely no guarantee that peace between democracies is here to stay, no matter how much less than three decades of reality appear to prove. There is no proof whatsoever that the globalization of neo-liberal, growth-oriented practices does not at some point of time collide with the discarded concept of growth's limits, and in the light of impending problems, humanity excels in regard of pathological denial.

Dramatic cultural changes are necessary. Even though nobody is capable of predicting when time is running out, there is no reason to assume that such knowledge would do us any good without a new culture, a different approach to life and a new understanding of economic development. It does not require magic to know that peak oil, a much lesser "catastrophe" than rapid climate change, is set to occur as close to immediately as anything imaginable, never mind a decade or two, even though past predictions turned out wrong. Nevertheless, we propel ahead at full speed, demand more and more of ever less and even cloak such behaviour as rational, or at least economically rational. Economic rationality is one of the core problems of our existence, as its irrationality appears difficult to top. The belief that markets will get the job done once it is time to do so is interesting, even more if one takes a closer look at the Hubbert peak theory's curve. Without a doubt, markets will have to do a hell of a job.

What is needed is a "real" attitude towards human existence. Currently, we globalize an unreal rationality, unreal and unsustainable needs, an unreal conception of "well-being" and unreal "selves". As it is always impossible to do just one thing, the globalization of western science and political practices, otherwise called development / economic development, also globalizes the western "self", thus the then-rational Me-first attitude so little in accordance with the true Homo sapiens. "Quite logically, evolution promoted not only the fittest Homo sapiens, but also those capable of cooperation. The biggest ego and a mighty club are of little advantage if one's path crosses with a small number of smaller egos with smaller clubs but a pretty good idea how to beat simultaneously. Just as for nature, a society is more than the sum of its parts, and an exaggerated cultivation of maximised parts is the wrong path to maximise the total outcome. If we were to successfully globalize western living standards and economic opportunities, "living" would turn into "dying", as the result would equal complete justice and complete catastrophe" (Bernt Pölling-Vocke).

What is needed for a better world? Just two simple maxims, as far as I am concerned: On the one hand, maximised en-masse happiness should be the driving factor all policies are measured against. If something does not increase happiness, why bother? On the other hand, these policies would need compatibility with sustainability, which more likely than not excludes the myth of global, sustainable growth. Everything that makes people less happy than before should be deemed irrational, no matter how economically rational it might appear. Neo-liberal "terror regimes" forcing their subjects to sacrifice themselves in the name of a global race to the bottom are not rational. Neither is the continued, political focus on economic growth once a certain threshold of material wealth is reached; in the case of Japan a six-fold increase in GDP per capita since the 1950s has apparently not correlated with a major change in perceived happiness, therefore it might be wise to question whether economic growth was beneficial at all. Results for most of Europe and the United States do not differ dramatically, with happiness reaching high levels in the early 70s, but remaining more or less stable afterwards (Layard). Nevertheless, economic outputs skyrocketed whereas mental diseases and personal insecurity in the light of neo-liberal reforms expanded just as fast, but why bother with collateral damage?

In regard of national development, especially for poor countries, economic growth makes sense, but once a certain threshold of well-being is reached, the political aim of economic growth needs scrapping. Whether a level of adequate development for more than 6 billion humans is possible is difficult to answer. Even before, economic growth should just be one of many aims, but if we chew over the wisdom of clever animals as Jeffrey Sachs, little else seems to matter at all. Additionally, anything not absolutely necessary for human survival or increased happiness, which includes the satisfaction of some non-vital needs, but tending towards unsustainability ought to be irrational.

A better world would put more emphasis on smallness than bigness. Regions do not need disempowering superstructures as the European Union, but regional empowerment. This does not discard the notion of the nation state or global governance in general, which is necessary for global issues, but nevertheless regions should become more self-sufficient. The globalization of unreal needs and their stupid satisfaction only boosts suspect measures as GDP, which also receives a boost if a formerly clean river is polluted and its waters need treatment to serve human needs, whereas non-human nature is forced to suffer. There would still be global markets for products irrational to produce regionally, but there is little reason why every corner of the world should only live up to the ideals of some narrow comparative advantages. Additionally, people could be re-empowered simultaneously, as there is no reason to oppose increased, but not exclusive, direct democracy on regional levels.

But how do we get to a world of more empowered regions, intelligent globalization and ecological rationality? How do we smarten the clever animal up? The issue of peak oil tells us that we can't, as we are so entrenched in our current phase of denial that we cannot even react to the stumbling blocks in clear sight. Somehow, it will all work out or science will save the day, many believe. Or hope. Or are too preoccupied to question. In the end, there are always the forces of the market to hope for. Peak oil in itself might lead to a rethinking of global markets, plain simply if past processes become economically irrational, but this might equally well not happen. Mass-migration might become an important issue. Currently, real sustainability is marginalised to the extreme, and even most critics of neo-liberalism only focus on inequalities or, more radically, call for something along the lines of socialism, even though there is no evidence that a more equal distribution of unneccessarities does any good. If the factory is the problem, worker-owned factories cannot be the answer.

The problem of agency is enormous, and it seems plausible to think that nature itself might become the agent once current, human mainstream rationality, functioning along the lines of "the fact that human population is on catastrophic course does not lead to the conclusion that catastrophe will occur" (Arne Naess), fails. What is important for those believing in the advantages of a world of sustainable smallness is the communication of their vision, which is likely to fall on deaf ears until catastrophe knocks on the door. As Noam Chomsky once said, "either you repeat the same conventional doctrines everybody is saying, or else you say something true, and it will sound like it's from Neptune". Without developed alternatives to contemporary growth-oriented cultures at hand, there is no guarantee that these will automatically spring up once they are desperately needed, or, as Leszek Kolakowski said: "It may well be that the impossible at a given moment can become possible only by being stated at a time when it is impossible".