

# A post-growth economy as the only alternative

The antithesis of a way of living based on growth, money and external supply might be found in a recovery of what Gronemeyer (1988) describes as “Daseinsmächtigkeit”, or “power of existence”. The term refers to the complementary interaction of two characteristics: a modest adjustment of needs (sufficiency) to the means resulting from one’s own skills and abilities or local, non-renewable options and resources (subsistence), i.e. finding adequacy in the available. These are the two most important of the five avenues of action by which the transition to a post-growth economy can be effected.

a) Sufficiency: escaping the suffocating oppression of a superabundance of material choices is not an act of abstinence, but one of liberation from excess. Choosing to rid oneself of material possessions which cost a great deal of time, money, space and ecological resources but are only of minimal benefit leads both to greater independence from volatile market conditions, money and work, and to freedom from stress. In an era of sensory overload, sufficiency is a mechanism of self-protection.

b) Subsistence: in order to mitigate the effect of growth drivers and reinforce economic sovereignty, wherever possible the distance between consumption and production should be selectively reduced. Redefining the relative importance of own vs. external supply does not necessarily imply forgoing consumption, but rather suspending external supply, first gradually and then selectively. Between the extremes of subsistence on the one hand and consumption of products generated by globalised value-creation chains on the other is a rich continuum of different degrees of external supply. Someone who spends just 20 hours a week earning money can devote the other half of their creative energy to decommercialised activities such as a manual trade, raising children, helping out neighbours, maintaining and repairing consumer goods, participating in the community. These forms of urban sufficiency offer a measure of freedom from dependence on money and external supply.

c) Regional economy: between the extremes of pure subsistence and consumption based on global distribution of labour are economic systems with a regional scope. The full potential of these approaches can be exploited by means of local currencies, which restrict purchasing power to a particular region, freeing it from global dependencies. Such systems would continue to permit some of the benefits of specialisation, albeit in a framework of “de-globalisation” (Bello 2005).

d) Zero-sum materials game as the new production model: as a result of the above strategies, industrial activity based on money and division of labour could be cut back by around a half. Moreover, the remaining structures could be adapted so as to reduce the need for new production of goods. Instead, the emphasis would be on preserving and enhancing the value of existing goods by renovating, converting and optimising them, extending their useful life or subjecting them to more intensive use. Repair services would lead to less frequent scrapping of defective appliances, while renovation strategies such as conversion as opposed to production from scratch would extract additional usefulness from existing goods, functionally and aesthetically adapting them to current needs and putting them to meaningful use for as long as possible. Markets for used, refurbished and recycled goods would also contribute to reducing new production. If these measures were to succeed in doubling the average lifespan of certain consumer goods, production of the same goods could be halved without affecting their availability to consumers. The decreased need for new purchases would reduce income requirements, leading to shorter working hours. This in turn would give people time to do work themselves which they would previously have had to pay others to do for them, yielding further economic savings. This takes us back to step b), in that subsistence not only provides greater autonomy, but also saves money. What is more, it can consist in productive, particularly manual efforts as a result of which industrial products are independently maintained and repaired as described above.

The oft-cited argument that halving employment, and therefore production, would halve material well-being is therefore no longer tenable. The material resources previously used for new production are replaced by three decommodified resources: (1) individual skills enabling production for own use and extension of products' lifespan, (2) the time this requires, and (3) social interactions arising from communal use.

e) Institutional innovations: insofar as the post-growth economy is the result of a gradual dismantling of industrial supply systems and infrastructure based on the division of labour, the transition could be supported by means of a number of basic conditions: reforms of the land, money and financial markets could reduce the pressure for growth inherent to the system. Regional currencies could be provided with a mechanism reducing interest to a level approaching zero to ensure the circulation of money. Modified corporate structures could serve to curb the profit dynamic. The subsidy jungle could be thinned out to reduce both ecological damage and public debt. A moratorium on soil sealing and infrastructure dismantling programmes could be declared. In particular industrial parks, motorways, car parks and airports could be unsealed and restored to their natural state. Alternatively, these areas could be used for the construction of renewable energy plants to reduce the massive impact on the landscape and space requirements of these technologies. Furthermore, rebound effects could be contained by replacing the elastic concept of "sustainability" with individual CO<sub>2</sub> balances, whereby each person would be entitled to the same yearly quota of emissions (approx. two to four tonnes), which could be transferable. Companies would be required to label all products with the CO<sub>2</sub> footprint caused by the product's entire lifecycle.

### Literature

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