
The Culture of Growth and the Culture of Limits

In every age there is a turning point, a new way of seeing and asserting the coherence of the world.

Jacob Bronowski (1974)

David Orr's wise words give us a wonderful example of the ways and means a great leader causes change. Abraham Lincoln is a superb example because the magnitude of his issue was nation threatening and dramatic. Slavery was not just another issue that happened to cause a war, like the assassination in Sarajevo in 1914, but an institution that led to a moral paradigm change of gargantuan proportions. Orr articulates the qualities and moral vision of Lincoln that helped hold the nation together.

I believe the issue of sustainability is best framed as a total change in all our habits, lifestyles, and values. Sustainability is slavery squared. It takes us back to the bedrock of our very way of life and of creating wealth, and it will require us to develop a whole new culture. As Orr points out, this will be no ordinary task.

C.P. Snow (1993, cited in Sowell 2002) contrasted the differences between the world of science and the world of letters and went on to observe, "Between the two is a gulf of mutual incomprehension . . . sometimes hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding."

This same two-culture metaphor is useful to spotlight what I consider a new chasm of "mutual incomprehension" inherent in the sustainability issue—the culture of growth and the culture of limits. Are resources finite or infinite? Can we solve the problems of growth with more growth? Will existing mechanisms and institu-

tions (including capitalism) be sufficient and as successful for the next 200 years as they have been for the last 200 years? There is the culture of growth that denies limits and the culture of limits that seeks to adapt to those limits. Aldo Leopold (1949) saw a similar conflict in writing about his land ethic:

One of the anomalies of modern ecological thought is that it is the creation of two groups, each of which seems barely aware of the existence of the other. The one studies the human community, almost as if it was a separate entity, and calls its finding sociology, economics and history. The other studies the plant and animal community and comfortably relegates the hodgepodge of politics to "liberal arts." The inevitable fusion of these two lines of thought will, perhaps, constitute the outstanding advance of the present century.

Most of the human experience is on the side of both the population and economic growth culture. The world of growth has succeeded brilliantly. It allowed survival in a harsh world. It has brought health, wealth, increased life expectancy, leisure, and most importantly, freedom. Growth has approached the status of a religion. But even in our religious fervor, we must ask, "Can it last?" Is this a sustainable vision? Is this the permanent secret to success for societies?

The other culture believes that for all our genius, we cannot escape ecological limits. It is one that David Orr has written about previously. This viewpoint holds that we must mod-

ify and in some cases reverse mores and cultures that have worked well and under which we have prospered for hundreds of years. Those who adhere to this school of thought contend that we can delay but not totally avoid the consequences of our infinite demands on a finite Earth. This culture argues that a very fundamental new world has emerged that entails a set of circumstances as important as the industrial or agricultural revolution. These circumstances, it is thought, will force the change from a world of growth to a world of sustainability.

Some would say that this is merely an extension of Snow's two cultures. But the stakes are much higher in the limits versus growth dichotomy because they go to the basic assumptions of our civilization. As philosopher Hershell Elliott warns, "We can disagree on the right way to live and use resources, but we cannot avoid the collective consequences of wrong ways." Has economic growth and population growth become more of a problem than a solution? Is the ecosystem a hurdle or a barrier? What is our vision of the future, and how do we organize the economy and social systems of the future? Can ingenuity and a can-do culture solve growth-related problems as it has solved so many others, or do we have to change our basic operating assumptions and culture?

A human dilemma is that we often see the world not as it is but as we think it is. Columnist Walter Lippmann warned: "At the core of every moral code, there is a picture of human nature, a map of the universe

and a version of history . . .” Our economy, our ethical standards, our moral standards depend on the mental map we have of the world. Thomas Sowell (2002) points out that people have very different visions of how the world works. “Visions are foundations on which theories are built,” and Sowell observes that most of us have mental maps of the world in our minds that do much to control our viewpoints. Sowell divides them into “constrained” and “unconstrained.”

These visions often arise from fundamentally different premises, says Sowell. “Visions are like maps that guide us through the tangle of bewildering complexities. Like maps, visions must leave out many concrete features in order to enable us to focus on a few key paths to our goal. Visions are indispensable, but dangerous—precisely to the extent that we confuse them with reality itself. Visions paint with a broad brush. What has been deliberately neglected in our vision may not turn out to be negligible in its effect on the results.”

The great evils of the world (war, poverty, and crime) are seen in completely different terms by those with constrained and unconstrained visions. “If human options are not inherently constrained, then the presence of such repugnant and disastrous phenomena virtually cry out for explanation—and for solutions. But if the limitation on passions of man himself are at the heart of this painful phenomena [sic], then what requires explanation are the ways in which they have been avoided or minimized” (Sowell 2002).

Are there limits in the physical world, or are those “limits” only limitations of our vision, creativity, technology, and ingenuity? Are there limits to human development in the physical world around us, or only in our minds? Can the mental map that Western Civilization has formed in our minds and human expectations be achieved in the physical world we live in? Is the past a guide to the future, or a “moral trap” that keeps us from recognizing that we are ap-

proaching carrying capacity? Could we end up being victims of our past successes because they have given us the wrong mental map?

These questions fit perfectly into the dichotomy between the culture of growth and the culture of limits. The jury is still out—neither side can claim victory—but the world is presently developing and increasing its population and standards of living, so the presumption should be with the growth vision. Growth is not something we should easily give up, as the culture of growth has served us well. However, it is not the end of the argument for, as Huxley reminds us, “Facts do not cease to exist just because they are ignored.”

One of the great challenges of history is to know when a new world or new paradigm has emerged. It is my passionate belief that economic theories cannot be at variance with ecological reality. Our economic system must adapt to our ecological system, or at a minimum our economic system cannot destroy our ecological system. We are, perhaps understandably, blinded by our past successes, and those successes make it all the more harder to change policies to meet new realities. We cannot assume that the practices and policies of the last 100 years will be applicable for the next 100 years. “Success” in societies is not a permanent state but a permanent challenge. Remember Marshall McKuhn’s dictum: “Nothing fails like success.”

Is additional population growth and economic growth an asset or a liability? Can science delay or avoid the consequences of finiteness (limits)? Are science and technology cures or parts of the disease itself? Is technology and ingenuity a solution or does it just buy us time? The larger ecosystem is likely totally indifferent to whether we get the answers to these questions right. Natural ecosystems are never altruistic. Millions have died in the past—the just and the unjust—because of the indifference of nature.

The assumptions that undergird our whole society incorporate infi-

nite resources. We confidently believe there are no limits that cannot be overcome. But are these assumptions correct or in error? Public policy and most of our institutions, as presently structured, assume unlimited resources, infinite wealth creation capacity, and no ecological limits. The resulting society is vastly different from a society that assumes environmental and ecological limits.

I think the future can be better planned for by confronting limits to the best of our ability and heeding the warning that infinite growth cannot take place in a finite world. The fact that we have been so successful in pushing back those limits does not dissuade me from believing that those limits are real. “All modern day curves lead to disaster,” warns former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, referring to population, consumption, and environmental destruction. Human civilizations are presently living on the upper shoulders of some incredibly steep geometric curves. We have used more resources since 1950 than in the million years preceding 1950. We experience more change in a year than our grandparents did in a lifetime. Yesterday’s solutions have a nasty habit of become today’s problems.

Evidence increasingly shows that something is fundamentally wrong with the growth paradigm. Our globe is warming, our forests are shrinking, our icecaps are melting, our coral reefs are dying, our fisheries are depleting, our deserts are encroaching, and our water is under increasing demand. I suspect these are the early warning signs of a world approaching its carrying capacity. We cannot call upon human ingenuity, science, and technology to develop new solutions to these new challenges. We must instead change our mental map of the world, our culture, and our economy.

I suggest we do not need better scientists and technicians but better poets and prophets. We have to modify our lifestyles and ourselves because we are unlikely to be the first

species in the world to be exempt from limits.

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