

## Reclaiming Progress by Limiting Economic Growth

Christopher A. Haines

**Abstract:** The idea of progress was developed during the French Enlightenment as an optimistic belief in human potential encompassing intellectual, physical and spiritual health within an enlightened society working to maximize happiness. Progress became equated to and then supplanted by economic growth, assumed to be the means to that progress. We are now suffering from that assumption. It is time to acknowledge the limitations, the failings and the costs of economic growth as a means to bettering society. We need to take the opportunity, thrust upon us by environmental impacts to de-throne growth in order to reclaim human potential for social progress, increase happiness and maybe even save the planet.

**Keywords:** Progress, Happiness, Economic growth, Costs of growth, Resources, Environmental sinks, Quality of life

## **Introduction**

What would constitute real progress in your life? What would really make it better? Less stress, a better exercise routine, more time with your family, a really good vacation, time to learn an instrument or to paint or write, the means to attend concerts, plays or visit museums, more time to read or just hang out with friends? For the millions of Americans that are out of work, struggling to pay their bills, then the answer may be that they just need a job and economic growth may or may not help in that event. But even for them, quality of life matters and they might be happier with fewer bills than with more income.

In the past 60 or so years, while some individuals have asked those questions, as a society we have been high-jacked by the assumption that economic growth provides the only path to greater happiness. Unfortunately, happiness has not been increasing over that same period indicating that a higher per capita GDP is not the answer. While this was predicted by earlier writers, we need now to accept this reality and take the wise road if we want to improve society. This paper is going to review how we got here and consider how we might move forward, saving ourselves and maybe our planet in the process.

## **The Idea of Progress**

Most of mankind's history has been lived under a perception of stability, where parents expected their children to have lives very similar to their own, or the perception of a society fallen from a previous golden era<sup>1</sup>. While those people recognized change, it was change without direction; the expectation of progress and growth that we now take for granted has not been the norm of history.

The idea of progress was developed by philosophers and historians theorizing on the history and therefore the future of mankind during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, mostly from the French Enlightenment where much of the thinking was developed. While recognizing that these portrayals are highly optimistic, I am concerned here only with what they envisioned for society.

Nisbet sees Jean Bodin (1530?–96) as a precursor to the philosophy of history movement that developed the belief in human progress. “The beginnings of humanity are marked by ignorance, terror of the unknown, oppression, and constant insecurity, the result of ignorance of the arts.”<sup>2</sup> Here we have an early statement of the cause of human suffering, “ignorance of the arts”. This concept is further developed by future writers.

A century later the writings of Abbe' de Saint Pierre (1658 – 1743) ”contain the first consistent statement of the utilitarian principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number... (and) he was author of two of the most important later extensions of the idea of progress: continuous improvement in social and political organization and behavior and, even more optimistically, continuous improvement in the morals of humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

The work of the Encyclopaedists may mark the high point of the French enlightenment, the greatest work occurring in the period 1751 – 1765. Helve'tius (1715 – 1771), who here exemplifies Abbe' de Saint Pierre's thesis of social organizational improvement, was one of the

Encyclopaedists who believed “society and its rulers are increasingly able, because of greater knowledge, to combine the individual with the general interest, and the laws of nations will be increasingly changed to increase both.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, “He was not convinced, for example, that beyond a certain point of health and comfort, the simple amassing of wealth would promote greater happiness, but on the contrary, assumed that an increasingly wise society will withdraw from the rat-race for ever larger fortunes, and learn contentment in domestic occupations.”<sup>5</sup>

For a summary of the meaning of “progress” and “happiness” to the writers of the French Enlightenment, we turn to the works of Condorcet, (1743 – 94) referred to as the “last heir of the optimism” of this period, “it linked very closely social with individual well-being, it associated art, knowledge, and spiritual greatness with physical satisfaction and bodily health, and it made the process of becoming, of achieving and moving towards a better society, the operative element in ‘happiness’.”<sup>6</sup> So by the end of the Enlightenment we have an optimistic belief in human potential encompassing intellectual, physical and spiritual health within an enlightened society working to maximize happiness.

With the publication of *Wealth of Nations* (1776) Adam Smith (1723 – 90) founded classical economics and developed the idea of wealth as the means towards social progress. “The classical economists,...agreed, by and large, with the French encyclopaedists and the English utilitarians that the object of the government was the happiness of the people *and that material progress was conducive to this end,(emphasis added)*”<sup>7</sup> This is the point where the linking of happiness and economics moved us onto our current path. While Smith believed in a *Laissez Faire* policy toward economics, he recognized the need for an equitable distribution of wealth. “No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.”<sup>8</sup>

John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) was the last major English economist of the era to share an interest in growth economics but he could see little benefit in economic growth for the advanced countries. “It is only in the backward countries of the world that increased production is still an important object: in those most advanced, what is economically needed is a better distribution.”<sup>9</sup> He could also clearly see the results of progress as he warned us of the very fate we are facing. “If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it...I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it.”<sup>10</sup> Oh, but if we had heeded that warning.

For the next 70 years, to about 1940, economists focused largely on problems, income distribution and inequality, growth of monopolies, the trade cycle and unemployment.

### **The Rise of Economic Growth**

Economist writings had thus made the step to economic growth as the means to human progress. However, in order to have economic growth you need to be able to measure an economy. A means to accomplish this was not put into practice until National Income Accounting started in

earnest in the Great Depression, with an impetus from WWII<sup>11</sup>. The Gross National Product is defined by Webster's as: n. (1947) "the total value of the goods and services produced by the residents of a nation during a specified period (as a year)"<sup>12</sup>. While now referred to as Gross Domestic Product, the date on the term documents its first use. It does not appear in Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition, unabridged, 1940.

With the conclusion of WWII, there was a very real fear that the depression would return and a real concern on how to employ the millions of returning soldiers. Thus the concern for full employment became paramount and the work of John Maynard Keynes gained prominence. Keynes argues that private business had no mechanism to keep expenditures up to a level that guaranteed employment to all those who wished to work. Only by government's use of taxation and spending power could unemployment be brought down to acceptable levels. The adoption of Keynesian principles by western governments post WWII provided relative stability for about 25 years.

While economies were tied to the gold standard with a fixed price for gold the economies could not grow without an equal growth in gold reserves. While that generally happened during the nineteenth century the economy would not have been able to grow to the extent intended without the renunciation of the gold standard that occurred in the 1970s. With the adoption of fractional reserve banking the money supply grew with each increase in debt controlled only by the interest rates and the reserve requirements. Is it relevant to note that this economic growth by debt runs counter to Adam Smith's assumption of growth by capital "gradually accumulated by private frugality and good conduct of individuals, by their universal, continual, and uninterrupted effort to better their own condition. It is this effort...which has maintained the progress of England towards opulence and improvements in almost all former times, and which, it is to be hoped will do so in all future times"<sup>13</sup>? We now seek growth by having our population; private, corporate and government act counter to their best interests by increasing debt to unsustainable levels.

Keynes included investment in new production capacity as part of aggregate demand, but that investment increases future production and thereby necessitated an increase in employment<sup>14</sup>. Thus growth became the key to full employment and the concept became the eminent focus of economic policy. "A few years after governments committed themselves to the maintenance of full employment; they adopted economic growth as a policy objective"<sup>15</sup>. Arndt claims "By the end of the decade, (1950's) economic growth had, as one commentator put it, been 'thrust to the top as apparently the supreme, overriding objective of policy.'"<sup>16</sup>

## **The Failures of Growth**

As we have seen, the enlightenment philosophers foresaw a future where the growth of knowledge would be used to improve society and increase human happiness in all forms. The classical economists translated that belief into economic growth as the means to that progress. There was not a universal acceptance of that position, and some of the early writers forewarned of the very problems we are now facing. Recall that Helve'tius) believed "that an increasingly wise society will withdraw from the rat-race" to find meaning in life outside of possessions.

Questions of failures of economic growth started to appear with post WW2 growth in its infancy, in books such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) which questioned the consumer oriented society. In his later work "Abundance for What?" (1964) he states "We are coasting psychologically on the remaining gaps and deficiencies in the ever rising 'standard package' of consumer goods but beyond that, we have very few goals, either individually or socially...No society has ever been in this position before, or anywhere near it...What we fear to face is more than total destruction: it is total meaninglessness."<sup>17</sup>

Linder, in *The Harried Leisure Class* (1970) argues "that consumption takes time, which is scarce. As higher incomes bring more consumption, people will become increasingly harried as they try to cram more consumption into a fixed amount of time. He predicted that people would end up doing several things at once to economize on time, but would not find this very satisfying. Linder did not use the term "multi-tasking" but he certainly saw it coming."<sup>18</sup>

Ezra Mishan, *The Costs of Economic Growth*, (1967) set off a firestorm because he was a well-respected economist and his views were taken more seriously by the mainstream profession.<sup>19</sup> The book "was an urgent plea to the thoughtful people to ponder 'the effects on the welfare of ordinary people of a gathering eruption of science and technology in pressure sufficient to splinter the framework of our institutions and to erode the moral foundations on which they have been raised'"<sup>20</sup> Victor concurs; social costs of growth include the breakdown of communities, alienation, crowding and crime. Mishan questions: "whether economic progress over the last couple of centuries has succeeded only in making life increasingly complex, frantic and wearing"<sup>21</sup>

He considers the assault on our senses and aesthetic sensibilities from "post war development, blight, the erosion of the countryside, the 'uglification' of coastal towns, the pollution of their air and of rivers with chemical wastes...and visible to all who have eyes to see, a rich heritage of natural beauty being wantonly and systematically destroyed"<sup>22</sup> He also reflects on unmeasurable consequences of growth including: "the latent antagonism between the demands of an advanced technological civilization and the demands of man's instinctual nature...a sense of intimately belonging, of being a part of a community in which each man has his place; a sense of being close to nature, of being close to the soil and to the beasts of the field that served him; a sense of being part of the eternal and unhurried rhythm of life."<sup>23</sup>

Philosophers, where they addressed growthmanship were less than sympathetic. One writing on *Economic Growth versus Existential Balance* states "Our overemphasis on economic growth...lead to the neglect of higher needs...the need for love and belongingness, the need for self-actualization in work...the opportunity for meaningful political action by individuals; and the dimension of contemplation in the broadest sense."<sup>24</sup>

All of these issues, from a lack of meaning, increasing complexity and frenzy in life (stress), an assault on our aesthetic senses, the loss of connection, the loss of a sense of peace, to the destruction of social institutions, impact our general "happiness". The results on this have been summed up as: "There is a paradox at the heart of our lives. Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet as western societies have gotten richer, their people have become no happier...It

is a fact proven by many pieces of scientific research”<sup>25</sup> If this leads to neglect of our higher desires, it may ultimately cause a self-reinforcing downward spiral.

So with the noted personal and psychological costs, borne by all, but increasingly by the less privileged, *The Affluent Society* (1958) struck at the heart of growth. John Kenneth Galbraith documented an unprecedented affluent society living in a corner of a poor world, with thinking behind technological achievements, using production through marketing to solve the wants it creates, advancing private wealth faster than public services, growing lopsidedly towards private wealth without assisting to reduce poverty around it. “Not only has the attainment of affluence left many essential public needs, - in health, education, housing, transport and urban services – unsatisfied, it has also failed to eliminate poverty.”<sup>26</sup>

About 50 years after Galbraith’s review, Victor reviewed the record for economic growth in Canada and concluded “Despite vigorous growth in the Canadian economy since the 1950’s, the rate of unemployment has remained well above 4 percent for most of the past half century.”<sup>27</sup> Thus for one advanced country at least, growth has failed to deliver on its main expectation. As a more general conclusion Victor states: “Economic growth in Canada since around 1980 has not eliminated unemployment or poverty. The distribution of income and wealth have become more unequal, economic growth has exacerbated, not been a panacea for environmental problems”<sup>28</sup>

## **The Impacts of Growth**

The earth is finite. The world consumption passed the regeneration production capacity of earth between 1978 and 1987, thus each year the economy is consuming natural capital and further reducing the regeneration capacity of the planet. We are effectively making the planet smaller as we lose arable land to desertification, lose forests to deforestation, destroy soil microbial life and reduce fertility by erosion, pollution, acidification or other problems and lose life forms to extinction. Then of course there are greenhouse gas emissions largely resulting from energy consumption. I shall briefly address population and two facets of the world economy; material sources, material that must be obtained; and sinks, the waste that the planet must be able to absorb without overloading the ecological system.

The world reached a population of one billion in 1804; just nine years after Malthus published his “*Essay on the Principle of Population*”. The population doubled in 123 years passing two billion in 1927. It doubled again in 1975, only 48 years later. While Malthus has been harshly criticized, it seems in one case for failing to anticipate oil,<sup>29</sup> with a world population of seven billion; his basic tenets have been proven correct. The projection to reach a population of eight billion in 2025 means a doubling in 50 years from a growth rate of 1.44%<sup>30</sup> ( $72/50=1.44$ ). If the economy grew during that period at 3.0%, near the typical US target, GDP per capita would double in just over 46 years ( $3-1.44=1.56$ ). Twice as much as effectively zero for the billion or so people in poverty won’t help them much, but the stress of doubling the developed worlds’ consumption would be tragic.

If “they ain’t making more of it” it is not a matter of if it will run out, but only a question of when. Many resources are facing tightening supplies. “Peak Oil” is the best known, but many other resources are facing shortages and rising prices. Not to mention arable land and water, we

are facing potential shortages in a variety of fuel sources, material ores, industrial materials, and some rare elements used in electronics, among other places. Coal is not as plentiful as most people believe and if we were to make a big move to nuclear power we would run out of uranium about the time we finished building the necessary power plants. Renewable power sources or materials are by definition renewable, but only if the consumption rates are less than the replacement rates. You cannot consume a million tons of wood in a time frame that only allows the growth of half a million tons and say it is a renewable resource. Monoculture fuel crops in particular also face the danger of soil depletion so there may be an element of unsustainability in that process.

The “sinks” side of the equation is not any more encouraging. Annie Leonard’s “Story of Stuff” extensively documents the system of consumption. Of all her conclusions two stand out a) for every unit of material goods created 70 units were disposed of to produce that one unit and b) of all the consumer goods purchased, only 1% is still in use in six months<sup>31</sup>. Taken together these facts highlight how incredibly inefficient consumption is in creating value for any one and make the damage caused by the system all that more intolerable.

Organic materials can be returned into the environment but only at a rate and in a concentration that the environment can accept. While animal manures spread out over an adequate area of land are an important resource for maintaining soil fertility, when produced in the volumes normal for feedlot operations the concentrations make them a noxious pollutant. We accept feedlot operations because they provide us with cheap meat, but they endanger our health and violate the principles the environment is founded on. We ignore these principles at our peril.

Man-made inorganic materials that do not break down by normal organic processes may pose serious risks. The problem is evident all the way from microfibers that break off synthetic fabrics when they are washed and enter the environment via the wastewater to millions of tons of garbage, largely plastics in the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch” to the many tons of electronic wastes, largely toxic, much of it carcinogenic that is dumped on the third world. All of these materials can wreak havoc on the unsuspecting creatures and the people who try to survive salvaging minute amounts of precious metals.

Dioxin is one of the most dangerous manmade chemical known yet we allow its disposal into the atmosphere when we allow incinerators to burn garbage<sup>32</sup>. There are hundreds of other chemicals that we know are hazardous that are dumped into the environment on a regular basis. Regulations, where they exist, merely limit the quantities to some smaller figure. The natural environment has no way to handle radioactivity, yet we dispose of millions of tons of radioactive waste, (mostly low level from hospitals). Our biggest concern is probably the 100,000<sup>33</sup> synthetic chemicals and materials we don’t know what impacts they have but still dispose of by dumping into the air, soil and water around us.

A few years after “The Affluent Society” Kenneth Boulding published *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth*, (1966); where he posited that we needed an economic system that reflected that the earth was a closed ecological system. A few years later the *Limits to Growth*, (D.H. Meadows, 1972) provided computer simulations from MIT of the effects of growth projections. While Arndt and many others believed these projections to be fallacious the 30 Year

Update (2004) demonstrated how close they were. While Arndt, the rise and Fall of Economic Growth, (1978) concluded that the idea of growth had peaked and was in decline his actual conclusion is not quite as definitive as his title.

Herman Daly has been the only economist consistently advocating Steady State Economics over the past 35 years, from his 1977 book of that title to his most recent contribution, Ecological Economics (2004). Annie Leonard profiles growth as the major cause of our ecological destruction<sup>34</sup>. Peter Victor, Managing without Growth, Slower by Design Not Disaster, proposes no-growth in the developed world so the underdeveloped world can still benefit from some growth (the same position advocated by J.S. Mills 150 years ago). He clearly believes that if we do not manage our growth we will create a disaster for all. Tim Jackson, Prosperity without Growth (2009) finds the belief that the markets will solve our problems “bankrupt”, tries to address the outline of what a new economy might look like and investigates how societal factors might need to change to become sustainable. Richard Heinberg, The End of Growth (2011) believes that due to the confluence of the depletion of resources, negative environmental impacts and our overburden of debt we are past the point of being able to affect a change, so growth will end on its own terms.

## **Quality of Life**

Let us return then to the the works of Condorcet, (1743 – 94) for whom progress, “linked very closely social with individual well-being, it associated art, knowledge, and spiritual greatness with physical satisfaction and bodily health, and it made the process of becoming, of achieving and moving towards a better society, the operative element in ‘happiness’.”

Recognizing that this chapter of history was concerned with the writings of theorists and what they believed, not what they achieved or had a plan on how to achieve, we take this as a starting point on how they saw society and how we might learn from them, or not. I would also like to put aside, for the moment, concerns of environmental degradation and focus on the social implications of progress as the Enlightenment saw it.

On the one hand, individuals are pushed by a lack of time into a hurried, frantic and complex lifestyle with elevated stress levels. Even as long ago as 1970 Linder effectively predicted multi-tasking as a coping mechanism, but predicted it would not be very effective. Americans do report an increase in stress levels of up to 30% over the past 30 years.<sup>35</sup> Many psychological and physical ailments are linked to stress. “Take the time to smell the roses” but when time is the premium commodity this rush in our lifestyle may have implications for other aspects of our sense of loss.

On the other hand, individuals are also faced with a loss of meaning, are confronted by “uglification” and may feel some of Mishan’s “un-measurable consequences” of disconnection or alienation, sometimes as just a feeling of something being wrong, without a clear sense of what that something is. These feelings impact society when they lead to street gangs, drug dealers and crime. Many gang members are merely creating a “family” and a “turf” they feel a belonging to. Many city kids have found a new life when they were given the opportunity by

church or youth groups to “find themselves” in nature. The success of many of these programs is at least anecdotal support for Mishan’s observations.

The individual’s feelings impact on his/her social interactions and thus society at large. When they feel overwhelmed from time pressures, alienated or depressed, they will likely be less involved in their communities. When families are forced to move frequently for jobs, parents are displaced and kids change schools, both losing relationships and emotional support structures. When people expect to move frequently they will be less likely to become involved with their neighbors.

Current research on happiness appears to support the beliefs of the Enlightenment and specifically the ideas of Condorcet noted above. According to Martin Seligman, considered by many the father of positive psychology, we can experience a progression of three kinds of happiness: pleasure and gratification, embodiment of strengths and virtues and finally meaning and purpose.<sup>36</sup> This fits very well with the enlightenments’ idea of perfecting society as people progress on their own journey of happiness, which progresses to individuals working for the common good and thus bettering society because it makes them happier.

The most recent research in the field of positive psychology supports the goal of working to improve “happiness” as opposed to wealth creation. According to the Center for Confidence it “shows that happy people are healthier, harder-working, more involved with their friends and families and tend to be more successful in life. In short, their lives are more fulfilled and they are less likely to divorce, become long-term sick, long-term unemployed, or to commit crime. For those who want to see a healthier, well-educated, fully-employed society, an increased level of happiness now looks like it could make a significant contribution.”<sup>37</sup>

And they continue along the lines that we have been discussing. “We’ve never had so much – but our houses, cars, holidays, and designer shoes are not making us any happier. Traditionally, the politician’s response to signs of unhappiness in society was to improve the economy, boost our spending power and tell us that we’ve never had it so good. But it is now becoming clear that ever-higher incomes won’t make us any happier, so policy-makers are now looking for some other way of filling the holes in our lives. Improving the sum total of happiness in society is rapidly establishing itself as an area worth exploring.”<sup>38</sup>

But it is not only the individuals who are impacted. When institutions are changed or destroyed some aspect of our life that had meaning is lost. Main Street has changed drastically in the past 60 years as thousands of mom and pop grocery stores, pizza shops, delis and sub shops, not to mention other retail of all kinds, have been replaced by big box chains and fast food franchises.

The Boston Globe recently noted a new threat to Main Street. This is due to the technology required to show 3-D movies that the industry is moving to for all first run films. Theaters will be required to replace old tried and true mechanical movie projectors with state of the art computer systems at a cost of \$60,000 to \$75,000 each if they wish to be able to project first run movies. Of course the big chains have already made the changeover but thousands of small town theaters, many historic structures in the center of town face closure if they cannot obtain funding for the new equipment. In addition, when a mechanical projector failed, the operator knew how

to fix it. This change will replace those units, many 50 plus years old, with a fancy computer system, that if it fails they do not have the ability to repair. In the name of three-D movies thousands of small towns may lose their theaters and people will have one less reason to go to town.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

“You cannot solve a problem with the same level of thinking that created it”  
Albert Einstein

Let me relate a story from an eighteenth century American diary.

A traveler stopped to watch a farmer building the foundation of a barn. He had assembled the stone and was carefully placing each stone into a drywall foundation five foot thick. This was hot, heavy and very skilled work to get the large stones to fit together to provide a solid stable wall for his barn. After watching a while the traveler asked “Why are you building the wall five feet thick?” The farmer replied “Why not?”<sup>40</sup>

I can answer “why not?” and you can probably answer “why not?” but the fact that the farmer could ask “why not?” says volumes about his perspective on life. That is not a perspective we share, but perhaps there is much we could learn from it if we wanted to.

Is that the dream the Enlightenment was looking for? Is that the new level of thinking Einstein demands? If we fail to discover that and adopt it, we will merely fall back into accepting the logic of the arguments that got us here. Recent brain research into neuroplasticity may be able to provide some assistance here. Studies reveal much about how our brains actually work and why we understand the world the way we do. More importantly, it shows exactly why it is so hard to change a paradigm, but also that it may be much easier to replace it.<sup>41</sup> Big ideas can drive behavior to match them and unusual ideas can shift the brain off automatic where it runs much of the time.

Economic growth is what got us to this point and more growth will produce more of the same if we pursue it. But growth has very real failings and not only in the environmental domain. As noted in the quotes above, there could be real social benefits to ceasing growth and focusing on “happiness” instead. Clearly the environmental impacts of growth are very real and need to be addressed urgently. Considering how far we are over the earth’s capacity limits now, it will not take very long to push the whole system over the edge. However, the point is that we have a great deal to gain by choosing another path not only for the sake of the planet, but for our own sanity and “happiness”. We must grab this opportunity to pursue a better society for all of us and maybe save the planet in the process.

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- <sup>38</sup> <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk>
- <sup>39</sup> *Boston Globe*, Jan. 27, 2013, (pA1 & A6)
- <sup>40</sup> A reference to this story appears in Eric Sloane, *American Barns and Covered Bridges*, New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1954, p70)
- <sup>41</sup> David Rock, *Quiet Leadership*,(New York, Harper, 2006) and Charles S. Jacobs, *Management Rewired*, (New York, Penguin Group, 2009)



\*Sciencenordic.com