Growth or Degrowth is not the Question
Outgrowing Compulsory Socio-ecological Recklessness

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(1) It’s not a secret that growth in the shape of purchasing power (i.e. money) is rather inconsiderate of social as well as ecological needs or damages. However this is largely seen as an effect of wrong attitudes or mind-sets. If it were, the problems could be solved mainly through education and the good example of an avant-garde of thoughtful consumers. Unfortunately, the troubles are rooted more deeply.

(2) The ability to organise our worldwide relations of production, consumption, care, development etc. along socially or ecologically rational aims is obstructed by structural problems. Indeed, human productive forces are now developed to a high degree. Technically it seems feasible to organise social progress along aims that are based on common decisions of ecologically well-educated human beings. In principle, humanity could be united in the will to create a sustainable “wealth of peoples” that doesn’t undermine the basics of sustaining life. Our capability to get information about the urgency of serious changes is growing quickly. Nevertheless it seems to remain unquestioned, that modern life should continue to function by an almost unlimited competition of independently operating agents of private benefit. Why don’t we recognise, that exactly this kind of competition disables us to set socio-ecologically rational goals? Why do we still cherish so much the freedom, to let our private needs decide on what shall grow or vanish?

(3) In order to get an idea of what detains us from creating a more reasonable, that is sustainable, wealth, we have to look at the historical rationality of the capitalist mode of production. The almost unlimited competition of institutions, whose survival depends on their ability to increase invested money, seems to have done a great job: Through a constantly diminishing amount of labour we can satisfy growing needs of consumption of a growing number of individuals. Even standardisation and cultural levelling, often seen as depletion, eventually lead to new kinds of cultural diversification. Seemingly we have to concede, that compulsory economic growth has become the material basis of increasing education, cultural development, freedom, and democracy. The only problem is, that our civil progress exists in a fatal liaison with modern modes of barbarism. The age of enlightenment has seen worst crimes. These days, nothing seems to be able to stop the globalisation of existential risks and disasters.

(4) While Dr. Jekyll’s caring hands of a glittering consumer-capitalism push forward civil progress, Mr. Hyde’s grappling claws are busy with undermining the basic means of survival. This is enforced by the effect that any gain in productivity leads to monetary devaluation. Despite all gains in efficiency – actually because of them¹ – the ability to produce an increasing quantity of goods for the same amount of money also means, that for the same corporate profit more resources have to be exhausted. A similar dynamic is initiated if some competitors can save necessary costs of production by socially or environmentally ruinous exploitation. The price advantage they achieve for their goods, urge their competitors to reduce their prices trough similar methods. This makes ruinous exploitation an economical necessity. As a result the pioneers of Mr. Hyde’s methods lose their ability to gain extra-benefits. They have to pass on prise advantages to the consumers who wrongfully see this as a sign of civil progress. Globalisation makes it difficult to stop this race to the bottom.
Consumers don’t need to face any negative effects of non-sustainability, not even a serious rise in living-expenses as long as new sources of exploitation can be made accessible or more effective methods to acceleration exploitation are developed. Of course, this kind of progress is not sustainable, but it can go on that way for a - dangerously - long time.

(5) The race for private advantages determines our sense of justice. As actors of capitalistic kinds of global interactions, individuals (respectively institutions) do not need to justify themselves for any preconditions or impact of their buying behaviour. That makes it difficult, or even impossible, to identify the fatal binding of weal and woe. As we know from Marx the capitalistic relationships among those, who produce, care, consume, organise or develop human sources of existence or enrichment are established “behind their backs”", that is without consciousness. Hence our economic relationships do not appear as relationships between each other but as relationships to (or even between) money and commodities.iii Our human actions seem to be ruled by practical constraints as if they were a force of nature. An attractive price seems to be the intrinsic attribute of a product or good. It remains beyond the everyday interest of cognition whether a “nice price” was induced by intelligent innovation, by ruinous exploitation or by a mixture of both. We don’t need to give thought to the fact that a commodity is the work result of other humans and the final outcome of nature’s productivity. A decrease in price does not make us question socio-ecological costs, which are paid for by a loss of security, health or future prospects of those on the other side of the act of purchase. Far from it! To get more goods for the same amount of money makes a decrease in price appear as an increase in salary, hence as our own merit. In that way the famous “invisible hand” of the free market transforms real damages on the one side of a global (re-) production chain into the imagination of an increase of social justice on its other side.

(6) Public institutions are supposed to build a regulation framework that leads the economy to terms of socio-ecological sanity. Unfortunately, their ability to do this job is dependent on the business success of exactly those who are to be tamed by these public institutions. Only flourishing economies generate an effectual amount of taxes. Even worse: Democracy is a basic precondition of any social progress, but politics depend on votes of just those, whose everyday life automatically and steadily is giving birth to narrow-minded imaginations of social justice.

(7) The ability to grow out of the structurally anchored (and therefore not self-inflicted) immaturity of social agents is not unconditional. The needed faculties and wants cannot just be called forth. Little successes must be organised, experiences along the way must be evaluated, achievements must be institutionalised. Yet, we have to bear in mind that institutionalisation as well as development of the subjective preconditions to socio-ecologically mindful interactions, cannot be achieved at once, hence they must be imperfect and contradictory. Compared to the world of brilliant theories step-by-step movements with their more or less good ideas and their one-point achievements, which can never be satisfying, might appear worthless. Teaching theory is just not a realistic way to prepare the social conditions of the transformation needed.

(8) Since current means to define and to meet socio-ecologically reasonable goals are limited by historical inability to share responsibility, we need criteria which in principle everyone could accept as “categorical imperatives” of development. Of course, such advice can only be very general, like the following: Basic interactions of humanity should be organised in a manner that enables us to justify to each other what our actions or wants imply, hence decisions about
growth or shrinkage shouldn’t be left to invisible hands. The question is, what let us put our minds together?

(9) Today’s most powerful signpost to socio-ecological rationality, is the principle of sustainable development. All human beings should have the possibility to live a good living, but without undermining the basic means of sustaining life. In order to save attempts of sustainable development from the fate of walking to death on the today’s life treadmill, it needs a historical perspective beyond the age of socio-ecological recklessness.

(10) Eventually a type of international economic order has to be established that is based on a global sustainability management. This is to be taken into consideration because we do have to manage the globalisation of a number of serious risks and damages. Of all things the dangers are pushed forward by the successful development of the new high-tech powers like China, India or Brazil. At the same time no nameable progress was achieved in the war on poverty. The technological and scientific potential to solve these problems cannot be set in power as long as our old ways to do business give us the run-around. Nevertheless, many approaches have the potential to yield hope. We do not need to look for them in the counter-publics of anti-capitalist denominations. Attention should be given to the UN process for defining millennium-sustainability goals. Taxes, disposals or customs paid on the use of certain resources can help to steer the economy into a socio-ecologically rational direction. Doughnut economics shows how to create a field of un-hazardous consumption that neither frets the social nor the ecological boundaries of sustainability. This tasty vision is to be substantiated by serious figures and scenarios about the possibilities, risks and damage we have to face. Science, associations, and action groups are challenged to limit contamination by non-sustainable conditions of living, hence politics. So, beside supporting the official UN process for defining sustainable development goals, they (we) ought to work out independently, what the Sustainability-Doughnut should look like, and how to build up an appropriate common-wealth-bakery.

5 Beside the problems with the ongoing earth worming process within the danger of acidification of oceans and to pass changeover points beyond the process would be controllable anymore particularly mentionable is the dwindling of soil, primer wood or biodiversity
8 Kate Raworth Doughnut economics: http://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/