Economic growth mongering and its apologists

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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One might think that our malfunctioning world would start to look at the clear causes of critical problems. Instead, we are besieged and bamboozled by the usual business-press and governmental focus on economic growth. This form of denial is not limited to capitalists and their reporters and regulators.

The only visible opposition to business-as-usual is actually a Team-B group of cheerleaders for a different shade of growth mongering. In this camp are some politicians and organizations that many progressive people would prefer to love unconditionally. After all, fundamental change, however overdue, is nice to put off or to pretend that it might be smooth.

"With the US awash with unsold homes, builders began work on 965,000 properties last month -- a 30% fall on July 2007." That revealing statistic [seasonally adjusted] was highlighted by The Guardian UK newspaper in an Aug. 20, 2008 article titled, “Economic Slowdown: World Markets Fall Sharply Amid Fears that Credit Crunch Has Further to Run”

Work on properties would not be so bad in itself, but "everyone" is hoping for more home-construction and higher prices for homes. It's insane that we depend on money-growth and infrastructure-growth when we should be concentrating, for example, on decent housing for those needing it. This may mean using existing dwellings and property more fairly, such as repairing buildings and making many smaller homes out of some of the larger, less efficient ones.

The former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund was quoted by the same newspaper on banking collapse: “I would even go further to say 'the worst is to come'," he told a financial conference in Singapore. "We're not just going to see mid-sized banks go under in the next few months, we're going to see a whopper, we're going to see a big one -- one of the big investment banks or big banks," Ken Rogoff said.

What this tells the powers-that-be ought to be different than what it tells the rest of us. But almost everyone is so caught up in the dominant system that they support it, even in vain as they may know a bitch's brew is about to blow. Cool heads such as economist Herman Daly have pointed out that the economy may grow, but the ecosystem does not. However, few have listened seriously to his message of steady-state economics.

The growth economy and the policies of government ignore the twin Achilles Heel issues of climate chaos and petrocollapse. Of the two, climate is starting to be understood, but we're still in kindergarten regarding understanding fast-dwindling petroleum's pervasive role in society and enabling economic growth. Even without the upending threats of climate chaos and petrocollapse, the only direction an overbuilt economy can go -- debt-ridden, masses of people disenfranchised -- is way down, fast. But instead of a correcting recession or depression, part of the normal "business cycle" of the modern capitalist economy, we see no end of stratagems to prop up never-ending growth. Cancer grows never-endingly, to a certain fatal point.

The house of cards will of course crash, but preparing for it openly at "high levels" would be an even more unpopular sin than admitting there's an elephant in the room. Meanwhile, we will see the card-house fall much harder thanks to the props and overextension of spending, resource exploitation, “free trade” schemes and more, that we've seen since the early 1990s. Bill Clinton got his marching orders and passed them on to the Bushies. As long as the U.S. endures, before the time comes for bioregional communities with local sovereignty post-crash, the government will essentially not change; it cannot.

Growth is slowing now, spreading fear among those who wish to know nothing different than the philosophy of the cancer cell. Slowed growth or a halt in growth tell some "anti-growth true conservatives" that we may have nothing more to worry about. But everything is still geared to growth. And the people led by the corporate press and the chambers of commerce want more growth -- not more human rights and freedom, or a reversal of our carbon emissions, but more growth and therefore all the evils and ills that go with it.

Accommodating more people as part of population growth or immigration solves nothing, but fattens the wallets of the growth industries responsible for urban sprawl and increased consumer spending.

The apologists for growth are not just the industrialists, bankers, investors, wanna-be capitalists or run-of-the-mill property owner. No, the apologist for growth does not have to be one who just sees his or her selfish interest. In truth, anyone who does not address growth and oppose the inefficient, wasteful consumer economy is at least a de facto apologist, closing his or eyes and ears to the sham of endless growth. A reckoning and collapse? Oh, can’t talk about that except on fringe websites or in our living rooms. Or at the bar. Or in the woods. In the streets.

The Democratic Party is full of leaders who aren't really an alternative to the Republicans, in that they all agree on growth being good and essential. Yet, the issues that the Democrats like to call their own are linked directly to the mistake of pandering to growth.

Environmentalists promoting a green technofix for the present consumer economy of this population size or greater are also apologists for growth. They may vociferously or privately deny it. But when we look closely at these promoters of "clean" cars and their sensible-sounding hope for replacing today's electric power with renewables, these "activists" are basically business boosters making a living as de facto representatives for technology corporations. This is because they are not seriously advocating vast, immediate curtailment of both energy use and economic growth. Sharing cars? Hoo, what a grant-killer that position would be if it were a serious initiative for the whole nation. These activists/apologists sometimes include the idea of slashing greenhouse gas emissions immediately, but how can that happen if people are mainly urged to buy this and buy that for a greener planet, or to wait for leadership for these reforms? Such activists/apologists are unwittingly (at best) trying to prop up the system. In their own defense they say they can't do anything else because people are not ready for deep changes in lifestyle.

These activists/apologists are of two camps: (A) Those who understand and admit that the U.S. is an overpopulated nation doing the most to destroy the climate and poison the world for profit, while it boasts of consumer comfort. This first group figures it might as well cater to the nation’s embryonic instinct to save a little energy and save money over the long haul. This is often a philosophical resignation that there's nothing else to do, and besides, getting arrested for protesting climate chaos is so inconvenient. (B) The other group of activists/apologists -- who when pressed claim to support conservation first and the technofix second -- do not actually prioritize promoting life-style change by the public; the basic message is "Green jobs are here today! Technology will save us! George Bush and the oilmen can be history soon if only government will green itself and spend money differently!"

An example of legislation-oriented, technofix-boosting activism is the U.S. Climate Emergency Counci, a non-governmental organization in Washington, D.C. They don't say, "Stop driving!" for example, but rather something like "Someday soon you can keep driving with a cleaner conscience.” I wrote to them after seeing their recent slick mass appeal to the liberal/left/green computer user, hoping to interest them in acknowledging peak oil and overpopulation in their analysis and message. No dice. They had circulated this, on August 14:

"The solutions to our economic and climate crises are clear: Invest in clean, renewable energy and technologies that will create millions of green jobs and solve the climate challenge."

Part of my reaction to them was, “There's a grain of truth in what you say, but you limit your message terribly, and simplistic notions don't help. Such as, a ‘solution’ to stop global warming which is impossible.”

The defensive response I got back was basically a challenge for me to agree with them that that “5 million green jobs” is "important.” And, “We are nowhere near a car-free economy. Maybe in several decades.” So, the climate and the petroleum-based infrastructure will have to just wait eh?

Far from stupid, such groups are quite clever, as are many apologists of growth, including Barack Obama, for whom I have a great deal of respect. It is time for them all to realize that economic growth has caused immense destruction and can only lead us to the equivalent of the slaughter house. Let’s stop being stupid as a society and get real for a change.

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Lorna Salzman, Culture Change contributing editor, offered this addendum:

The only fault with this article is that it doesn't name enough names. What about the Apollo Alliance and Green For All? The latter is Van Jones' latest venture, which leaps over the economic and energy collapses without a pause and focuses on all those new jobs that will raise up the poor, as if nothing were going to happen between now and the time when the jobs materialize. This is a period that will last ten to fifty years. Guess what's going to happen in that time... I wonder just what THEY think.

What I also find inexplicable is how people like Van Jones can attack environmentalists and let the corporations, financiers and congressmen off the hook. They seem to have peculiar ideas about who their enemies are, and no clue to

their friends.

It is mightily depressing to realize how few friends the planet has, friends who really understand the underlying problem and who are willing to face up to the harsh reality that is starting to crash down on us, economically and ecologically. Fair weather friends is, I believe, the term for these people who, when the going gets tough, get lost.

It isn't as if environmentalists haven't been talking for DECADES about the disastrous effects of growth or the impossibility of it continuing much longer. Remember The Limits to Growth? The Blueprint for Survival? Both came out in 1972, with the Limits updated twice since then.

But apparently so many people, minorities and advocates for the poor included, have bought into the American Dream that they will have to be ripped yelling and screaming away from it. It really is hard to refrain from saying to these guys: Hey, we told you so.

Further reading:

"Can ecological economists stop the mainstreamers before it's too late?" by John Feeney:

culturechange.org

A Steady-State Economy "A failed growth economy and a steady-state economy are not the same thing; they are the very different alternatives we face." by Herman E. Daly, for the Sustainable Development Commission, UK, April 24, 2008:

sd-commission.org.uk

"Economic Slowdown: World Markets Fall Sharply Amid Fears that Credit Crunch Has Further to Run" Aug. 20, 2008, by Larry Elliott, The Guardian UK:

guardian.co.uk