What could a post-growth society look like and how should we prepare for it?

Published by Brian Davey on June 10, 2011

This was the theme of a massive congress held in Berlin last month. I attended it and have written a report for Feasta which describes the role played by Attac and the Decroissance movement, Vandana Shiva's critique of economic growth in India, the vision of “Buen Vivir” put forward by representatives of indigenous communities of Latin America and the new relationship being forged between the greens and the left in Europe.

The Beyond Growth Congress

When I booked for this conference two weeks beforehand, 1,000 participants were expected. However, at the closing session on May 22nd, it was reported that 2,500 had participated in the discussion. Most of the individual workshop discussions had at least 100 participants, many up to 300 or more. Plenary sessions were gigantic.

It was clear that post growth thinking has arrived in Germany and is now so strong that it is difficult to believe that it will not soon be making a major political impact. There were over 50 organisations supporting, funding and promoting this conference – including several prominent think tanks and foundations. It represented a major convergence.

The role of Attac as a melting-pot of ideas

The main organisation of the conference came from Attac – which is growing throughout Europe, and obviously very powerfully in Germany, as a place where quite divergent trends of left and green thinking can meet. For a number of years academics who are developing ideas around social justice and ecology as critics of globalisation, have been converging on Attac. The Attac bookstall has a huge selection of its own publications – green left academic studies of various themes. Attac is not party political and many different strands of political opinion from hard left to post growth green can be found in its ranks. It has also succeeded in engaging the trade unions – for example IG Metal and Verdi – the engineers union and the service sector union – both of which were fully involved in the discussions. A colleague who I worked with in the 1990s tells me that attac is very diverse but that the mainly young people that get involved with it find no problems in coping with that – a few years ago there was difficulty bridging the division between the ecological and environmental politics of the greens and the social and other focuses taken up by the left and trade unions. There are still divisions but they were handled non acrimoniously and, as a major IG Metal speaker said, it is clear that there is now an explicit consensus that social and ecological must be worked on together.

It is important to be clear however what attac is not – it is not, like Transition Initiatives, working directly in project development. It organises conferences, publications, demonstrations, petitions etc. It facilitates campaigning. Its spokespeople (like Nico Paech, an ecological economist Professor at Oldenberg University, and one of its academic rising stars) will speak warmly of community gardens. Attac does not however organise such gardens itself…..It is a meeting point, and a melting pot, where diverse ideas meet and cross fertilise to develop as a political force.

The overwhelming majority of delegates at this conference were young people. As the two women on the podium at the closing
Destructive growth in India

The influence of the global south was powerful. Vandana Shiva opened this Congress – and made a powerful intervention about the way in which growth in India is rooted in a host of destructive practices and processes. Her main point was that growth is just a measure of activity but when you look at what is growing in India then these processes are mostly damaging to the least powerful and polarised wealth. To say that growth was needed for the south was to miss the point. What is needed is a different development model – one that is socially just and not ecologically destructive. She said she has been invited to advise the Bhutan government that is focused on “national happiness” rather than growth. Her role will be agricultural adviser to promote organic production which will reduce growth because farmers will be buying less chemical and other inputs for example.

What this alternative development model can be, or should be, in developed countries and the global south was a major theme for the conference. What was clear and explicit (a point also made by the French Decroissance Movement) is that the pain, distress and social chaos caused by recession is NOT the model. Degrowth, Post Growth Economics is different from being driven into poverty in the interests of the finance and banking sector. What is needed is a different vision, different institutions and a different development model – posed as a positive alternative. In that respect this conference shared something with the idea of the Transition Movement and, again, with the French Decroissance Movement, that argues that as contraction will have to happen the important point is to shape the process of contraction in as positive a fashion as possible.

In this process, as already indicated by the reference to the participation of Vandana Shiva, there was a clear recognition of the value of dialoguing with ideas from the global south. Particularly influential at this conference were voices and ideas from Ecuador and Bolivia. In the search for overarching visions and goals for a post growth economy activists in Germany have picked up on the voices of indigenous communities in Bolivia and Ecuador, and particularly the idea of Buen Vivir – Gutes Leben – Good Life. I write this aware that these european words will sound banal and there is a problem with important ideas getting lost in translation between languages and cultures. In fact the starting point for this idea of “Good Life” is the cosmology, philosophy, culture and political economic ideas of a diversity of indigenous communities and tribes in the Andean region. The culture and thinking of these communities are re-emerging after centuries of colonialism, catholicism, and the impact of having their economies subordinated to processes of resource extraction. Now the ideas of these communities are being put into the political discourse as their alternative to “development” and growth – which has brought nothing but misery and destruction up to now.

Buen Vivir: a vision for the future?

For the indigenous communities of the Andes the alternative to growth is self evident. It is their traditional notion of “Sumak Kawsay”, a Quecha word that is translated into Spanish as “Buen Vivir”. “Sumak Kawsay” puts the relationships of humans and communities to Nature as their central point. It is an idea that existed prior to colonialism and the development of the ecologically destructive extraction industries as well as the plantation monocultures. The idea is based on the cosmological visions and ancestral traditions of many different tribes and communities and decisively breaks from western concepts of development. For this reason the summary words, “Good Life”, nowhere near adequately convey what is meant to an English speaking/ European readership.

The fact that these ideas are coming forward now, and are influencing the politics and constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia is incredibly important. It not only gives rise to states that explicitly reject growth and ‘development’ as their goals, but reflects an emancipation process. The indigenous population in the Andes have for centuries been repressed and marginalised, but now are able to put their own ideas into the political process. (In Bolivia 55% of the population are indigenous peoples, making up 36 different ethnic groups. White people are a mere 15%. In Ecuador the indigenous population are 35% of the total population).

It seems obvious to say that common ways of thinking about growth and development among the population of the industrial countries assumes that peoples in poor countries would want to develop along a similar path to what has happened in the industrial world – for this is the direction of “progress” and reason. That is, after all, why they are called ‘developing countries’. However, for indigenous peoples “development” and growth has actually been a long history of colonial exploitation, suffering, racism, the oppression of women, not to mention the destruction of “Mother Earth”. It is thus by no means the case that all of these people see their further “development” as a desirable future and we should stop assuming it. On the contrary many indigenous peoples have reason to counterpose their own cultures and way of life and see their traditional lifestyles as having an important contribution to
prevent a economically suicidal path for the planet.

Is consumerism really a part of human nature?

I recall an email exchange with a journalist on the Financial Times who was certain that poor people everywhere wanted to have electrical household appliances, a car, and all mod cons. But this assumption that consumerism is a natural and inevitable feature of human nature is not something that one can assume of the exponents of Buen Vivir. For example, Elisa Vega from Bolivia, who leads the department for de-patriarchalisation at the ministry for decolonialisation, was sure about the quality of life associated with traditional ways of living when she spoke at the conference. Her grandfather had died recently at 110 years of age and was active to the last. He did not save money, but saved up plentiful reserves of non perishable foodstuffs. Elisa said that indigenous peoples were not consumption orientated. There was no point in having more than was necessary. If you saw her again, she said, it would be wearing the same traditional dress and the same jewellery, the jewellery being centuries old. Things must be protected and made to last. What was important to indigenous peoples were family and community relationships – and the relationship to mother nature, Pachamama.

In this respect Buen Vivir is very different from any kind of individualistic idea of ‘Good Life’. It is only conceivable in the social context in which people live. It involves striving for harmony and balance rather than dominance and this is importance because the concept has plurality and a co-existence based on respect – both of human communities and of Nature – integral to it.

Thus de-colonisation in the Andean region is not tending to the creation of a new monolithic point of view but is seen as needing to be built on a diversity of cultures. Nor is it about a simple return to ancestral and traditional thinking. Buen Vivir not only allows differences but actively seeks them out. Thinkers from the Andes communicate with other cultures as well as with dissident western thinkers and make reference to philosophers like Bloch and Walter Benjamin, as well as Aristotle and the thinkers of deep ecology.

So what, then, in summary does this Buen Vivir consist of? The general principles can be summarised thus:

- Harmony and balance of all and with all
- Complementarity, solidarity and equality
- Collective wellbeing and the satisfaction of the basic needs of all in harmony with mother earth
- Respect for the rights of mother earth and for human rights
- Recognition of people for what they are and not for what they own
- Removal of all forms of colonialism, imperialism and interventionism
- Peace between people and with mother earth

Expressed thus one can see that this is the very antithesis of the idea of consumerist wellbeing – which is largely focused on material possessions so that people can profile themselves in a status hierarchy over and above others. One is reminded of the book by Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, which shows clearly that wellbeing and health is directly correlated with the degree of equality in a society. The social harmony is important to well being and a good life – and the Andean communities see the importance of a harmony with nature too.

The rights of the earth

Let us now turn to the rights of mother earth, or or Pachamama. It was on the basis of the rights of Mother Earth that the Bolivian government rejected the Copenhagen compromise and then went on to organise their own conference in Cochambaba where they put forward and agreed a charter for the rights of mother earth in 2010.

To understand Pachamama properly one has to understand “Pacha” as a key concept for cultures in the Andes. It is an ambiguous concept that refers to the totality of being. It includes not only space and time but also a form of life that transcends space and time. “Pacha is not only time and space, it is the ability, to have an active participation in the universe, to immerse in it, to be in it.’ Manqhapacha’ is the telluric (earth related) dimension of the Pacha, it relates to the inner earth as the origin” (Thomas Fatheuer, “Buen Vivir” Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Vol. 17, page 22)

In short the concept relates to the way in which indigenous people not only do NOT see the earth as a resource store that belongs to
them – they see themselves as part of the earth, they are walking and living pieces of the earth, as one person at the Congress explained. They do not have an anthropocentric world view with humans as the peak of creation and its owner – their view is nature centric with humans merely participants and parts in this world.

From this different view of how the world is a Charter for the Rights of Mother Earth has now been put forward which is integrally connected to the Good Life perspective.

According to the Cochabamba Convention of 22 April 2010 the following rights for mother earth were suggested to be

- Right to Life and to Existence
- The right to be respected
- The right continue its cycles and life processes free from damage caused by humans
- Right to protection of its identity and integrity as a diverse, self directed and interrelated being
- Right to water as the source of life
- Right to clean air
- Right to all round health
- Right to freedom from contamination and pollution by toxic and radioactive wastes
- The right not to be impaired by genetic modification or having its structure modified which would threaten its life and health functions
- Right to speedy and complete rescission of human activities which breach the principles of the declaration

It will be noticed that this is not “sustainable development”, nor can it even be described as designing and arguing for a “green economy”. Neither is it the same as putting decarbonising the economy into focus as a central aim. It puts into question, something deeper – the value…or otherwise…of all our european concepts of modernity in which nature is “out there” as an external store of resources and a sink, available for human use. This is a different voice, coming from a different cultural viewpoint that is not part of the western tradition.

The western tradition, with its assumed superiority, is now challenged – nevertheless there is a connection that would be understandable in terms of western concepts in that the ideas of Pachamama and the Good Life have been embodied in law and in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia.

The pressure to exploit

But what of the practice? Ecuador and Bolivia have been ploughing their own path in South America but they are not able to cut themselves off completely from the processes of capitalist development. Far from it. Both Alberto Acosta and Elisa Vega explained how hard it was in practice to counterpose these ideas to priorities and pressure of global economic forces.

The global economic pressures are experienced in their countries as a drive to open up to exploitation for and by mining and energy interests. As Thomas Fatheuer argues, it is an irony of history that it turns out to be Bolivia of all places that has the world’s greatest reserves of lithium – necessary for batteries for mobile phones and electric cars and a strategic resource for the future. It is true that the lithium is to be found in a salt desert area and would have little effect either on biodiversity or indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, when the Bolivian government negotiates with Japanese interests for a strategic economic partnership it is reproducing another form of what was repeatedly called ‘extractionist economics’ in the Beyond Growth Congress.

It remains to be seen how this will work itself out. There are dangers of Buen Vivir being pressurised into a compromise “Buen Vivir Lite”. But there are also some clearer examples of how things might be. One such example, more in tune with “Buen Vivir” principles, are whether to open up exploitation of oil reserves in the Yasuni area of Ecuador, which is part of the rainforests and has a high level of biodiversity. In this respect Alberto Acosta has suggested that Ecuador leave the oil in the ground and be compensated for doing that – however at a price much under the world price for oil. So far no developed countries have shown a willingness to take up the offer.

In conclusion, what I above all took from this discussion was the need to stop assuming that development is either necessary or that
it is what everyone naturally wants – including people in poor communities. Perhaps especially in many poor communities. I recall a description of how, in Ireland, the people living on the west coast adjacent to the Corrib gas field rejected on shore development even though they were offered much money. The truth is, and this was also expressed by Vandana Shiva in her contribution to the conference, most development leads to the expropriation of poor people, to debt, to the poisoning of their living environment, to immense suffering and precarious alternative forms of employment – with the benefits going to a smaller group and the corporate elite. In the circumstances a qualitative change is necessary and the core ideas of what a better life constitutes, to replace growth are at their roots quite simple principles, but important nonetheless.

The greens and the left

The discussions at the ‘Beyond Growth’ conference were particularly interesting as a left and green dialogue, in which some trade unions were taking part. For many of the left wingers at this conference the problem of growth is a problem of capitalism in so far as capital is driven by competition and profit maximisation to continually increase monetary valuations by and for the owners of the economy. As a simplification one might even say: of course the left would be against growth, because growth means more capitalism, with all its effects.

But this then raises the issue of what is the alternative? I did not notice anyone here arguing for the ideas that were in circulation a few decades ago – a centrally planned economy, whether led by a party hierarchy or under some form of workers control. If Buen Vivir was part of a discussion about the alternative vision for society beyond growth (a vision clearly needing adaption to conditions in the industrial countries) what are the alternative means of delivery for a Post Growth and therefore, for the left, a post capitalist economy?

For many here the buzz words were “Solidarity Economy”. This is not specified rigidly but it is obviously meant to involve a variety of arrangements and struggles that are bottom up – from the trade unions struggling to get policies for, and democratic practices in, their employing organisations; from workers and consumers co-operatives; eco-social enterprises and community projects including community gardens and community energy projects and women’s organisations, arrangements like community supported agriculture and peer production arrangements which would promote and re-establish commons – both natural commons and cultural and digital ones.

Solidarity economics

I mentioned above that the organisers, ‘attac’, are mainly campaigners. They are not like the Transition Movement in that respect. However, it is fair to note too that most people at the conference appeared to be in favour of building up of new kinds of grass roots economic organisations directly, DIY style. For example, in the workshop discussion about agriculture and food in the post growth economy, an organic farmer with experience since the late 1980s described how the organic market had evolved in that period with the development of Bioladen – mini supermarket chains specialising in ecological foodstuffs. After a couple of decades many organic farmers were now in a position of very weak bargaining power to these chains. They were receiving low prices and were finding it very difficult to survive. For this reason, the farmer at the workshop had decided that a new kind of arrangement was needed where farmers came together directly with a known circle of customers who share the risks and share the harvest with the farmers, who work together to specify what they want and are prepared to pay for it up front. This is what he was now working towards. (Community supported agriculture). This is solidarity economics working for farmers.

Of course it is also not good enough to merely have a loose collection of projects and hope that they will thrive individually. There is a realisation here that, for the individual initiatives and projects of this solidarity economy to grow, the projects need to network – to develop structures of mutual support – building communications and network structures, organising joint training projects, making common publicity, working for better framework conditions for the solidarity economy to develop. (These are, for example, the aims of the Initiative for a Solidarity Economy http://www.solidarische-oekonomie.de/). In my view it would be very good here to be able to bring in ideas like those of Stafford Beer – about Viable Systems Modelling as the basis for networking. Unfortunately I did not see any evidence of ideas like the VSM – but in such a huge event one can never know. See http://www.esrad.org.uk/resources/vsmg_3/screen.php?page=preface.

The role of governments
So much then for bottom up. But what of the state? What chance is there for meaningful top down? What can be gained from
depolitical engagement and activity? Clearly attac is a campaigning organisation and there is a wish and desire to campaign also for the
best framework conditions for the development of the solidarity economy. (eg specifying eco-social conditions for public sector and
state purchasing).

There was much talk of the need for democratisation to facilitate the post growth economy and society and to support its new and
emerging arrangements. However there was also great scepticism how much can be achieved at this time. The grip of big corporate
lobby interests over politics at national and european level is simply too great.

This is important for the evaluation of the concept of “Green Growth”. Of course, Green Growth is a corporate agenda. Its assumption
is that state policies to promote “clean technologies”, improving the efficiency with which natural resources and sinks are used, can
achieve a drastic decoupling whereby the consumption of natural resources and energy and sinks is reduced, even as the growth
process continues. This was doubted because the state was simply not strong enough against corporate interests.

As was said in another workshop this is a fantasy – in the context of the rebound effect, in the face of the way carbon intensive
industries have been displaced to other countries and because of the declining energy return on energy invested. As Tim Jackson
from the UK said in this workshop, there is no doubt that relative de-coupling can take place (reduction in resource use per unit of
production) but absolute de-coupling (a real reduction in resource use) requires falling production and that requires a system change.

Indeed most of the presenters here agreed that the problems we face are systemic – sometimes seeing systemic in Marxist terms,
sometimes not. Whatever. There is no doubt that the state is part of the system too – bound in by the interests of big corporate
groups – and in current conditions absolute decoupling is not going to happen. The state is a weak instrument for the kind of change
needed and must be changed. It is a little better in the more democratic societies perhaps. But too weak nonetheless.

In these circumstances where are we to see the possibilities for real change occurring? How do we get the necessary ‘top down’ to
support the ‘bottom up’? My own view, expressed in the de-coupling workshop was to argue that systemic change from one system
to another is not like the adoption of a policy it is a much more far reaching process. However, one way of looking at it was to
compare it with the reconfiguration of a computer which must be switched off – and then on again – if reconfiguration is to take place.

Beyond collapse

Perhaps the nearest that we will come to this will be the chaos caused by peak oil. I pointed out that a few months ago a department
in the German army had produced a document that foresaw chaos because of peak oil – particularly the possibility that it would lead to
a financial system collapse. I suggested the need to think about what programme would be needed to prepare for the surviving of a
‘switching off and on’ again – what political economic ecological programme would help to start again in a very different direction –
towards a solidarity economy?

http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,715138,00.html

In the concluding session of the congress the attac representative on the podium said he felt that the discussion at this “Beyond
Growth” Congress had been much more positive than other events that he had been too where there had been gloomy or alarming
predictions of collapse. Collapse prophecies can put people off. However, at the beginning of the congress Nicho Paech argued that
we have to prepare people for what is to come in the next couple of decades. Perhaps we can and must combine both perspectives.
To repeat once again – a contraction is coming whether we like it or not – but by preparing we can shape what is to come, rather
than being passive victims. Perhaps we might even find that we are able to create a society in which a Good Life is possible.

Download Brian Davey’s translation of the summary document produced at the end of the conference
Read a translation of Silke Helfrich’s talk on the commons beyond growth

Featured image: Vandana Shiva speaking at the conference. Author: Fiona Krakenbuerger. Source:http://www.jenseits-des-
wachstums.de/index.php?id=8263&L=2.
Brian Davey trained as an economist but, aside from a brief spell working in eastern Germany showing how to do community development work, has spent most of his life working in the community and voluntary sector in Nottingham particularly in health promotion, mental health and environmental fields. He helped develop Ecoworks, a community garden and environmental project for people with mental health problems. He is a member of the Feasta Energy and Climate Working Group and the Co-ordinator of Cap and Share UK. His life-long interest is why and how people and systems break down. He lives in Nottingham.

Note: Feasta is a forum for exchanging ideas. By posting on its site Feasta agrees that the ideas expressed by authors are worthy of consideration. However, there is no one ‘Feasta line’. The views of the article do not necessarily represent the views of all Feasta members.

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4 Replies to “What could a post-growth society look like and how should we prepare for it?”

Luke Devlin
June 28, 2011 at 10:18 pm

Thanks for this great summary Brian, was at the conference too and it was as inspiring as you describe.

sunweb
August 8, 2011 at 11:04 pm
I have been planning for a post-growth vis a vis energy and resource constraints since 1968. I believe the choir will do many things out of belief and perhaps wisdom. However, I give you these two quotes:

“There is within every human the perpetual pull of opposites. Fear taunts courage; willpower struggles with appetite; order with disorder. Caution tugs at curiosity as impulse teases aversion. For all the stimulation of the new, there remains the powerful comfort and security of the known. We are, like Dr. Dolittle’s famous Pushme-Pullyou, conflicted creatures. Individuality is defined by these differences, by where the balance is struck.

But one impulse in particular seems to have weak competition or none at all. The appeal of ease, or the less-taxing option, is unquestioned. Only the obstinate, the perverse, the eccentric, or the mad, the conventional wisdom toes, intentionally choose the more difficult over the easier method of reaching a goal. The hatchet or the ax over the chain saw? “I like the feel of the ax in my hand, the resistance, the thud of impact. I like to feel I am linked to what I am doing. I like the quiet in the forest, the smell of rosin, even the living shudder of the tree as the x bites,” says the old woodsman. The logger smiles, pulls the starter on his chain saw, and has seven trees down in the time the woodsman spends on one. And the logger’s boss brings in the feller-buncher, the giant machine that grasps each tree in a steel embrace, then cuts it and stacks it with its downed companions as if it were kindling; and logger smiles no more as the new machine does the work of seven chain-saw-bearing men and he finds himself reading want ads. Seldom, however, is the original impulse to make things easier questioned.

Close on the heels of ease is cheap, and the combination, especially in goods, is virtually irresistible. Low cost and convenience: the machine made it possible.


and

We will do anything and everything to maintain our present personal level of energy use and the comfort it affords us. We will do anything and everything to the earth, to other people and even to ourselves to continue on this path. And if we don’t have the energy level we see others have, we will do anything and everything to the earth, to other people and even to ourselves to attain that level. The proof of this assertion is simple; we are doing it.

From: The Curmudgeon Report


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