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Limits to Growth - denying the bleeding obvious.

In 1972 a body calling itself the Club of Rome (from their meeting place) attempted to popularise a notion, earlier suggested by Thomas Malthus, that neither humanity nor any other species could expand indefinitely. This had never been much of a problem before; indigenous people had always found ways of controlling population growth. Either natural conditions and shortages of food limited population growth, or cultures included contraception in their practices. From ancient Greeks exposing weak infants to the vagaries of the weather, to Australian aborigines slitting the penis of over-fertile men, overpopulation does not appear to have been a difficult problem for humanity until recently. All this appears to have changed with the advent of the industrial age.

The first major academic contribution came from the Rev. Malthus, who, amongst some good arguments linking resource shortage problems to population growth also included spurious arguments which blamed the poor for overpopulation. His influence was certainly one of the factors which led to the early dumping of Britain's convicts on Australia. Malthus has had a bad press on the Left; some of it deservedly because of the undoubtedly right-wing components of his meaningless solutions. There can however be little doubt that his maths was sound if not novel.

In the latter years of the 20th century the Malthusian argument assumed new significance. From 1½ billion humans at the beginning of the 20th century we are now heading for a peak of 9 billion some time this century. This is less than half the story; in addition to the increase in population we now have a growing percentage of these escalating populations consuming resources at a per capita rate which is many times higher than even the rich in imperialist countries of 100 years ago. Furthermore, this consumption is in commodities which are getting and less accessible as time goes on. This is driven by consumer capitalism, a distortion of the original system which requires the industries of capitalist countries to produce more and more useless goods and to persuade ordinary people to acquire them at great cost to their health and social lives, only to discard them after a brief period of ownership.

Alongside this destructive ideology, or as part of it, the system developed a pseudo-science called "classical" economics which, as part of its dogma, claimed that the well-being of nations depended on ever-expanding per capita consumption, referred to as "growth", even though it was in no way connected with increasing human satisfaction or happiness.

In the 1950s a group calling itself the Club of Rome put forward a slim volume titled "*Limits to Growth*" which expanded the Malthusian argument to take in the depletion of resources. Just as the argument for reduction of excessive population growth had been anathema to various religious and political groups (it still is), so the idea that you couldn't expand resource consumption endlessly rang a sour note with the prophets of capitalism. Without digesting the gist of the document, they fastened on to an extrapolation which had used the maths of the scientists who had compiled the original report to project a use-by date for certain natural commodities beyond which these resources would "run out".

They could then proclaim that *Limits to Growth* was “wrong” whenever these limits were reached and there was still a bit left. We still have people who claim that we can have growth without increasing the use of scarce resources, only it hasn’t happened so far.

However, the most ludicrous contortions are performed by people nominally on our side of the fence. These are environmentalists who have convinced themselves and are trying to convince us that it is perfectly possible to run a capitalist system without growth. By definition, this would be a capitalist system with no profit. After all, the notion of profit implies that after everything in the system is paid for, a bit remains. That bit is called the profit and is owned by the capitalist. The capitalist doesn’t want to shove it under the mattress; he wants to reinvest it so that next year it will show the profit percentage he expects year after year. Usually, this profit on the previous period’s profit is called growth. And I cannot for the life of me see how you keep capitalism alive while you abolish growth. And even though some people who are pushing the notion of a surviving capitalism without growth are card-carrying environmentalists, I must agree with the right-wing economists who trumpet from the rooftops that the success or otherwise of their system is expressed by growth figures. If there is no growth, they say, there is no capitalism and all I can say is – yes, so what?

The system’s ideologues, which means all capitalist governments as well as most institutions of learning therefore, while claiming to be primarily concerned with the wellbeing of the environment and those who share it, actually are concerned with maintaining the wellbeing of the capitalist system. A perfect example is the way in which PM Kevin Rudd in a recent international address put forward carbon sequestration as the only way of dealing with global warming when it actually represents the only way he can see to save his beloved and highly profitable fossil fuel industry, which successive federal governments have been supporting to the tune of 6 billion dollars per annum of taxpayers money

What has all this to do with technology? Quite a bit. Consumer capitalism is a child of technological development. The very fact that world population can rise to the extent it has done, is one of the more beneficial effects of technology. And the current crisis in Capitalism, although it has features of previous crises, has aspects which are the outcome of technological developments which have allowed instant communications everywhere as well as instant adjustments to financial transactions. Technology even impacts the way people are reacting, by providing some alternative media, some enlightening, some confusing.

The confusion being spread by the new media brings an entirely new aspect to radical politics. There was a contradiction in the old class struggle. The more successful the trade unions and the parliamentary system were, the more could the system spread the illusion of an ever better capitalism. The impact of the ecological crisis coupled with an ever greater impact of the current financial crisis is creating new political situations which reduce the effectiveness of these old illusions. To predict where all this is leading is of course quite impossible.

However, for once it is again possible for real political alternatives to come to the fore. We are entering uncharted waters which afford new opportunities. Once more, we are faced with the choice of some form of co-operative society as against the near certainty of barbarism. Only this time the choice comes in a new form and with a new urgency.