



Existential turn of society

The policy window

for a change to a "new sufficiency"

is wide open

By Marius Fröchling, 2022

Growth is the natural metamorphosis of life, is continuation, further development, wealth of experience. To negate this per se fails because of reality. Nevertheless, it is evident that overexploitation, plundering and excessive "metabolization" of nature lead to changes in the environment, which in turn complicate human (over-)living conditions - which would probably be more like withering than growth. At least from the point of view of our species.

These activities must be limited, according to the latest IPCC report, one of the largest interdisciplinary global community projects of our time. And despite a newly dawning multipolar world, the power nations of the world community had recently declared themselves quite unanimously in favor of the climate goals. There thus seems to be a high degree of agreement on the problem across cultural circles.

Infinite growth and its limits

But far from the hitherto rather symbolic climate policy, a rethinking is also obvious from a security policy point of view: Do we not rather increase the resilience capacity of the liberal world by being independent of growth? Inherently crisis-ridden capitalism (Kindleberger) thankfully "evaporated everything standing and stagnant," made mass prosperity possible for dozens of nations, but has meanwhile increasingly lost its genuine appeal:

For too fragile, too monopolistic, too panicky and too susceptible to the influence of financially strong interest groups, the increase-oriented basic system is now proving itself in practice to be incapable in the long term of credibly asserting the liberal community of values against archaic and totalitarian styles of government.

What is opening up as a result of the impending economic and utility malaise is a policy window, a corridor of opportunity to cultivate a new minimalism, to rethink social status therein, to help long-established cultural concepts achieve a new renaissance, and to redirect growth to a qualitative dimension. "We have to be honest with ourselves and say: for the time being, we will lose the prosperity we had for years," Rainer Dulger is also quoted as saying.

German employer president, after all. "In the end, we will be 20 to 30 percent poorer," is also the verdict of Martin Wansleben, chief executive of the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce.

The fat years are over

The Western world, far from the Euro- and Anglo-centric world view, has a difficult position: For centuries, at the expense of weaker countries and the natural environment, an empire of prosperity was created, which has no equal in history. Built on morally clay feet and with the help of internationally looted goods, the Western system enables its members to enjoy individual values of freedom that frighten some traditionalists, disturb many worldviews, and at the same time generate unimagined enthusiasm and appeal worldwide, especially among the younger generations.

When the G7 leadership recently solemnly postulated that it would make an integrating contribution to the world community and its infrastructure (i.e., to secure markets) with a 600-billion-dollar investment, this is not entirely the wrong direction, depending on one's perspective, but it leaves an insipid aftertaste if one takes into account the origins and the actual dividends of the prosperity that is being benevolently and jovially distributed with full hands. Especially since a mere \$4.5 billion has been allocated for global hunger relief.

We would do the world community a greater favor if we were to start structurally with ourselves.

Just - at the expense of others

Western culture must not fall victim to a late-modern decadence, an anesthetized carelessness, a narcissistic economic perversion of figures, a corporate capitalist monoculture. For with the image of an internally rotten, ailing, decadent, visionless society, a narrative worthy of support - for example, in the race with the BRICS states - can be made attractive neither to its own populations nor to people in the global South: "When it is said by our foreign minister... Values-driven foreign policy... And we're going to Qatar. What is that? Do we want to make fun of people?"

So we have to decide already: Either we're serious about it, or we're not serious about it. But we can't say: There are certain countries where we're moral and there are other countries where we're not interested in morality at all," argues Richard David Precht on "Markus Lanz" (ZDF) on July 13.

Such a new narrative would have to continue to include the values that have been painfully fought for, such as diversity, freedom, the rule of law, tolerance and equality. However, it must also be able not to claim these rights at the expense of others - i.e., demand mindful treatment of other people, materials and the environment, keep supply chains transparent, strengthen public welfare-oriented structures, downsize, encourage and reward consumption reduction.

It must strive for a healthy societal metabolism ("Society with a smaller metabolism" according to Kallis) after we have literally overeaten ourselves for years.

We cannot turn back the wheel of time. In the eyes of billions, the West's vest remains soiled and will probably never again shine in white. And yet it would be an overdue signal to the world community, as it were on its civilizational deathbed: We Bosch(n)eid ourselves now. We cultivate and favor lifestyles that are not only sustainable from an ecological point of view, but are themselves desirable for members of society from a behaviorist rational-choice logic.

And in doing so, we notice: There is another way. Our satisfaction does not sink into the bottomless pit, but grows from unexpected sources.

Rediscovery of sufficiency

In the future, "progress" should receive special attention, appreciation, if not redefinition, where it solves problems through the clever combination of (international) knowledge and wisdom, where it represents a resource-efficient alternative to existing patterns of consumption and activity, where originality replaces mass-produced goods, where people (re)learn to turn a little into a lot, where bridges are built with the help of cooperation instead of competition-based reinforcement of the dichotomy of conquerors and conquered.

In short: Where a sensitive, considerate culture is established that gives people more than material things are ever able to do. Which encourages the full development of spiritual worlds - without having to pay the high price of material and abstract substitute satisfactions, whose promise of happiness in life the restless spirit of capitalism tries to breathe into us again and again. Where we do not become "senseless" because we train away our senses in favor of convenience. Because to say it with Rudi Dutschke: "One can also consume well and vegetate nevertheless".

Structural change is needed

Such a new European minimalism would have the potential to enrich the international community with perspectives, could alleviate internal social tensions and, above all, increase the resilience and independence of democracies. But this requires structural change: Although liberal circles are already talking about "semi-socialism," certain subsectors of social life should no longer be increasingly organized along market lines. In particular, the health, energy and food sectors of the states should not be ordered by private corporations, but once again by institutions under public law, which do not claim to be permanently efficient.

A reversal of the neoliberalization of these policy areas should be demanded. Other areas of society, above all the affluent, entertainment and luxury segments, on the other hand, could be entrusted to a largely free market - because here the effects are kept within more manageable limits when the invisible hand reaches into the void. When things get "system-critical" again.

The best of all worlds

A central problem with existing critiques of capitalism is that the demand for less market almost always goes hand in hand with an increase in the state's share. But government and state employees are at least as susceptible to cronyism, political influence, and corruption as free markets, plus they are suspected of being less productive (since they are not subject to such significant competitive pressures) and that they would thus be more likely to contribute to making an already tense situation worse.

So why not integrate and favor with political programs a third sector, such as public welfare-oriented enterprises, NGOs, banks, cooperatives, support associations, local, neighborhood and citizens' associations, which certainly operate in a market, but do so without an exaggerated priority for capital accumulation. In addition to the above-mentioned policy areas, this sector could in particular serve the social areas that are currently provided on a voluntary basis according to the subsistence principle, i.e. serve as a gap filler for capitalism.

For what lies dormant here alone in terms of non-captured value creation is gigantic: "Until now, the state has never institutionally recognized cleaning the apartment or caring for the children as work that needs to be paid for:

Governments have simply assumed that families must do these tasks. These basic activities that organize our lives and our economy have been privatized and shifted inside families," criticizes Spain's new Minister of Equality, Irene Montero, but holds out hope: "The current Spanish government has called itself a feminist government, and is willing to listen to women. This is unique in the history of Spain."

Successful and existing business enterprises should be motivated to change and make restructuring efforts toward this new dimension, for example, through political incentive systems.

Liberality and social orientation should complement each other, not fight against each other.

Genuinely liberal demands such as the abolition of strict licensing requirements or the abandonment of traditional prohibitions (Milton Friedman) could even be integrated in order to facilitate the social transition conditions. To be sure, this could also involve a loss of quality - but that quality, after all, has never existed without an ecological-planetary price.

So what legitimation do we have to claim these qualities - entirely in the child ego - for our lives?

Via newly created or more forced structures, the necessary foundations could be established that a growth-independent society needs to transform the growth-dependent welfare state into a sustainable welfare state - without sacrificing the greatest socio-political achievements. This is where approaches of a basic income - or at least a basic security worthy of the name - are connectable, especially since they address the equally fundamental problem of social inequality, the long shadow of capitalism.

When the demand for a good grows, its price usually rises as well: The "value" of a product or service is thus strongly linked to social acceptance. If a third dimension, a local-community organized structure, now enters the scene alongside the free market and the public sector, entrepreneurial innovation would also be in demand in this field, it could attract value and capital, and in particular it could go hand in hand with social acceptance. It could thus continue to serve the human drivers of entrepreneurial activity and ingenuity, thus taking advantage of the supposedly unique benefits of the free market. At the same time, it would be an exit corridor for companies that now need to reinvent themselves anyway.

From free-riding to setting an example

Critics from various political camps accuse the leadership of the western world of subjecting its own people in particular to a compulsion to do without through creeping expropriation, a great reset and an associated sharing economy, which only delays the inevitable system crash and ultimately favors only the powerful. Elsewhere, the concept of self-defense is combined with economic power in a mercantilist manner. At the end of the day, the nation with the strongest economy and thus the most powerful army still rules, at least that is the thinking (notwithstanding the fact that wars continue to break out despite "credible deterrence," then mostly as proxy wars).

Both views underestimate the social forces and the increased motivation to live that could arise from a defensible and defensible culture that can also exist vital far away from profit maximization and increase imperatives. Which materially no longer (constantly) grows into the total, but ideally prospers, generates undreamt-of synergy effects. It acts globally, communicates, develops, participates, "dialects" - but predominantly produces and consumes locally.

A forward-looking, inspiring Western narrative, that would be a culture that dares an intellectual awakening, that unites the best of all worlds, that respects and anticipates the cultural treasure of all continents to create a narrative that acknowledges and openly discusses its own historical mistakes. A culture that offers participation to every individual against the backdrop of the sad history of human discrimination and herd-like reflexes of distinction.

Which declares nature as authority. Which professes international achievements such as human rights and peace work, but also always discusses and questions majority opinions. That trusts people, puts them in the center of their own responsibility and does not appear too paternalistic and authoritarian, but at the same time guarantees the basic existential conditions. A society that prioritizes stability and value preservation over growth and the pursuit of profit, but still relies on the individual contributions of all members of society and appreciates the efforts of individuals. In short: an ecologically compatible, socially oriented, consociationally democratic culture of progress. Certainly not without losers, but with many more winners. Maybe not paradise on earth, but at least not paradise at the expense of the earth.

I will be a white old man in a few years - and could symbolically stand for the shame of a human epoch. Because the sources of my life satisfaction make others sad. Because my

selfishness is tantamount to endangering others. Because I have questioned much, but by no means everything that previous generations have trained into me as an ideal heritage, as a habitus of self-evidence. And because I was still too proud to say: I was wrong. We were wrong. After all, the degree of civilization can also be gauged by the degree of consideration shown to one another - and not by the gross domestic product.

Existential turn: Psychotherapy for society

But just as there are political struggles for interpretive sovereignty over concepts such as "home," so this symbolism can continue to be influenced. I have no interest in more crises that arise because a simplistic, instrumentalizing worldview that serves primarily the interests of a privileged few makes a centralized market out of my life. Which constructs a life of uniformity. We should define as a society which areas of life we do not want to totally subject to the rules of capitalist accumulation, which territories we no longer release, where we forbid the vampire-like logic of value creation to take over. But also where we can continue to use it as an instrument.

Whether the continuing unequal concentration of power, we will need the help of white old men to continue, if not retell, the story. To establish a narrative that enables an existential turnaround at the societal level, that is, a radical reversal of vision in which (Western) man turns away from an attitude of entitlement and expectation of life and shifts to an attitude of openness to the demands and prompts of his life situation (and thus those of all subsequent generations) (loosely based on Frankl, 1987).

The political window of opportunity is known to open especially in times that get under the skin. Then there is room for substantial change. Concepts and ideas for a more growth-independent, adaptive society have been ready for a long time, and not only at German universities. What our political representatives need now are signals that the populations of the European republics are also ready for a turnaround in prosperity, because they understand that the future of global civilization can no longer be fought for in a battle of materials.

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