

The Limits to Growth
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The economic system that has done so well by us is Capitalism, a system that encourages competition and innovation, its excesses moderated by government regulations that protect the public from the abuses of the system's earlier century. This delicate balancing act has depended on growth: population growth, productivity, and seemingly limitless innovation.

But now there is a problem for this system. Nothing in the biological world has unlimited growth. Things are born, live, and die----all plants, all animals, and even all human-designed systems. In the political world, kingdoms and empires begin, flourish, decline, and die, to be replaced by new systems.

Our problem today is that we cannot enjoy "three percent annual growth" forever, no matter how much our President claims we can (under his guidance). Our economy has bubbles and crashes, and always will. We have a very low unemployment rate today, which is temporary. People have jobs, but many formerly well-paying factory and mining jobs no longer exist. One must have two or three service jobs to equal the salary of manufacturing jobs, without job security or safety nets.

Our growth-dependent Capitalist system has apparently reached its limits. What can we do to invent a new system, a "steady-state" system that does not depend on growth, but on continuity? What is the future of work?

Our ancient ancestors were hunter-gatherers, who spent as much time each day as needed to gather and prepare plant food, augmented by hunting and fishing. They survived, their numbers small. The innovation of deliberately growing crops to eat and capturing animals for their meat and milk gave rise to the first population growth for human beings. Villages grew to cities, then to city-states, kingdoms, and empires, ever larger, ever more populated.

Throughout the centuries, however, these burgeoning populations could only grow during times of good climate, stable weather, and political peace (none of which were permanent). Populations could not grow beyond their earth's capacity to feed them. Too many people and too little food resulted in famines, warfare (which killed many more), and plagues. The human population grew slowly, with spurts and retractions, until the scientific revolution of the 18th century produced huge growth in food production, medicines to treat disease and extend life, and the modern economy which has produced the best lives that humans have ever enjoyed.

The world's population is at its maximum today, and it is obviously facing the limits to growth. Those countries practicing modernity have reversed unlimited childbearing, resulting in a population decline, accompanied by a doubling of women's life expectancy (and happiness). Those traditional countries resisting modern values are exploding with populations increasingly unable to feed themselves, survive warfare, or disease plagues.

Most Sub-Saharan African countries are facing disaster, as are almost all Muslim-majority countries, plagued by warfare, food crises, and general misery. Their sheer numbers are putting limits to their ability to survive, and food shortages and disease outbreaks are multiplied by another global system, climate change.

The earth balances itself through fluctuations in climate over the millennia, which leaves us with a largely temperate planet hospitable to human, plant, and animal life. Even periods of good climate cannot go on forever; there must be ice ages.

Human work has changed from the survival level efforts of hunter-gatherers to the seasonal and largely endless labor of agriculture. Industrialization has morphed from its beginnings as better work for people than backbreaking agriculture to an abusive system that poisoned air, water, and exploited workers. This system too became better and more equitable thanks to human thought.

Today, the world of work is undergoing a new revolution: one in which clever, educated people thrive, producing innovations that delight us (self-driving cars). The diligent, hard-working factory workers who so thrived during the late 20th century are now finding that their lifetime jobs have vanished. What are they to do?

The newest revolution challenges us even more: robots can eventually replace all physical and some mental labor. How do people replaced this way survive?

The limits of growth do not limit our ingenuity. We can and must figure it out.

681 words

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