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# Editorial Introduction

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The contents of this, the third issue of *The Journal of Population and Sustainability*, once again illustrate the breadth of scholarship required to grapple with the relationships between human numbers and environmental sustainability. With papers covering the development of ideologies of consumerism and economic growth, the idea of the Earth's human carrying capacity, UK immigration in a global context, and the ethical problems surrounding individual reproductive choice, the diversity of concerns is, once again, all too apparent. We also carry a review by Ugo Bardi, professor of Physical Chemistry at the University of Florence and author of *The Limits to Growth Revisited* (2011) and *Extracted* (2014), of Raoul Weiler and Kris Demuynck's *Food Scarcity* (2017).

Whilst reading our first paper, Kerryn Higgs' *Limits to Growth: Human Economy and Planetary Boundaries*, I was reminded of John Maynard Keynes' essay *The Economic Possibilities of Our Grandchildren* (1930). Keynes gazed 100 years into the future and envisaged the society brought into being by the wealth created from compound interest and ever-advancing technology. He anticipated a leisure society where work occupied three hours of a day, the love of money was regarded as a disease, and the biggest challenge was how to meaningfully occupy free time. From the standpoint of 2017 the achievement of Keynes' vision seems a great deal further off than 13 years hence. However, I am struck by how Higgs' paper gave some of the key reasons why Keynes' prediction did not come true, but also by the fact that, in essence, Keynes presents us with the germ of a idea of what a sustainable society might look like.

The articles in this issue are linked via their emphasis on the role of ideas, values and choices in both the generation and amelioration of our current environmental problems. They all, therefore, have an indirect relevance to Keynes' forecast,

both in terms of its failure to materialise and the actions required if we wish to achieve it.

Keynes reasoned that the contemporary issue of technological unemployment, caused by increasing mechanisation of production, was a temporary situation that ultimately would be liberating. Like Marx, Keynes had great foresight and correctly predicted the ever-increasing impact of automation on economic activity, and while not revealing how the dividends of technology would be equitably distributed, Keynes argued that basic needs would be universally satisfied without labour. Although first written at the end of the 1920s, Keynes' essay was not published until after the Wall Street Crash. In this version Keynes argued that the pessimistic view that the economic progress of the 19th Century had come to an end was not correct. While he did not foresee the depth and severity of the Great Depression, he was correct about the still enormous growth yet to come. Undoubtedly, Keynes believed that economic growth was good. Once again he concurred with Marx that technology was eradicating scarcity and liberating human beings from toil. However, this was not growth without end. Keynes believed that a point would be soon reached where "we prefer to devote our further energies to non-economic purposes" (p. 326). Thus leading to a form of steady-state economy with people living "wisely and agreeably and well" (p. 328). Ultimately, Keynes thought that economic appetites would be satiated and further economic growth would be neither necessary nor desirable.

According to Zilibotti (2008) Keynes' optimism about economic growth was not misplaced. Zilibotti calculates that during the half-century after the war GDP per capita quadrupled and that if projected over the century amounts to a 17-fold increase – Keynes anticipated a four to eight-fold increase. Whatever the precise rate of economic growth since Keynes was writing, as Higgs notes in her paper published here, post-war economic growth is unprecedented in human history and has exceeded the capacity of the planet to sustainably provide material resources and absorb waste.

Two important factors should be appreciated in Keynes' essay. Firstly he was only considering the "progressive countries" (i.e. the developed world), and secondly he included the caveat "no important increase in population" (p. 326). When Keynes was writing world population stood at around 2 billion with Europe and North and Central America (largely representing the "progressive countries")

constituting around a quarter of that total, by 2016 the combined populations of Europe, North and Central America had roughly doubled to over a billion with total world population at 7.33 billion (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina 2017).

The aggregate figures for wealth and population reveal relatively little. As Joel E. Cohen's paper *How Many People Can the Earth Support?* published here shows, "the devil is in the detail". Cohen's paper shows that despite rapid global population growth, average well being on a number of indices has improved. However, regardless of this general improvement massive inequality and poverty persists. In particular Cohen demonstrates that while enough grain is presently produced to feed 10-12 billion people, only just over two fifths goes to feed humans directly while a third is used to feed animals to produce meat for those who can afford it (the remainder goes for industrial use). In 2017 800 million people are chronically malnourished.

Even within the "progressive countries" Keynes' implicit assumption that inequality would diminish has proved to be incorrect. Paul Mason (2015) has argued that while income inequality flattened in the mid-20th century, the adoption of neoliberalism in the late 1970s onwards has led to the weakening of workers' bargaining power and a squeeze on incomes.

> If we accept, as Piketty [(2014)] and others show, that modern capitalism is geared to boost asset wealth above incomes, inflation and GDP growth rates, then even rising per-capita GDP can lead to an increase in poverty among growing parts of the population. You get the oligarch's yacht alongside the food bank, forever (Mason 2015).

Furthermore, Porritt and Hines' argue in *Reflections of the Current Immigration Debate in the UK* published here, that the free movement of labour is the principle neoliberal method of keeping wages low and reducing workers' power. This is particularly true for the least skilled strata of British society. While immigration has had a limited but broadly positive economic impact for most people, it has undermined the earning power of unskilled labour and in turn contributed to increasing inequality. The neoliberal drive toward globalisation of the capital, labour and commodity markets has concentrated wealth into fewer and fewer hands both globally and within nation states.

As we have seen, while Keynes had great foresight where economic growth and the development of technology was concerned, he did not anticipate massive population growth and, most importantly, widening inequality. Yet, Keynes was not unconcerned about human numbers. In *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) he writes:

> Before the eighteenth century mankind entertained no false hopes. To lay the illusions which grew popular at that age's latter end, Malthus disclosed a Devil. For half a century all serious economical writings held that Devil in clear prospect. For the next half century he was chained up and out of sight. Now perhaps we have loosed him again (Keynes 1919, p. 8).

Furthermore, Keynes' writings on Malthus and population (see Toye 2000) clearly show that for a considerable time he was concerned with the return of the Malthusian Devil and that he did not dismiss the idea of natural limits[1].

While population growth and widening inequality are possibly sufficient reasons for Keynes' prediction to fail, there is yet another factor, related to both, which he did not anticipate: the rise of consumerism and the ideology of perpetual economic growth.

Keynes identified two types of needs: absolute and relative. The first, as we have seen, he believed were likely to be universally met by the fruits capital accumulation and technology. The second, "those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows" he acknowledged, "may indeed be insatiable; for the higher the general level, the higher still are they" (p. 326).

Perhaps Keynes' acknowledgement of the status ordering nature of human beings is actually one of the main reasons why, despite the satisfaction of basic needs, so many people in the developed world still choose to work long hours and strive for ever higher material accumulation. This, no doubt, would have greatly perplexed

1. However, as John Toye (2000) has made clear, Keynes' views on population were not static. Furthermore his enthusiasm for eugenics, shared by many "progressive thinkers" such as Beatrice and Sydney Webb, is now rightly regarded with considerable distaste.

Keynes since status ordering need not express itself materially and he certainly believed that even if there were those who pursued accumulation "the rest of us will no longer be under any obligation to applaud and encourage them" (p. 329).

The "naturalisation" of the desire to acquire ever increasing wealth and material possessions is so entrenched in modern consciousness that to many the idea that people would choose to consume less in order have more free time seems fanciful. Yet, Weber (1930) alerts us to the role of ideology, specifically the work ethic, as a necessary but not sufficient condition in the development of capitalism. Weber points out that without a work ethic pre-industrial agricultural labourers, usually paid piece-rates during harvest, would actually choose to work fewer hours if the employer raised the rate with the intention of bringing the harvest in more quickly. Weber observed: "A man does not "by nature" wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and earn as much as is necessary for that purpose" (Weber 1930 p. 60).

Weber's emphasis on the work ethic as a force in the economic growth brought about by capitalism only takes us so far in understanding modern consumer society. Indeed, Keynes was well aware of the power of the work ethic and the possible difficulty of suppressing it ("[f]or we have been trained too long to strive and not to enjoy" (Keynes 1930 p. 327)). However, what Weber alerts us to is the role of ideology – values, beliefs, attitudes – in what appear to be value neutral economic choices. The generation of our current environmental predicament has to be understood in this context.

In her paper published here, Kerryn Higgs gives an account of the history of the idea of economic growth and the development of consumerism that goes a considerable way to understanding why Keynes' expectation of the satiation of material desire failed to occur.

Higgs points out that by the early 20th century the basic needs of most of the population of the United States had been satisfied and industrialists feared a permanent crisis of overproduction. However, writers like Edward Bernays and Victor Lebow realised that the manipulation of consumer desires through advertising could lead to insatiable demand. In particular the stimulation of status consciousness, the creation of new "needs" in tandem with constantly changing products encouraged

a desire for unfettered consumption of new goods and discarding of the old under the banner of "progress". All this encouraged and depended upon the impetus to spend rather than save, and to value material goods over free time – a kind of bastardised version of Keynes' own *General Theory*.[2]

Higgs argues that prior to the 1950s economic growth as a government policy objective was conspicuously absent and neither businessmen nor politicians thought governments should have any role in promoting it. However, post-war governments and international economic agencies the world over embraced the idea of economic growth as an imperative, and it became, and still is, the central and uncontested objective of economic policy. At the same time, the idea of economic development of the third world came into being and redefined well-being in terms of economic growth and the exploitation of resources. In the face of national liberation movements in these "undeveloped" countries, economic growth was preferred over the redistribution of land and resources.

Higgs goes on to draw up a list of environmental problems all too familiar to readers of this journal, including loss of biodiversity, climate change, pollution etc., consequent of this explosion of economic growth and human numbers. Higgs argues that all these problems are indicative of approaching planetary boundaries.

Keynes' vision of an almost work-free steady-state economy has failed to materialise due to a number of related factors including population growth, chronic inequality, consumerism, an ideological commitment to economic growth and environmental damage chief amongst them. Yet Keynes' vision is far from redundant and has provided inspiration for a number of contemporary writers on steady-state economics including Dietz and O'Neill (2013), Maxton and Randers (2016) and Tim Jackson (2017). While there is insufficient space in this editorial to explore the proposals of any of these writers, it's worth noting that the papers

2. Despite the claims of neoliberals like Steven Horwitz (2010), Keynes would not have been in favour of consumerism. Certainly, Keynes argued for aggregate demand management involving the stimulation of consumption in order to smooth out the business cycle, but, as Higgs' article will make clear, this is not the same as the ideology of consumerism. Indeed, Higgs would point to the organisation for which Horwitz is writing, the FEE, as one of the "think tanks" which have promoted the neoliberal agenda of unfettered economic growth.

published in this issue (and indeed previous issues) of *The Journal of Population and Sustainability* all contribute insights compatible with the achievement of a sustainable, low-growth, or steady-state economy.

Higgs argues that we need to challenge the ideologies of economic growth and consumerism, and develop an alternative economic system. Redistributive justice within and between countries will be essential. The rich world will need to reduce material consumption and allow the developing world to achieve material security. She points to Herman Daly's (2008) ten point program including ecological tax reform, policies to deal with unequal income distribution and the stabilisation of population, as a means to tackling our current predicament.

While Cohen's approach can be seen as critical of authors that have raised concerns about human numbers in combination with economic growth such as Meadows et al.'s *Limits to Growth* (1972), it is also complementary to them. When addressing the issue of the planet's human carrying capacity Cohen argues that natural constraints are only part of the equation and that choices and values play a critical role. Thus, as we saw above, more than enough food is currently produced to feed the entire global population, but the persistence of poverty and inequality, and a range of other collective and individual choices and actions, lead to the greater part of a billion people being malnourished. The impact of such choices of course go well beyond the ability of agriculture to feed the world's population. Putting aside the issue of our current dependance on fossil fuels to produce fertilizer, the growth in the consumption of meat, and even the choice of which animals are regarded as culturally acceptable as food, affects the envionment in different ways.

Since publication of his 1995 book *How Many People Can the Earth Support?*, Cohen has argued for extending universal primary *and* secondary education in the developing world. This will allow people to create and use better technology, it enables people to understand their own bodies and better regulate their fertility, and it empowers them to demand better governance (Cohen 2007). However, without meeting a standard of basic nutrition prior to and in the first three years after birth (the time during which the brain is developing fastest) children born into the poorest regions of the world are already significantly disadvantaged. Cohen argues that addressing this issue is a vital prerequisite to the success of any education programme leading to the achievement of the desired outcomes.

As Cohen's work makes clear, migration is an important factor in the relationship between population and sustainability. However, Porritt and Hines argue that the "progressive centre-left" has a particular blind spot where it comes to immigration issues (and indeed to the consequences of world population growth) and tends to be committed to an "open borders" perspective, often characterising attempts to raise the issue as "xenophobic". Yet this unintentionally supports neoliberal free movement of labour policies with their tendency to increase inequality. As a counter to this, Porritt and Hines propose a "progressive internationalism" consisting of international trade and development designed to address the factors where people perceive their life chances being improved from leaving their homeland. Critically these aid and development policies should be tailored to enhance the employment prospects of the young, and most importantly, to improve women's access to education and reproductive healthcare which will help reduce population growth.

Many advocates of a low growth or steady-state economy, such as Dietz and O'Neill (2013) and Maxton and Randers (2016) see the shrinking of the developed world's population as essential in shifting the global imbalance in resource consumption and environmental impact. Julian Roche's paper is a response to Sarah Conly's *One Child: Do We Have a Right to More* (2016), a summary of which was published in the first issue of this journal. Roche identifies Conly's earlier concept of 'coercive paternalism', where individuals are forced to act in their own interests by morally concerned external agents such as government, as a limit on the policy options for dealing with population growth. According to Roche, Conly's 'one-child per couple' position, apart from being poorly defined and in the process of being rendered obsolescent by technology, is a direct consequence of her commitment to the liberal concept of the individual and the centrality of the associated notions of individual autonomy and rights. Roche argues that by substituting a more relational and communitarian concept of the individual, solutions to deal with population growth are better solved by transcending narrowly defined individual interests and notions of rights and autonomy. This wider approach Roche contends, has a much greater chance of dealing with the issue of human numbers and is likely, with appropriate policy development, to be more effective, democratic, and, importantly, more just.

In conclusion, Keynes' prediction of a steady-state economy should perhaps be reinterpreted as a global aspiration. As Maxton and Randers (2016) observe,

automation of both the production of goods and the provision of services is already with us, and as this becomes more widespread has profound implications for our economic system that "business as usual" cannot deal with. Keynes' vision of a society where machines do all the work may well be a reality much sooner than we think, but creating a sustainable society by overcoming the entrenched discourses of consumerism and economic growth, as well as tackling inequality both within and between nations may take longer. The transition will require the kind of government intervention approved of by Keynes but abhorred by neoliberals. As Maxton and Randers acknowledge, the biggest barrier is not economic but political. However, with the entrenchment of neoliberalism in national governments, international agencies, and corporate lobbying networks, overcoming established short-termist discourses will not be easy.

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