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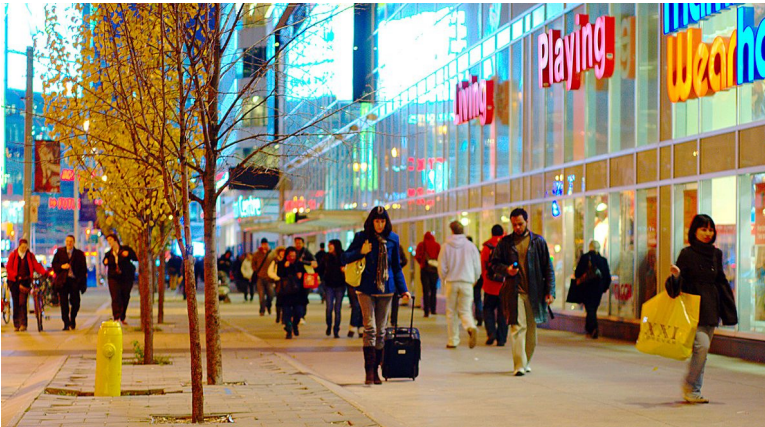
Growthism

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by [Erik Lindberg](#), originally published by Resilience.org | DEC 12, 2016



A week or so ago, it hardly matters when, I heard an NPR business update announce that economists were predicting “a *healthy* holiday shopping season.” Such reports are a near-daily happening, and their words of praise, sometimes warning, have come to be accepted with little question, for they are more mesmerizing than thought-provoking, a spellbound drumbeat which keeps the rhythm of our national ups and downs, hopes and fears, progress and disappointment.

But *healthy* for what? Is the health of our families and our children the concern of such reports? A healthy shopping season may mean a mound of presents under the tree, but will this give comfort to our distracted minds, our scattered consciousness? Can any still and simple purpose claw its way to the top of such a growing mountain of stuff? Do the throwaway toys and the “look how much he loves me” jewelry, the most advanced personal devices, or bow-festooned Lexus SUV’s create more of anything we truly need—more love or joy, contentment, peace, simple time with others? Is it healthy for the Chinese workers who must pump out a strange assortment of bizarre looking plastic pieces beneath the yellow smog which hangs as a choking menace over their cities? Is it healthy for the African gold and diamond miners, pushed ever harder and more cruelly as demand increases? It certainly isn’t healthy for our environment, our overburdened planet, which first must supply the raw materials and then absorb the waste.

Of course we all know at some level what a “healthy shopping season” is really healthy for: *the economy*--that thing, that thing which giveth, it is true, but also taketh away, and is still the only game in town. But what is “the economy”? Is it a mere name--like the harvest, the kill, or the catch--that in this case we give to the assembly of transactions we make? It seems more alive and willful than that, full of demands of its own. It provides us with our daily bread, and sometimes much more—but at any moment this could come to an end. For it stands above and apart

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from us. It has requirements distinct from ours. It must be fed. We are conscripted by it. It demands our sacrifices. We live in its shadow, this tottering childish giant, with its foul moods. But most of all, *the economy must grow*, a terrible fact that most of us accept without question, we imperiled mortals in the hands of this angry and petulant God.

This need to grow—Growthism—is the foundation of our current condition and the key concept of our present worldview. It has become a sort of theology and advanced democracies are equally theocracies of Growthism. It is our official ideology, but not in the common partisan sense of the word. Rather, it describes a value or a good that is mainly invisible and obediently accepted without question. Growth, and growth without end or limits, seems like the natural and inevitable order of things, like the best possible arrangement between people and their lands, like all that is left standing when false gods are slain and ancient beliefs are stripped away.

None of this is true. Growth of the sort we celebrate is only a few hundred years old, and the creed of Growthism is far younger than that. The economy is alive and distinct from our transactions not because it is a natural thing, though its requirements act like natural law. We have collectively granted powers to it, allowed it to achieve ascendancy. It rules, in a sense, by consent of the governed. But in another sense it now rules without consent. We cannot will it away, even as we come to understand its malignant force, nor could we vote it out or loosen its grip with a popular referendum. We breathed life into it, gave it power—and now it will not go away, this latter day Frankenstein, simply because it no longer serves our purposes. Our purposes now belong to it.

Consider, as an example, how it meets out punishments to us in the form of recessions. A recession, after all, simply means the economy is not growing, which in turn means that the total quantity of goods and services are not increasing. Not growing, if you think about it, might be an entirely normal state of affairs. As parents, we hope our children stop growing, at least, physically, when they are big enough. Perhaps we have all we need and now require only emotional growth. Perhaps our health requires equilibrium, even rest. Even if we might want a little more, making due with a little less for a year or so—and we are talking about a very small contractions (as little as 1 or 2% when it comes to recessions)—should not be the cause for alarm if that was the end of it. But with recessions fear and panic tremble through the system—and for the very real reason that a one or two percent decrease in the rate we produce goods and services can send the economy into a fit of rage. It punishes us by destroying businesses, evicting people from their houses, loading people with unpayable debt. After a recession it may take years to return to full employment, for businesses to stabilize, for people and nations alike to balance their budgets. And some never recover. An economic event sits in the pantheon of human fears alongside earthquakes, tsunamis, and typhoons. But this one, our priests assure, us might be prevented.

And so we return in all earnestness to growth, lesson learned. The economy must grow. Everyone says it is so.

Das Growth

In the context of growth, and brief lapses in growth—and then the all-hands-on-deck, full societal effort to return to growth—it no longer makes sense to think of our economic system simply as a capitalist system. By no means do I wish to underrate the role played by capitalism in growth. Capitalism is still growth's number one supporter, and will, in the hands of its financiers, be one of its final defenders. Rather, it is to say that the rules of growth have superseded the rules of capitalism and, for that matter, the rules of the market. Growth, and its demands, is broader and deeper than capitalism. Under pure capitalism (should it exist or have existed), the demands of capital and property ownership establish the rules for all of society, and the state becomes, to paraphrase Marx, a committee for managing the common affairs of capitalism. Today, in contrast, the Liberal state is a committee for managing growth, for prodding and prying our affairs and efforts in the direction of growth—the market, if necessary, be damned. One of the main differences between liberals and conservatives, in industrial societies, amounts to two different approaches to securing growth. And growth, this way, vs. growth, that way, are the only options we have at the polling place.

There may have been a time when Marx's description was accurate, but capitalist markets, alone, were unable to maintain growth, and since growth has the last word (it turned out), the state began to supplement capitalism, with monetary and fiscal policy and an intricate system of regulations and incentives and now bailouts. If necessary, government will take over of businesses, here, while privatizing

services there, as long as it can help maintain growth. But beyond the financial nuts and bolts, or the influx of cash or credit, civil society has constructed a vast and inexhaustible ideological social apparatus that pays ceaseless homage to growth. To the needs and interests of the capitalism, capital, and the immediate demands of capitalists, Growthism, in all its exhaustive brilliance, *has added* the needs of the destitute, the demands of the worker and half-employed, and the very identity of the expanding class of knowledge workers and managers of growth. All are united in the pursuit of growth, which isn't to say that growth helps all equally. Hiding this difference, this easing of class antagonisms, is just one of its many coup d'états. But this easing requires growth to continue, lest these antagonisms (or others) return with renewed vigor (as they do today). And if capitalism takes enough rope to hang itself, Growthism takes more rope than that. It requires a far taller gallows for the noose to tighten and the neck to snap.

But what is Growthism? What *kind* of thing, even, is it? This question is best answered genealogically—where did Growthism come from and how did it form? By answering this we see its manifold destiny. For Growthism began as a new condition of reality, became a solution, a solution so successful that it became inexorably embedded in our systems, directing and controlling them, appearing as an inescapable natural law; and then, just when it looked like we may have reached the limits of growth, Growthism became an earnest, though idolatrous belief. But as part of its *cunning*, Growthism contains each successive stage in the present, so that it is at once a condition, a solution, the end pursued by our every system, and a belief about what is good and right and natural.

Part 2, forthcoming: Growth as a Historical Condition

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About [Erik Lindberg](#): Erik Lindberg received his Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature in 1998, with a focus on cultural theory. After completing his degree, Lindberg began his career as a carpenter, and now owns a small, ...

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Jan Steinman • 11 hours ago

I am buying nothing new this holiday. I'm making gifts, or giving used things.

I've also let everyone know that I don't really want any gifts, unless they are of a similar sentiment.

Starve the beast!

2 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Maia → Jan Steinman • 11 hours ago



Totally with you on this! A few years back, I started refusing the present-giving frenzy by asking people to donate to good causes instead. I haven't bought a card in 40 years, I make them or skip them. I like to pass on gifts, find gifts in the recycling bin or Free Box, or thrift store. Or if none appear, so be it! I know that family pressures rival gravity, but...I just read an article about a recent survey that showed a majority of people in favor of donations over gifts likely not needed.

Of course, giving gifts that ARE actually needed is a whole other story. One of the great pleasures of life, actually.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Howard • 21 hours ago



Really liked the article, Erik, despite my feeling like it was assuming too much and leaving important facts out, facts that you may or may not be aware of, or might include in part 2 or perhaps its just another viewpoint to add to the perspective. bear with me.

An economy is a human creation, it is the exchange of goods and services among humans. All the materials needed for those goods and services come from the commons and as money is used to facilitate exchange it can be seen as a system of monetary exchange.

The growth we have in this economy is primarily linear growth, we take from the commons but do not give or return materials to the commons except in the form of life damaging pollution, the wasting of materials. Such growth is the ideology of a cancer cell. That sense that the economy is alive and willful, yet invisible, comes from the monetary system that is in use. Many think money is just money and there is nothing special about it unless you have a lot of it. However, that is not true, how money is created makes all the difference in the world.

[see more](#)

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Maia → Howard • 11 hours ago



I agree with much of what you've written here...except that money itself is the not really the CAUSE of Growthism. That urge for more more more is a distortion of a natural mechanism and once fully going, has no brake of its own. It must be seen through, diverted/transformed into a whole new kind of desire that is self-limiting, and that is actually capable of long-term fulfillment, or "enoughness" which leads to sharing/circulating the excess in various ways, another source of deep satisfaction and an incentive to continue.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Erik Lindberg → Howard • 14 hours ago



A key phrase, looking ahead, is "For Growthism began as a new condition of reality, became a solution, a solution so successful that it became inexorably embedded in our systems, directing and controlling them, appearing as an inescapable natural law;"--with an emphasis, eventually, on "embedded in our systems." :) Thanks for your attentive reading; I do appreciate it.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Devin Quince • 21 hours ago



As a small business owner of a local bulk food store, I live on two sides, since I want to see our store flourish to a reasonable and healthy level, but not at the expense of the environment, etc. We built our business on the idea of using fair trade and environmentally friendly items along with paying our employee a living wage.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Luanetodd → Devin Quince • 18 hours ago



May you live long and prosper.

To some extent your attitude is quite similar to the local businessmen's attitudes in my youth.

It is the 'reasonable and healthy level' that is key here I think. We

It is the reasonable and healthy level that is key here I think. We have had tradesmen of one sort or another for most of human history. You didn't survive in other years if you constantly ripped off either your customers or your suppliers.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Lynn_Montgomery · a day ago

Thanks to Resilience for exploring alternatives over the years. There are lots of good ideas and directions in the archives. Let's keep exploring.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



piyush2 · a day ago

For most part of the last century, growth was positively correlated with jobs. In the absence of social safety nets or weak social safety nets, job loss is devastating because it becomes a survival issue. Now increasingly growth is weakly or negatively correlated with jobs because of automation and technology (most job creation is in the area of automation and technology but this is temporary as it will also go away as AI etc becomes more prevalent). These are put in place to serve the growth God but are rapidly eliminating jobs. This may continue at least until we hit energy crisis after which all bets are off.

We can see the effects of high growth and low/no jobs for increasing number of people in the US leading to a political upset with Trump making promises to bring the jobs back that were lost a couple of decades back but now with machines doing more work than ever before, jobs are not coming, they are disappearing everywhere on the globe. Growth is going to end one way or the other, it would be much better if we end it consciously rather than the forces of nature and market do it for us in a destabilizing way.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jan Steinman → piyush2 · 11 hours ago

What is this "job" you speak of? For some 199,800 years, the "job" of humanity has been feeding one's self. It seems that much of what makes people miserable is this "job" thing.

A reversion to the mean is inevitable. Avoid the rush! Quit your job, and start feeding yourself!

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Dave → Jan Steinman · 5 hours ago

Agreed. People were originally robbed of access to the means to support themselves and have since been in a kind of slavery.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



shastatodd → piyush2 · 20 hours ago

stepping down from the top of the "technology pyramid" is a daunting and precarious journey... but that is wiser than trying to mitigate our problems by climbing even higher.

job one should probably be personally "decarbonizing" our lives. "collapse now and avoid the rush" comes to mind.

<http://www.utne.com/enviro...>

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Joe Clarkson · 20 hours ago

As this image (<http://www.newgeography.com/fi...> shows, GDP growth has far exceeded population growth. The reason for this divergence is the same as the reason for growth being sought after with great fervor by just about everyone: people want more of everything rather than less. Fossil fuels have let them satisfy their desires.



^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Maia → Joe Clarkson · 11 hours ago

Such "desires" are never satisfied. That's the trouble. And the engine of more desires, more buying, more trash and pollution.

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