

The Oil Drum: Europe

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT ENERGY AND OUR FUTURE

The Zero Growth Mind

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Ancient peasants lived, mostly, in a "zero growth" world and, perhaps, in the future we'll return to a condition in which the finiteness of resources is an obvious fact of life. We see in this painting a group of 19th century Dutch peasants as painted by Vincent Van Gogh, who had an uncanny capability of showing not just the exterior aspect of things but also their inner reality ("The potato eaters", 1885, the Van Gogh museum, Amsterdam)

We often think that we have a problem of scarcity of resources. It is not so: scarcity is not absolute. Whether we have enough of something or not depends on our perception of what we need. And, because we seem to think that we never have enough, we tend to use what we have faster than it can be replaced. It is the phenomenon called "overexploitation" or "overshoot". It is the main problem that we are facing and it is all because of the way the human mind works. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, overexploitation is all in the brain of the exploiter.

Nate Hagens has argued several times in "The Oil Drum" that the human mind is geared for growth (see, for instance [here](#)). Apparently, we act on the basis of a series of neurotransmitters (e.g. dopamine) that make us search for continuously renewed stimulation. This way of functioning of the human mind is what generates our tendency of "discounting the future", that is of giving a lower value to the future than to the present. This rapidly declining discount function is the key of the mechanism of overexploitation.

This view of human behavior is based on experimental evidence which, however, is mostly limited to humans living in the modern, fast growing countries of the Western world. But present day

humans may be just a short lived phenomenon. Growth cannot continue forever and sooner or later we'll have to settle in a condition of zero growth; very likely after a phase of decline. Zero growth has been the normal condition of human life for the past few millennia of agricultural civilizations. Surely the world changed even in ancient times, but the perception of this change was denied to people constrained to their fields, their family, their village, and little more. It was the world of peasants.

Peasants, by now, have disappeared in the Western world, replaced by farm workers specialized in operating agricultural machinery. Yet, this is a recent development and the peasant world is still alive in poor countries and a living memory in rich ones. So, we still have a chance to have a glimpse of a zero growth world and of the mind of the people living in it. How did they see the world around them? How did they see their future? How did they plan ahead for good and bad times?

There seem to be few psychological studies of the mind of the peasants: office workers are much easier to find and study, nowadays. But anthropologists have studied peasant civilizations in depth. One of these studies is in the book of Peter Farb "Humankind" published in 1978. Farb was an American anthropologist who had studied mainly native Americans, but who had a broad interest in human behavior in general. "Humankind" was a condensate of his thought (he died in 1980). After more than 30 years, the book is dated in many respects, but it is still well worth a look even today. I remember having read it for the first time in the early 1980s and, rereading it now, I see how much it has shaped my vision of the world.

Here are some excerpts of Peter Farb's description of the way of thinking of peasants as it appears in the chapter titled "The Perennial Peasants". The pattern that emerges doesn't agree with the idyllic view of a zero growth world made of small, self-sufficient units as it is often presented today. It shows that the limitation of material resources affects also the perception of all (as termed by Farb) "the good things in life", such as friendship, manhood, honor and sex. We don't know the shape of the discount function in the mind of peasants but, from this description, they seem to be even less worried about the future than we are. That is, perhaps, a logic consequence of the fact that in a zero growth world the future is just the same as the present.

People living in a future zero growth world will not necessarily live and think as ancient peasants, but surely there is a lot of food for thought here.

From Peter Farb's "Humankind", Triad Press, 1978. Excerpts from Chapter 7 "The Perennial Peasants"

Although peasants are widely scattered throughout the world, owe allegiance to many nations, speak a variety of languages, and display dissimilar customs, they nevertheless share certain fundamental traits. For this reason they often give the impression of being - as Karl Marx once declared with some exaggeration - as alike as the potatoes in a sack. <..>

Almost anywhere that peasants are encountered, they are likely to give the same impression of being conservative, individualistic, prone to suspicion, jealous, violent, superstitious and unthrifty. <..> To the peasant, the farm is a household rather than a business enterprise designed to turn a profit, as are most farms in North America and Western Europe today. The household farm barely provides subsistence for the family after the obligations due to the owners of the land and the wielders of political power are met. Peasants are unlike modern farmers also in that they do not rely on machinery, modern techniques of plant science, or hired labor. The extreme inefficiency of their methods can only be compensated for only by long hours of backbreaking labor. <..> Such has been the lot of peasants in almost all societies, since complex civilizations arose about 6000 years ago.

<..> Peasants at all times and in all places, almost without exception, have had an inferior status - legally, politically, socially, and economically. <..> This subservient position of peasants in society has produced behavior that often appears irrational, uneconomical and ultimately self defeating. <..> Peasants frustrate all attempts by national governments to get them to increase agricultural production through the use of modern technology. And while seemingly making no attempt to lift themselves out of inherited poverty, they even worsen the situation by rejecting birth-control measures. <..> Many of the ills besetting them could obviously be cured by cooperation and by the exercise of local leadership, but the peasants remain tenaciously individualistic. Well intentioned outsiders, such as Peace Corps or United Nations workers who come to the village and attempt to provide such leadership are viewed as potentially dangerous, criticized and gossiped about, and sometimes assaulted. A widespread peasant strategy in contact with outsiders is to play dumb, preferring this to being swindled by a representative of the external powers. Or an outsider will be replied to in words that mean "Yes, I'll do it tomorrow"; with Spanish-speaking peasants it is *manana*, with Italian ones *domani*, with German ones *morgen*, and the Amhara of Ethiopia say *eshi naga*. As if all this were not irrational enough, one further thing bewilders outsiders. As soon as peasants have acquired a small surplus through hard work or good fortune, they spend the entire amount profligately on one grand fiesta or ceremonial.

Why is it, we may wonder, that the peasants do nothing to better themselves? Some scholars have concluded that they are too desperately poor to have time for social cooperation or for political agitation. Others have attributed the inaction to their being as impassive as their donkeys and oxen. Still others explain that the peasants have been exploited for so long by the upper classes that they would never join their social superiors in any venture, for fear of being cheated. Each of these statements is true to some extent, but none by itself can account for the peasants' disregard of their own welfare. "The peasants may be poor, but each could afford a day or so of voluntary labor for such community projects as repairing a schoolhouse. Impassive they may be also, but they are far less so than is usually thought. Scarcely a peasant can be found who in private conversation is not articulate about the ills of this world and about what steps might be taken to correct them. And if the peasants so mistrust the upper classes, why then do they not band together? Obviously, none of the above explanations entirely accounts for their acting as they do.

Their behavior is not irrational at all, given the realities of their existence. In fact, the attitude of peasants is probably the only one possible for them. A modern observer of peasant life has defined their adaptation in terms of "the image of limited good." In other words, peasants view their total environment as one in which all the good things of life-land, wealth, power, friendship, sex, health, and honor-exist in only limited quantities. As they see it, the limitation exists for two reasons: "There are more of themselves than there are of good things, and they consider themselves powerless to increase the quantities available. Peasants have unconsciously extended a truth about the limited nature of their arable land to include all aspects of life. Like the land itself, good things can be divided and their ownership changed-but they cannot be increased.

Because not enough good exists to go around, a peasant family can improve its position only at the expense of other families in the community. A family that actively works to improve its lot thus represents a threat; whatever extra good it obtains must inevitably be taken from someone else. Peasants consequently regard modern farming techniques as ways to deprive others of their rightful share of wealth rather than as ways to increase productivity and thus to create new wealth. Even enlightened peasants realize that they cannot modernize, although they understand the advantages in doing so, simply because the other villagers would see it as taking unfair advantage if they were to augment their share of the limited good. "The peasant belief that everything desirable is limited lies behind the social behavior that to outsiders often appears ludicrous, pathetic, or maddening.

True friendship is included among the scarce goods, and to ensure at least a minimum of it peasants try to form a longlasting relationship with a close friend. Similarly, honor and manliness

(the well-known machismo of Latin American peasants and the philotimo of Greek peasants) exist mainly in limited quantities. Constant vigilance is therefore required to prevent loss of any amount of manliness - which explains the male peasant's sensitivity to insults and his violent reaction to real or imagined affronts to his honor. The list of goods that are considered scarce is a long one, and it even includes health. The supply of blood itself is thought to be limited, and thus to give a transfusion would mean that the donor had parted with a non-renewable good.

No wonder, then, that peasant behavior is characterized by extreme individualism and the absence of cooperation. To cooperate, peasants would have to delegate authority - but no one wishes to assume leadership lest gossiping neighbors complain that their own share of authority is being taken away from them. In thus shirking community responsibilities that might thrust them into prominence, peasants deprive their own community of the leadership essential for breaking the cycle of poverty. They pay no immediate penalty for their lack of cooperation, as do hunter-gatherers (whose very survival may depend upon it) or people living in modern societies (whose complex political, social, and economic systems could not function without it). The peasant family can manage very well without cooperation because it is a nearly self-sufficient unit. It produces almost all of its own food, uses only family members for labor on the farm, makes its own clothes and most household utensils, and carries its own produce to market. Most families feel that rather than waste time on cooperation they should spend it in vigilance to make sure that they obtain exactly their share of the scarce good things. The family must not fall behind, but it must also not appear to improve its relative position lest that arouse suspicion and jealousy. Outsiders who visit a peasant village are usually struck by what appears to be uniformity of housing and attire (such as the plain black dresses of Spanish, Italian, and Greek peasant women and the trousers and shirts of white cotton twill worn by Latin American men).

Peasant families make a desperate effort to guarantee for themselves their proportionate share of the limited good through the sheer number of children they produce. From the standpoint of the peasant, it makes eminent good sense to have many children. In fact, almost everything in their experience goes against the opinion that small families are advantageous. Because the mortality of peasant children has traditionally been high, large numbers of them are a form of insurance that at least some will survive. Even young children can do chores both inside and outside the house. As the younger children grow up, some of the older ones can be spared from the land to take up employment elsewhere and contribute their wages to the family's well-being (as do the braceros who annually cross into the United States from Mexico). The peasant couple realize that the more sons they produce, the greater the chance that a few will survive to care for them in sickness and old age. In the process of producing many sons, of course, many daughters might also be brought into the world. But daughters will eventually marry and provide a wide network of sons-in-law, who with their kin can be called upon for support in time of need. From almost every point of view, the peasant's logic is unassailable: The rich agriculturist can invest in farm machinery but the poor peasant can invest only in children.



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