

Social Democratic Reflections on “Economic Growth or Quality of Life?” (April 11, 1972)

Abstract

Speaking at a conference of the metalworkers’ union, the social democratic thinker Erhard Eppler pleads for a move away from unlimited economic growth—and its deleterious environmental effects—and argues for greater attention to quality-of-life issues as a political goal.

Source

Erhard Eppler at the IG Metal International Conference in Oberhausen on April 11, 1972

1. *From Quantity to Quality*

Today we speak of quality of life, although we don’t know exactly what that is—much less how we can achieve it. We speak of quality because we have lost our faith in quantity. At the root of this, too, stands doubt, not knowledge. We doubt whether all of this is good for humanity:

- wider and wider streets for more and more cars
- bigger and bigger power plants to consume more and more energy
- increasingly elaborate packaging for increasingly questionable consumer goods
- bigger and bigger airports for faster and faster airplanes
- more and more pesticides for larger and larger harvests
- and not to forget: more and more people on an increasingly overcrowded planet

Because we have learned in recent years that this also means:

- increasingly polluted air
- increasingly disgusting garbage heaps
- increasingly intolerable noise
- less and less clean water
- increasingly angry people
- more and more toxins in the organism
- and more and more dead in the streets

We note this without being able to say precisely how economic growth is related to quality of life. The only thing that seems certain is that the same economic growth that has made our lives more pleasant in many respects over the past 100 years can also make them unbearable.

The computers of the Club of Rome have calculated for the entire globe what we are slowly becoming aware of in our country, the younger generations more quickly than the older ones.

[...]

2. *New Benchmarks*

It will soon be indisputable that economic growth is not a suitable measure of progress. That the doubling of sleeping pill consumption within seven years—an achievement certainly not limited to the United States—is statistically registered as a rise in the standard of living will soon be considered a

curious piece of trivia, as will the fact that a housewife's work in her own household does not add to the gross national product, but that her—paid—work in someone else's household does. The quality of life of a small child, in any case, is likely to be fairly proportional to the amount of time that the mother can concentrate her attention on him or her.

Moreover, none of the common modes of calculation provide any information as to whether the economic and human potential of a country is being carefully used, partially wasted, or already overtaxed; whether this leads to satisfying more or less pressing needs; and whether investments will secure or threaten our future.

[...]

The fact that qualitative benchmarks are incomparably more difficult to find than quantitative ones is no reason not to look for them. That is also how I understand the suggestion that Sicco Mansholt included in his letter of February 9, 1972, to [Franco Maria] Malfatti.^[1] Mansholt is known to prefer the term *utilité nationale brute* to gross national product.

We also need new benchmarks for science and technology. This cannot mean that emotional protests against science and technology will help us along, and certainly not a romantic call “back to nature.”

It is not a matter of frustrating the human spirit of invention, but of channeling it toward new tasks. If an environmentally harmful technology can exist, then so can an environmentally sound one.

[...]

3. Challenges for Politics

Whoever is serious in addressing the quality of life must want political and social change.

[...] Neither the common means of the market economy nor the methods of state capitalism will suffice for the new tasks. In other words: what has to be tackled now is likely to embarrass the dogmatists in East and West as much as those who take too much credit for their pragmatism. The thought revolution from economy to ecology will leave no social system untouched. The dogmatists will probably try for some time to dismiss the whole subject as an especially clever attempt to subvert their established order before they set about seizing it and integrating it ideologically. The relationship between economy and politics will change—in both East and West. Where economic growth is the undisputed political goal, politics will have to provide the administrative structure for economic growth: Good policy promotes growth, and bad policy inhibits it. People will continue to ask politicians how they contribute to growth.

Where quality of life is desired, politicians—pressured by public opinion—will ask economists and entrepreneurs how they contribute to it, whether positively or negatively. Politics will have to instantiate the interests of the common good, in order to provide orientation for both industry and government.

[...]

NOTES

[1] At that time, Mansholt was the European Commissioner for Agriculture. Malfatti was president of the European Commission—trans.

Source: Erhard Eppler, *Maßstäbe für eine humane Gesellschaft: Lebensstandard oder Lebensqualität?*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1974, pp. 18–31; reprinted in Eckart Conze and

Gabriele Metzler, eds., *50 Jahre Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Daten und Dokumente*. Stuttgart, 1999, pp. 223–25.

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