

Growth and austerity: cultural perspectives

That the world has no ethical significance but only a physical one is the greatest and most pernicious of errors. Schopenhauer, *On Ethics*.

Austerity is not just about economics, nor is growth. Neoliberal economics as the answer to everything seems to have become the default policy of the UK Conservative Party, as was evident in the past eleven years of its administration. Care, also, for the whole population - and demonstration of that care - seems to have been forgotten. At the same time, its failure to secure economic growth anyway and reduce the wealth gap was encapsulated in the recent disastrous brief administration of Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng, that revealed the final, ethical and financial bankruptcy of neoliberal ideology.

Equally, the failure of the policy of economic austerity was captured by Kerry-Anne Mendoza in the subtitle of her book, *AUSTERITY: The Demolition of the Welfare State and the Rise of the Zombie Economy*.¹ In her 2017 reprint, 10 economic myths were outlined, including the notion that “the private sector is more efficient than the public sector”. Mendoza’s may be seen as a left wing, ideological view, but neither “growth” nor “austerity” are, as I have said, purely about economics.

Government in a democratic country is about governing the state in the interests of all, and the Reagan/Thatcher doctrine that good government is no government has finally been discredited today in Britain and the United States. Growth is also about health and well-being, for happiness does not come with getting rich. Everyone needs a roof over their heads, work, and enough to eat, but, as Gandhi reminded us, while the world can provide for basic needs, it cannot cater for greed. We need active, intelligent government in a democratic society, and protection against an oligarchy that gives priority only to the pursuit of its own material interests.

This is to say nothing about the global, and absolute, existential issues of climate change, ecological crisis, and mass extinction today but, given the consensus that these are related to our fossil-fuel addicted and over-consuming Western “civilisation”, our view of growth and austerity certainly, at least, need urgently to be revised. There are

¹ Kerry-Anne Mendoza, *Austerity: The Demolition of the Welfare State and the Rise of the Zombie Economy*, New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 2017 (2015)

psychological, emotional, and social forms of growth, as well as voluntary and progressive austerity, not just their economic variants.

A simpler life

In his book, *Voluntary Simplicity*, which was first published in 1981 but has been revised and reprinted twice, most recently in 2010, Duane Elgin set out the reasons clearly why a simpler life provides a happiness which excessive affluence most often only obscures. Again, the key is in the subtitle: *Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*. Elgin stresses that his book is not about living in poverty but “living with balance”. A life of ecological awareness, frugal consumption, and personal growth addresses both individual and planetary needs. Living more simply leads a person towards genuine personal happiness, but it also conduces to a safer, more secure, and sustainable future for collective humanity and all life on Earth. ²

There are different kinds of simplicity. Rather than something crude, regressive, or superficial, Elgin refers to

“a deep, or conscious simplicity...that represents a deep, graceful, and sophisticated transformation in our ways of living - the work we do, the transportation we use, the homes and neighbourhoods in which we live, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and much more. A sophisticated and graceful simplicity seeks to heal our relationship with the Earth, with one another, and with the sacred universe”. ³

Elgin also makes the point that, while poverty is involuntary and debilitating, simplicity is voluntary and enabling: “poverty is mean and degrading to the human spirit, whereas a life of conscious simplicity can have both a beauty and a functional integrity that elevates the human spirit”. ⁴ Nor does voluntary simplicity imply sacrifice but, insofar as it is consciously chosen - deliberate and intentional - it can support a better and higher quality of life. ⁵

² Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich, Second Revised Edition*, 2010 (1981)

³ Ibid. pp 8-9

⁴ Ibid. p 19

⁵ Ibid. pp 4-6

Of course, no one can practise voluntary simplicity easily when they are constrained by the material poverty our current capitalist society imposes. If an inadequate income and scarcity of affordable property - to own or rent - forces you to choose between eating and heating, and resort to food banks, you are caught, whatever your intention, in a “mean and degrading” life. Added to that, our food industry - and its advertising - are set up to provide unhealthy and processed food, which traps so many people in poverty, poor diet, and ill health.

This has obvious implications for a welfare state and the issue, for instance, of preventive medicine. If people were able to look after themselves better and enjoy the benefits of real voluntary simplicity this would lead to better physical and mental health. This would, in turn, result in less reliance on the NHS, which would, then, be freed to provide services when people really required them. The combination of a healthy life-style and good medical services would contribute to a more effective democratic way of life. Moreover, the issue of a “bloated” welfare state in Britain, which, since Thatcher and Lawson, has dominated Conservative policy, would be less likely to obtain.

A new awareness

It is often felt that our political leaders lack vision, and, without vision, people miss what can only be called a sense of transcendence that inspires and lifts them above everyday living. Transcendence may imply a faith in God but, for a more secular vision, it also involves experience of an interior, psychological reality that is more real than modern-day materialism would have us believe. In ancient India austerity is sometimes indicated by the Sanskrit word, *tapas*. *Tapas* has a spiritual dimension. In addition to austerity, it can imply “glow and heat”, even “mortification”, and is an intensive spiritual exercise, leading to a new awareness. This can take different forms, such as a realisation of God, an intimation of *brahman* - the Indian sense of a transcendent power - or a connection with some sort of ultimate, or absolute, reality. ⁶ It is, for instance, one of the five virtues

⁶ See entry in *The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion - Hinduism, Taoism, Zen, and Buddhism*, edited by Ingrid Fisher-Schreiber et al, Shambhala, 1994 (1986)

required at the first two stages - *yama* and *niyama* - of a spiritual path like *raja yoga* - the supreme yoga. ^{7 8}

Yoga

Yama is a part of the very necessary ethical preparation for further progress in all spiritual ways. Anyone committed to the yogic path of self-control first adheres to the precepts of *yama*, five ethical practices: the non-injury of others, truthfulness, not stealing, continence, and no covetousness. Secondly, as *niyama*, come the principles of outward and inward purity, contentment, restraint, study of wisdom, and commitment to some form of spiritual life. Ethics are the basis for everything. They are a primary instinct, however actions might seem to contradict it. As the great moral philosopher, Adam Smith, wrote:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him... Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion we feel for the misery of others... for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it. ⁹

Raja yoga, the “royal yoga”, yoga of the mind, was described in four books of aphorisms written down in the second century BCE by Patanjali, the founder of yoga philosophy. Patanjali considered *raja yoga* as a means to attain conscious liberation by mastering the various elements of human nature, both physical and psychic. The physical body, the active will, and the observing mind must all be brought under control. To this end certain practices are designed to free the body from its restlessness and, equally, establish clarity of mind. *Raja yoga* is intended as a path towards spiritual freedom, although, at the same

⁷ Ibid. See separate entries

⁸ *Raja yoga* is the science of meditation, first outlined by Patanjali in the second century BCE and the subject of many commentaries. I recommend Swami Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga*, now available in *The Four Paths of Yoga*, Discovery, 2017.

⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, with an Introduction by Amartya Sen, edited with Notes by Ryan Patrick Hanley, New York: Penguin Books, 2009 (1759) p 13.

time, it can strengthen one's vital power and also prolong youth and add to the length of one's life.

As raja yoga teaches, right ethics are the necessary precondition for the further steps - for a yogi - of concentration and absorption - *samadhi* - that lead to absolute freedom - *nirvana*, or heaven-like consciousness. But right ethics are the starting point for anyone concerned with a humane way of living. One doesn't need to be on a yogic path to understand and practise these spiritual principles, though there are other forms of yoga that appeal to people with a range of interests and dispositions.

Modern "paths"

Swami Vivekenanda, the student and disciple of the nineteenth century Bengali sage, Ramakrishna, translated and wrote an illuminating English commentary on Patanjali's aphorisms. These have been included in a book, published recently, of commentaries on the other paths, known as *The Four Paths of Yoga*. These are: "The Path of Knowledge" - *jnana yoga* - for the rational intellectual; "The Path of Self-Knowledge" - *raja yoga* - for meditative people; "The Path of Selfless Action" - *karma yoga* - for the activist; and "The Path of Devotion" - *bhakti yoga* - for emotional commitment. *Hatha yoga*, which is the popular physical yoga of today, derives its value from the other forms of yoga, particularly those originally delineated by Patanjali.

Democratic way

What I am suggesting is that people are starting to look after themselves but they must be helped and enabled to do so by our political leaders, who, themselves, need to be more enlightened and understand the importance of this. Growth and austerity begin with ethics, at the level of both individual and community initiatives. There is no contradiction between a central government and a devolved way of living. Government can provide assistance but it is often individuals and local communities who know best what is needed, whether families, towns, or regions.

These are the principles of a truly democratic life. Duane Elgin made the blunt point in his most recent book that, given the seriousness of the global crisis the purely material values of Western civilisation has caused, it would seem there are three choices for us now:

“functional extinction, authoritarianism, or democracy”. ¹⁰ Devolving and reframing austerity and growth as “voluntary simplicity” in the way Elgin describes it, would help us avoid the worst effects of the ecological crisis, defeat the pathological central control of authoritarianism, and allow for a more natural, responsible democratic way of life.

April 2023

¹⁰ Duane Elgin, *Choosing Earth: Humanities’ Journey of Initiation from Breakdown and Collapse to Mature Planetary Community*, 2022