

# The Culture of Growth and the Culture of Limits

by Richard D. Lamm

*The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement; the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.*  
— Niels Bohr (1885-1962)

Humankind can seldom resist dividing aspects of life and human events into two opposing positions. “Black or White” or “all or nothing.” “Either you’re with me or you’re against me” is part of our vernacular and thinking.

One has to be careful, of course, not to overuse these stark divisions. Truths overlap, reality is seldom simple and the color of truth is usually gray. But as C.P. Snow has shown us in “Two Cultures,” it is still useful to make a point by delineating contrasting viewpoints. Even when the exercise is exaggerated, which it often is, the concept is immensely useful. Like a contrasting agent in radiology, the very starkness helps clarify. We often cannot appreciate the full nuances of a problem without a contrast, often in the form of parables, metaphors, and simplifications.

C.P. Snow in *Two Cultures* usefully contrasted the differences between the world of science and the world of letters and went on to observe: “Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension ... sometimes hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding.”

This same “two cultures” metaphor is useful to spotlight what I consider a new chasm of “mutual incomprehension” — the culture of growth and the culture of limits. Are resources finite or, through technology, infinite? Can we solve the problems of growth with more growth? Will existing mechanisms and institutions (including Capitalism) be sufficient and successful for the next 200 years as they have been for

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the last 200 years. There is the culture of growth which denies limits and the culture of limits which seeks to adapt to those limits.

Aldo Leopold saw a similar conflict in writing about his “land ethic”:

*One of the anomalies of modern ecological thought) is that it is the creation of two groups, each of which seems barely aware of the existence of the other. The one studies the human community, almost as if it were a separate entity, and calls its finding sociology, economics and history. The other studies the plant and animal community and comfortably relegates the hodgepodge of politics to ‘liberal arts.’ The inevitable fusion of these two lines of thought will, perhaps, constitute the outstanding advance of the present century.*  
(Sand County Almanac)

Most of human experience is on the side of both the population and economic growth culture. The world of growth has succeeded brilliantly. It allowed survival in a harsh world. It has brought health, wealth, increased life expectancy, leisure and — most important — freedom. Growth has approached the status of a religion. Sociologist Peter Berger writes:

*Development is not just a goal of rational action in the economic, political and social spheres. It is also, and very deeply, the focus of redemptive hopes and expectations. In an important sense, development is a religious category. Even for those living on the most precarious margins of existence, development is not just a matter of improved material conditions; it is at least also a vision of redemptive transformation.*

But even in our religious fervor, we must ask “can

it last?" Is this a sustainable vision? Is this the permanent secret to success for societies?

The other culture believes that for all our limits we cannot escape ecological limits. This viewpoint holds that we must modify and in some cases reverse mores and cultures that have worked well and under which we have prospered for hundreds of years. They assert that we can delay but not totally avoid the consequences of our infinite demands on a finite earth. They argue that a very fundamental new world has emerged; a set of circumstances which is as important as the industrial or agricultural revolution. It is to change the world of growth into the world of sustainability.

Some would say that this is merely an extension of Snow's two cultures. But the stakes are much higher in the limitB/growth dichotomy because they go to the basic assumptions of our civilization. As philosopher Hershell Elliott warns, "We can disagree on the right way to live and use resources, but we cannot avoid the collective consequences of wrong ways." Has economic growth and population growth become more problem than solution? Is the ecosystem a hurdle or a barrier? What is our vision of the future and how do we organize the economy and social systems of the future? Can "Yankee ingenuity" and a "can do" culture solve growth-related problems as it has solved so many others, or do we have to change our basic operating assumptions and culture?

One of the human dilemmas is that we often see the world not as it is, but as we think it is. Columnist and thinker Walter Lipmann warned: "At the core of every moral code, there is a picture of human nature, a map of the universe and a version of history..." Our economy, our ethical standards, our moral standards depend on the mental map we have of the world. Author Thomas Sowell points out that people have very different visions of how the world works. "Visions are foundations on which theories are built" and Sowell observes that most of us have mental maps of the world in our minds which do much to control our viewpoints. Sowell divides them into "constrained" and "unconstrained."

These visions often arise from fundamentally different premises, says Sowell. Visions are like maps that guide us through the tangle of bewildering complexities. Like maps, visions must leave out many concrete features in order to enable us to focus on a few key paths to our goal. Visions are indispensable, but dangerous — precisely to the extent that we confuse

them with reality itself. visions paint with a broad brush. What has been deliberately neglected in our vision may not turn out to be negligible in its effect on the results.

*The great evils of the world (war, poverty and crime) are seen in completely different terms by those with constrained and unconstrained visions. if human options are not inherently constrained, then the presence of such repugnant and disastrous phenomena virtually cry out for explanation — and for solutions. But if the limitation on passions of man himself are at the heart of this painful phenomena, then what requires explanation are the ways in which they have been avoided or minimized.*  
(Conflict of Visions)

Are there limits in the physical world, or are those "limits" only limitations of our vision, creativity, technology and ingenuity? Are there limits to human development in the physical world around us, or only in our minds? Can the mental map that Western Civilization has formed in our minds and human expectations be achieved in the physical world we live in? Is the past a guide to the future or a "moral trap" that keeps us from recognizing that we are approaching carrying capacity? Could we end up being victims of our past successes because they have given us the wrong mental map?

*Believers in unconstrained visions seek the special causes of war, poverty and crime. Believers in the constrained view seek the special causes of peace, wealth and law-abiding society. In the unconstrained vision, there is no tractable reason for social evils; therefore, no reason they cannot be solved with sufficient moral commitment. In the constrained vision, whatever the artifices or strategies are strained or ameliorated inherent human evils will themselves have cost, some in the form of other social ills created by the civilizing institutions so that all that is possible is a prudent tradeoff.* (Conflict of Visions)

This reasoning fits perfectly into the dichotomy between the culture of growth and the culture of limits. The jury's still out — neither side can claim victory but the world is presently developing and increasing population and standards of living so the presumption should be with the growth vision. That is not something we should easily give up. The culture of growth has served us well. However it is not the end of the argument for, as Huxley reminds us, “Facts do not cease to exist just because they are ignored.”

One of the great challenges of history is to know when a new world or new paradigm has emerged. It is my passionate belief that economic theories cannot be at variance with ecological reality. Our economic system must adapt to our ecological system, or at a minimum our economic system cannot destroy our ecological system. We are, perhaps understandably, blinded by our past successes and those successes make it all the harder to change those policies to meet the new realities. We cannot assume that the practices and policies of the last 100 years will be applicable for the next 100 years. “Success” in societies is not a permanent state but a permanent challenge. Remember Marshall McLuhan’s dictum: “Nothing fails like success.”

Is additional growth of population and economic activity an asset or a liability? Can science delay or avoid the consequences of finiteness (limits)? Are science and technology a cure or could they be part of the disease? Are technology and ingenuity a solution or do they merely buy us some time? The larger ecosystem is likely totally indifferent to whether we get the answers to these questions right. Natural ecosystems are never altruistic. Millions have died in the past — the just and the unjust — due to the impact of nature (the ecosystem).

The assumptions that undergird our whole society presume infinite resources. But are these assumptions correct or in error? Public policy, and most of our institutions as presently structured, assume unlimited resources and an infinite capacity to create wealth with no ecological limits. The resulting society is vastly different from a society that assumes environmental and ecological limits.

I think the future can be better planned for by

confronting limits to the best of our ability, and by heeding the warning that infinite growth cannot take place in a finite world. The fact that so far we have been so successful in pushing back those limits does not dissuade me from believing that those limits are real. “All modern day curves [population, consumption, environmental destruction] lead to disaster” warns former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Human civilizations live on the upper shoulders of some incredibly steep geometric curves. We have used more resources since 1950 than in the preceding one million years. We experience more change in one year than our grandparents did in a lifetime. Yesterday's solutions have a nasty habit of becoming today's problems.

Evidence increasingly shows that something is fundamentally wrong with the growth paradigm. Our globe is warming, our forests are shrinking, our icecaps are melting, our coral is dying, our fisheries are being depleted, our deserts are encroaching, our water is under more and more demand. I suspect these to be the early warning signs of a world approaching its carrying capacity. We cannot call on science, technology and human ingenuity to develop new solutions to these new challenges. We must instead change our mental map of the world, our culture and our economy.

I suggest we need not better scientists and technicians but better poets and prophets. We have to modify ourselves and our lifestyles. We are unlikely to be the first species in the world to be exempt from limits.

This writer has been impressed by a scholar named Hershell Elliott who has taken similar reasoning and applied it to the attempt to change all “human-centered ethics.” Our hubris notwithstanding, he suggests we ultimately must live within a limited and increasingly fragile ecosystem. He doubts that growth can ultimately solve growth-related problems; we must move to sustainability.

*It is extremely improbable that human ingenuity could devise a system that would be as stable and secure as the one which nature has already designed. The new human system would be unlikely to function for more than a few ticks of geological time.*

He questions whether “a priori, human-centered ethics” are sustainable in a finite ecosystem. He postulates that no ethical system or value system can be valid if it cumulatively destroys the ecosystem of which it is a part.

Elliott points out that however laudatory and well-meaning it seems in human terms, we can't give priority to humans over every other living thing.

*When the man-made biosystem fails because of some ethical misconception about how human beings ought to live in the world, it will be irrelevant that Christians, Muslims and Jews had believed that the true morality was revealed to man in the eternal world of God. It will be beside the point that professionals in ethics and philosophy had used the demands or conscience, the self-evident truths of reason, their theories of justice or the logical inferences from moral language to justify their moral convictions about how human beings ought to live and act.*

I fear that Elliott is right. We cannot avoid the collective consequences of wrong ways. The ecosystem has little use for our elegantly reasoned ethical systems. To be valid, a thought pattern must be sustainable. “...[T]he fact is that if the practice of a mistaken conception of ethics should ever allow the world's life-support system to break down, nature's experiment with Homo-sapiens would be over.” If living by a system of ethics should make human life physically impossible, “that ethics is absurd.”

We must reconcile our thinking and culture to the ecological system that surrounds us. No matter how attractive and elegantly reasoned is the world built up in our unconstrained vision, it ultimately must fit within the reality of the physical world. As Elliott points out:

*The culture of growth which drives the ethical, political, economic thinking in the Western nations, confuses the two domains (mental world and physical world). It assumes the open-ended, infinite expansion which is possible in the mental-cultural domain is also possible in the physical world.*

But I fear that it is not. If these fears are valid, the ultimate dichotomy will be between our mental map of the future being largely an extrapolation of the past, and a new mental model requiring profound cultural and economic change to align human activity to the realistic limits of our ecosystem.

Peter Russell in his book *Waking Up in Time* gives us a powerful metaphor to ponder. Describing a scene from a Zola novel he says:

*While a train full of soldiers on the way to war is rushing downhill, the driver and fireman are fighting. The fireman insists on stoking the engine and the driver is trying to stop him. As they tussle, one grabs the other by the throat and together they tumble off the engine, leaving the trainload of drinking and singing soldiers hurtling through the night, totally unaware of what has happened. And there the book ends!*

Is humanity on a similar course?