

From Household Budgets to Saving the Planet

Contribution to launch of David Graeber Institute

Khalil Avi Betz-Heinemann

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It's good to save, right? For example, it is wise and responsible as to 'save for a rainy day'. If you have the means, it may well be prudent to do so. It makes sense to increase your income in comparison to your outgoings, how much you earn in comparison to how much you spend, your input against your outputs. But your household budget does not exist in a vacuum outside of banks, governments, and everyone else's transactions. This 'everything else' is what is often called or reified as "the economy". And it's a commonly parroted belief that the economy functions like your household budget, just a scaled-up version. However, it does not.

"Money is debt. Banknotes are just so many circulating IOUs... Pounds are either circulating government debt, or they're created by banks by making loans. That's where money comes from. Obviously if nobody took out any loans at all, there wouldn't be any money. The economy would collapse."
(Graeber 2015)

In other words, if you actually ran the economy the way you run a prudent household budget with savings, then most people's actual households' budget would go into debt. The point here being that a certain habit of thinking (prudence) and activity (saving) have been mistakenly extended from the micro to the macro, the household to the national, the local to the global.

So what about saving the planet? This same habit of thinking appears, extending itself yet again despite the fact that we know the initial extension is mistaken. We went from household budget to economy, but now we also extend the economy to the planetary ecosystem. Again, outputs should not exceed inputs. One part is to be saved whilst the other part is spent. In the case of 'nature' this called wild and domesticated, save one and spend the other. For example, you have 10 acres of monkey laden forest. You could save it, or you could log it and raise 1000 cattle on it. A tug of war ensues between save versus spend, until it is decided, for example that you can save 5 acres of rainforest and raise 500 cattle, more intensively, on the remaining 5 acres.

For those interested in the peculiarities of such budgeting, in the native language of this tug of war, to decide what is prudent means talking about natural capital, wildlife conservation, net zero, and ecosystem services. Once it has been decided what is to be saved or spent, then the activity of saving begins with the practices of protected areas, expelling people, killing invasive species etcetera. But wait, this is not all. This habit of thinking and the related actions do not stop there.

Human population is increasing, whilst the rest of life on the planet — 'nature' — is on a finite budget. More people must mean more acres will be spent, so it follows that there will be less wild unless there is growth in more intensive exploitation of what remains in the budget to be spent. The premise then is that life is finite, and humans are by default exploitative, and this premise is expressed in ideas of sustainability or sustainable development, drawing on economics and management theory. An answer to how to manage this balance between wild and domesticated, saveable and

spendable, inputs and outputs. This answer emerging from a tension between believing in indefinite progress, economic growth, now green growth, and the poststructuralist recognition of limits to growth now in some cases degrowth (Mitcham 1995). Different ways to overcome the problem of what to save and what can be spent.

This tension reflecting different epistemologies, or ways of knowing. Poststructuralists understood that there was no perfect truth at the end of the scientific tunnel, and that methods of observation do not produce an objective representation of an objective reality. Instead there is just corrupted power relations all the way down. Whilst believers in linear progress and linear growth — positivists — maintained a belief in being able to know the planet in its objectivity. But, in Graeber's analysis both parties,

"...tend to agree that if there were a real world independent of the subject, it should be possible (at least in principle) for the subject to have absolute and comprehensive knowledge of it." (2015)

Furthermore, there is agreement that underlying 'life' there is effectively an economic logic of savings vs spending. For the poststructuralists Graeber argues,

"The idea was always to unmask the hidden structures of power, dominance, and exploitation that lay below even the most mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life. Certainly such things are there to be found. But if this is all one is looking for, one soon ends up with a rather jaundiced picture of social reality. The overall effect of reading through this literature is remarkably bleak; one is left with the... feeling of a fallen world, in which every aspect of human life is threaded with violence and domination..." (2001)

In doing so leading theorists such as Bourdieu ended up theorising 'economic capital' and 'symbolic capital'. In other words the world is so terribly corrupted by power that it really is savings and spending all the way down. As Bourdieu argues we must,

"...extend economic calculation to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation—which may be 'fair words' or smiles, handshakes or shrugs, complements or attention, challenges or insults, honour or honours, powers or pleasures, gossip or scientific information, distinction or distinctions, etc" (in Graeber 2001)

So from the perspective of this seeming tension between progress or growth and limits to it, there is in fact an agreement on a habit of thinking in terms of savings versus spendings. On top of this, both place a kind of end on time. The poststructuralists "making power and domination so fundamental to the very nature of social reality that it became impossible to imagine a world without it". In other words, there is no future there is only dismantling or putting limits on the present. Whilst the positivists hold

fast to the idea that all the past has progressed to this present and this present in terms of the planet is basically knowable in its totality, with an unknown future into which we can grow.

So the poststructuralists “phrasing everything in largely negative terms and tone” (Mitcham 1995) provided some recognition of a limit to progressive growth and turning their tension with positivists from a recognition of what should not be done, into a question of what should be done better i.e. sustainable development. In other words, humans should appropriately measure this ‘progressed’ present and then define our inputs and outputs so as to at least sustain our present achievements.

Which brings us back to the habit of thinking that extended the household budget to the economy, to the ecosystem. Because sustainable development not only emerges from thinking in terms of saved versus exploited, but it creates that ‘end in time’ by juxtaposing the present against the past as a movement from wild toward domesticated. This juxtaposition being the mythological basis that humankind and other animals once existed in a ‘state of nature’, then suddenly around 10,000 years ago,

“...we find our imaginary human actors scattered across the world’s continents, beginning to farm their own crops and raise their own herds. Whatever the local reasons... the effects are momentous, and basically the same everywhere. Territorial attachments and private ownership of property become important in ways previously unknown, and with them, sporadic feuds, and war. Farming grants a surplus of food, which allows some to accumulate wealth and influence beyond their immediate kin-group...To make matters more difficult still, or so the story goes, farming ensures a global rise in population levels.” (Graeber and Wengrow 2018)

In sum, the domestication of nonhuman wildlife enabled the domestication of human wildlife and its growth. The idea of being a civilized human, sustainable and developed, is harnessed to domestication as exploitation, with domestication providing the necessary resources to sustain growth and civilization, because ‘nature’ is finite.

The concepts of wild and domesticated then, breathe life into the theory of linear progression from one to the other, establishing the premises of the linear progression of social evolution and that this necessarily/inevitably involves exploitative domestication of wildlife. However, this is not a fact. At its simplest we know wild to domesticated is not a one-way process, and even at a microscopic level evolution is not linear. More importantly though the whole dichotomy is unhelpful. Not only do we have archaeological records of farming in “many ways, other than European-style farming, which [involve caring] for and improve the productivity of land” (Graeber and Wengrow 2021), but that have been diminutively described as foraging. We also have the works of environmental anthropology, ethnobotany, and environmental history that have recorded many ways of life that don’t fit into this wild past and domesticated present dichotomy. But most important, there are many indigenous and peasant farm-

ers today whose work also does not fit, often described instead as agroecology, land justice, and food autonomy (☒food sovereignty).

Just one example that expresses the difference between saving or spend and other ways of farming comes from looking a herring in Alaska North America (Thornton et al. 2010). The sustainable development of fisheries there via the idea of maximum sustainable yield has been a failure, compared to a local cosmology of environmental relations that has been suppressed. The other way of sea farming by the Tlingit speaking people does not pretend to be able to survey and objectively know life in order to work out how it can be sustainably harvested in terms of how much can be saved vs exploited. Nor does it pretend by contrast that all knowledge is purely subjective powerplay. Instead, its based on leaving the herring to be autonomous, but making gifts to them that help them thrive, creating regional trophic cascades that people and other sea creatures can enjoy.

In conclusion, I want to criticize the Marxist suggestion that we do not need to be reminded that human society depends on nature, but that the remarkable thing is that we have built it on other grounds. This needs an important update: Our habits of thinking about what it means to be a civilized human are built on how we think about nature and the related actions. If we take Marx’s point that,

“...ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas”
(1845)

Then habits of thinking are what structure a civilization and these habits are nothing more than an idealised expression of dominant material relationships that benefit those who rule that civilization. To develop this further, it is ideas of natural order. Where ‘natural’ order as an idea is rooted in habits of thinking about human-environmental relations as wild, domesticated, exploitative and civilized.

The point being that these formal abstractions reflect the natural order not just in terms of human-human relations but also human-environmental relations, where the later justifies the former and the consequent ways in which wildlife is saved, human-environmental change and continuity are sustainable developed and so forth. In sum domestication does not have to be exploitative nor does the environment determine social relations, but how we think about natural order provides justification for how we think of our social order as natural.

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