

7.2. Seeking Alternatives to the Triple-Growth Imperative: A Fool's Errand or a Slave's Dilemma?

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Abstract

A triple imperative dominates contemporary societies: physical and digital mobility need to continuously grow so that the economy can also continue growing. This is a remarkable state of affairs as this triple-growth imperative represents massive personal, societal, and environmental problems. Fighting this triple imperative is typically understood as a fool's errand: a pointless line of action that can only jeopardize those unwise enough to pursue it. There is, however, nothing foolish about it, as the triple imperative is rapidly leading humanity to its own collective destruction. Following the writings of Arno Gruen, we argue that fighting the triple-growth imperative constitutes, instead, a slave's dilemma. Contemporary subjects need to choose either a fundamentally honourable line of action against unethical domination that might save children and future generations from catastrophic circumstances — they should choose this knowing that such a line of action necessarily represents considerable hardship for those willing to pursue it. Alternatively, they can accept and contribute to the perpetuation of the triple imperative. This will grant them appealing rewards, but will come at a dire price at both personal and collective levels. What the slaves will do is, therefore, a key question of our times.

Key words: mobility, digitalization, economic growth, imperatives, future alternatives

Present-day societies are under the influence of a triple imperative on how to understand reality and shape the future. The first imperative is that the means of mobility must be continuously improved and accelerated for the benefit of the

avid consumer-traveller, for whom everything and anything needs to be available, accessible, and attainable (Rosa, 2018). The second imperative of contemporary societies determines the endless proliferation of digital technologies and, through them, the endless growth of digital mobility. These are presented by powerful lobbies as key and, in fact, inevitable building blocks for the future of human societies. As Shoshana Zuboff states,

Among high-tech leaders, within the specialist literature, and among expert professionals there appears to be universal agreement on the idea that *everything* will be connected, knowable, and actionable in the near future: ubiquity [in digital technology] and its consequences in total information are an article of faith. (Zuboff, 2019: 220, original emphasis)

The third imperative is that all imaginable things need to be imaginatively explored so that they can somehow stimulate economic growth. As a result, the paradoxical question that is taking an increasingly central role in high-level policy-making is how incessant economic growth should be induced (Mazzucato, 2018: 4) in a global context where the economy is already too large for the planetary ecosystem to sustain it (Daly, 2005). This imperative naturally also includes promoting growth in both mobility and virtual mobility, which are key prerequisites for a multiplicity of growth-boosting innovation, production, and consumption activities.

The high hopes placed on digitalization are of particular relevance when physical mobility becomes less feasible due to environmental constraints and/or disruptions such as that imposed by COVID-19, as experienced in 2020 and 2021. In this problematic situation, the second imperative (ever-increasing virtual mobility) is employed with extra impetus due to the failure to carry on with the first imperative (ever-increasing physical mobility), so that the third imperative is protected (ever-increasing economic growth).

Our claim here is that contemporary societies need to open their imaginaries for the future beyond the triple imperative of economic growth propelled by mobility growth and/or digitalization growth. This research explores what blocks the emergence of alternatives. An increasingly widespread belief seems to be emerging: to fight the triple-growth imperative is a fool's errand. We hope to convince the reader that it is not. It might, unfortunately, be something worse: a slave's dilemma.

Mobility, Digitalization, Economics, Growth

Contemporary societies are characterized by high levels of mobility dependency. In line with this, Urry argued in *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (2000) that sociological research needs to shift its focus from an analysis of societies towards an analysis of mobilities. There are both important benefits and disadvantages resulting from this global pro-mobile societal orientation (Ferreira *et al.*, 2012). On the one hand, mobility facilitates economic exchanges; makes jobs, services, and goods more accessible; opens new horizons of psychological and cultural understanding; allows individuals to establish and maintain meaningful social connections across vast geographies; and creates a subjective sense of freedom and unlimited possibilities.

On the other hand, mobility is a source of major environmental impacts, and is making global climate change an “exceptionally significant” future (Urry, 2008: 261). It is also a source of major impacts on human health, such as respiratory diseases resulting from toxic emissions, and injuries and deaths caused by accidents (Nieuwenhuijsen & Khreis, 2019: 3–16). Furthermore, mobility dependence is a source of fragility: the more dependent on mobility a society is, the greater the impacts of mobility disruptions. This became evident during the air travel disruption resulting from the ash cloud produced by the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in 2010 (Birtchnell & Büscher, 2011) and was emphasized during the global disruption imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The introduction of COVID-19 lockdowns during 2020–2021 was a quasi-experiment into the limits of virtual mobility as a desirable practice. While digital means of communication proved themselves capable of solving practicalities during the lockdowns, they fell short of providing the full richness of interacting face-to-face with loved ones or visiting a desirable destination. However, heavy reliance on digital means was not just disappointing. It was *painful*. So-called “Zoom fatigue” is today a common problem among many knowledge workers, leading researchers to develop theoretical conceptualizations to try to explain why people are struggling to continue attending virtual meetings (for example, Bailenson, 2021).

Moreover, there is consensus that the use of contemporary digital technologies benefits “Big Tech” corporations at the cost of democracy and the public interest (Zuboff, 2019: 516). To aggravate matters further, there are soaring uncertainties about the negative impacts of digital technologies in children’s emotional and cognitive development (Desmurget, 2019: 18), and doubts increase about the safety of wireless radiation devices for physical health (Pall, 2018; Sage & Burgio, 2018; Kostoff *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the rare minerals needed to develop digital technologies are, indeed, rare. Increasing

reliance on them will become a source of major geopolitical tensions in the near future (Stegen, 2015). Despite these negatives, wireless digital means are becoming dominant in contemporary societies and a progressively central feature of how the future is imagined. Why? Because they are proving to be highly effective in stimulating consumer demand and, through that, in promoting economic growth. However, evidence accumulates demonstrating that neither consumption nor economic growth can be seen as a synonym for well-being and prosperity. As Tim Jackson observes,

An economy whose stability rests on the relentless stimulation of consumer demand destroys not only the fragile resource base of this finite planet, but also the stability of its financial and political system. Consumer capitalism relies on debt to keep growth growing. Burgeoning credit creates fragile balance sheets. Complex financial instruments are used to disguise unsavoury risk. But when the debts eventually become toxic, the system crashes. (Jackson, 2017: 24)

Fighting the Triple-Growth Imperative as a Fool's Errand

While Big Tech has become more powerful, those less convinced of the goodness of technological innovations have become rather powerless. As a result, the triple-growth imperative became the uncontested credo of contemporary societies deeply shaped by the triple-helix model of innovation (Etzkowitz, 2003; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2001). In brief, this model stipulates that universities, industry, and governments must work in increasingly interconnected ways so that supposedly virtuous processes of “hybridization” can occur. The neoliberal underpinnings of this model are obvious and determine that, while governments are supposed to become more entrepreneurial, universities become more commercial, and corporations more governmental. This is a model that serves to naturalize the notion that innovation is the only way to move forward, and that “moving forward” necessarily means growing the size of the economy in ways that primarily serve the corporate elites.

Fighting this techno-corporate-governmentality is perceived by many as a fool's errand, for good reasons: if the success of an academic career is determined by the capacity of the academic to attract funding to promote yet

another innovation, demonstrating critical thinking against the established funding powers becomes a recipe for professional failure. A similar problem is being experienced in a variety of other professions and organizations beyond academia, for example, local authorities, central governments, hospitals, and non-governmental organizations.

Promoting ever-increasing physical and virtual mobility constitutes an important element of this disciplinary strategy. The exceedingly “liquid” (Bauman, 2007) — that is, uncertain, precarious, and shifting — properties of highly mobile societies constitute effective means to legitimate and consolidate abusive work contracts and funding arrangements across multiple sectors, professions, organizations and geographies: either one accepts the rules of the game, or the money moves somewhere else.

The Slave’s Dilemma

Presenting the fight against the triple-growth imperative as a fool’s errand fails to highlight the madness of what is happening. Contemporary “developed” societies are forcing on individuals and organizations the pursuit of economic growth through (technological) innovation accelerated by physical and virtual mobility while failing to realize something obvious: an acritical obsession with mobility, economic growth, and technological progress is the reason why planet Earth is increasingly at risk of becoming uninhabitable for humans (Meadows & Meadows, 1972; Daly, 1999; Gray, 2004; Daly, 2005; Kallis, 2011; Pilling, 2018). Fighting this logic cannot be portrayed as a fool’s errand because what is perfectly irrational and suicidal is to promote it. A more precise way of portraying this situation is as a “slave’s dilemma”.

The notion of the slave’s dilemma as presented by the authors of the present text is inspired by the work of Arno Gruen (1995). This Swiss-German psychoanalyst proposed that contemporary societies are becoming highly dominated by a form of *realpolitik* where the priority for all individuals must be to maximize their own power. This requires that they suppress any connection with their own moral identities and instead learn to please the authorities. As their capacity to please increases in the same proportion that acritical obedience becomes their second nature, the authorities delegate to selected individuals of great *merit* increasingly greater powers. This is a costly process: obedient individuals experience a deep sense of shame and corruption resulting from this prostitution; however, that sense must be suppressed at all costs because it is too unbearable (see Sally Weintrobe’s (2020) discussion of the notion of “moral

injury"). In practice, such individuals become unaware of what they feel or why they think in a certain way instead of another. To maintain their role, obedient individuals must focus all their energies on producing the feelings and thoughts that they are supposed to manifest, as determined by the established authorities. In other words, even though they seem to hold great powers and prestige, they are slaves of the establishment that reproduce the status quo.

The above discussion is critical to understanding why fighting the tripe-growth imperative is not a fool's errand. There is nothing irrational or foolish about it. It is, instead, a slave's dilemma. Individuals can choose to continue their numbed lives, enjoying the comforts derived from being seemingly powerful and being considered individuals of great merit and achievement while driving humanity (and therefore themselves and their loved ones) to self-destruction through economic growth and innovation. Alternatively, individuals can choose to face all their inner pains, their past experiences and horrors as slaves, lose the powers and credibility the establishment has granted them as rewards for their obedience, and embrace human- and nature-centred alternatives beyond technocratic domination.

In the meantime, as we write, the world is heading towards self-destruction. What will the reader do about it?

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