

Beyond Growth: Monetizing European Citizens into Poverty

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Introduction

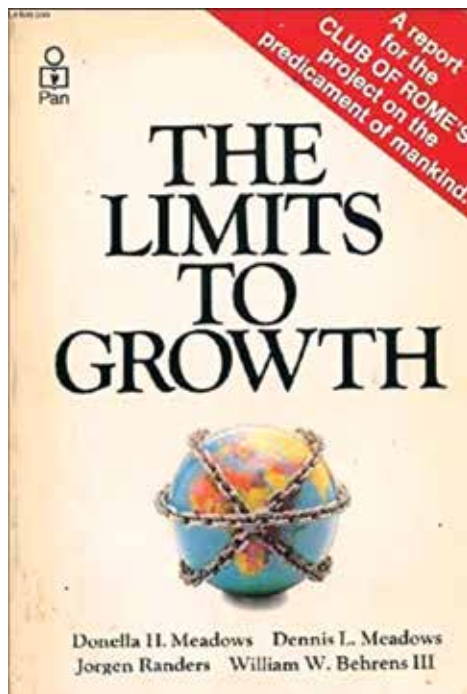
My dad said to me many times that Europe is the most dangerous part of the world. It took me a while to really fathom his words (I know, I am a slow learner): this continent has spawned not one but two World Wars, and who knows what's in store for us? The direction in which the EU is now heading is not helping in that historical department.

Indeed, at the May 15–17, 2023 Beyond Growth 2023 Conference, the President of the European Commission, Ursula Gertrud von der Leyen, gave a speech that is “interesting,” to say the least. It seems warranted to have a close look at her views and how she is trying to connect old and new ideas, which by any sane standard are massive and dangerous failures, yet fit snugly into the utopian vernacular so much loved by the European chatterati.

My projection: we are in for a “historic ride” in which only a “happy few” come out on top! Yet,



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European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen addresses the May 15–17 “Beyond Growth 2023 Conference.”



critiquing any of this now is regarded by the Dutch intelligence service as anti-institutional extremism. So much for intelligence. Let's dive in, shall we?

Inexcusably Glorifying *The Limits to Growth*

It comes as no surprise that von der Leyen starts her talk by praising *The Limits to Growth* report to the Club of Rome that was published in 1972. This pseudoscientific report is certainly not the “granddaddy” of the Western utopian/dystopian litany, but it is definitely one of the most prominent, a dystopian poster-child if you will (emphasis added):

A little over 50 years ago, the Club of Rome and a group of MIT researchers published *The Limits to Growth* report. It mapped the interaction between population growth, the economy, and the environment. And 50 years ago, it came to a drastic conclusion: *Stop economic and population growth—or else our planet will not cope.* As you know, this report has sparked a long controversy. For instance, about the role of new technology in countering climate change.

But instead of prolonging these debates, I today want to concentrate on one point, and

that is a point that the report got right beyond any doubt: That is the clear message that *a growth model centered on fossil fuels is simply obsolete. This assessment has been confirmed, time and again.* The recent IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change —ed.] report is just the latest reminder that we need to decarbonize our economies as quickly as possible.

So, economic growth is no longer “viable”; the 1972 report to the Club of Rome nailed it already half a century ago in von der Leyen’s book. That, of course, has nothing to do with science, but is simply the utopian dialectic that is mouthed by the EU president. Hardly innovative and certainly not intelligent.

Put differently, the European Commission, via *The Limits to Growth*, needs the world to be in dire circumstances—the dystopia—to sell its utopian perspectives, as I and my colleagues remarked already 18 years ago:

They [governments and international organizations —ed.] act within the context of bureaucratic optimism, not to say naivety, and, like the Club of Rome, of a belief in the power of planning and good intentions (perfect government) in combination with a pessimistic conceptualization of technology and economic growth.... This pessimism is a double-edged sword as it is not only targeted against science and technology but also does not leave the nation-state and its representative political make-up untouched.

That is not all, I am afraid. The painful and tainted debate on population growth is put “to rest” far too quickly by von der Leyen. In fact, she doesn’t spend a single word on this topic.

Indeed, morally and politically, she cannot afford to recognize that this debate is intimately tied to the environmental debate she so impatiently embraces. Let me reiterate some words of William Vogt, as found in his



William Vogt (1902–1968) put population growth and its “abatement” front and center in the environmentalist movement.

book, *Road to Survival* (1948); emphasis is not needed:

One of the greatest national assets of Chile, perhaps the greatest asset, is its high death rate. This is a shocking statement. Nevertheless, if one does not believe there is a virtue in having more people live ever more miserably, destroying their country with increasing rapidity, the conclusion is inescapable.

Those not familiar with William Vogt (1902–1968) should realize that his now largely forgotten but then famous book, *Road to Survival*, precedes

most if not all 20th Century environmental writings, *The Limits to Growth* included, that squarely put population growth and its “abatement” center-stage in the environmental debate.

Worse, Vogt is one of the founding fathers of the environmental dystopianism we now see again rising in the Extinction Rebellion. As Charles Mann puts it in his *The Wizard and the Prophet—Two Remarkable Scientists and Their Dueling Visions To Shape Tomorrow’s World* (2018), emphasis added:

Vogt ... laid out the basic ideas for the modern environmental movement. *In particular, he founded ... “apocalyptic environmentalism”—the belief that unless humankind drastically reduces consumption its growing numbers and appetite will overwhelm the planet’s ecosystems....* Vogt argued that affluence is not our greatest achievement but our biggest problem. Our prosperity is temporary, he said, because it is based on taking more from Earth than it can give. If we continue, the unavoidable result will be devastation on a global scale, perhaps including our extinction. *Cut back! Cut back!* was his mantra. *Otherwise everyone will lose!*

Unsurprisingly, the two books [Vogt’s *Road to Survival* and Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr.’s *Our Plundered Planet*] were in some ways quite sim-

ilar—and not just in that both railed against a new chemical called DDT. They were jointly inventing a new literary genre: *the concerned report on the global condition*. They were the first to portray our ecological worries as a single Earth-sized problem for which the human species is to blame. And by stating that the problem is one interconnected, worldwide issue, rather than something local or national, they implicitly argued that ecological issues could only be solved by a unified global effort, administered by global experts—by people, that is, like Vogt and Osborn.

Hence, by praising *The Limits to Growth*, von der Leyen sets up the non-democratic and scientific expertocracy—minimally the Brussels bureaucracy—that is ostensibly required to lead us all to the sustainable safe space of the European Green Deal. Indeed, as is noted in the 1972 report to the Club of Rome she so praises (emphasis added):

There may be much disagreement with the statement that population and capital growth must stop soon. But virtually no one will argue that material growth on this planet can go on forever... Man can still choose his limits and stop when he pleases by weakening some of the strong pressures that cause capital and population growth, or by instituting counter-pressures, or both. *Such counter-pressures will probably not be entirely pleasant*. They will certainly involve profound changes in the social and economic structures that have been deeply impressed into human culture by centuries of growth...

The Club of Rome explicitly links the risks of science and technology to the “inevitability” of centralized assessment and abatement strategies. The goal of these scientific assessment strategies is to perpetually gauge new technology in relation to the premeditated checks on (capital) growth.

Two examples of these continual assessment strategies are EC Regulation No. 1907/2006, “Registration, Evaluation, Authorization & Restriction of Chemicals” (REACH) (see my [paper](#), “Tradeoffs of Chemicals Regulation—the Science and Tacit Knowledge of Decisions,” co-authored with Edward J. Calabrese), and the so-called [Greenhouse Gas Protocol](#) initiative.

Toward Predesigned Poverty

That being said, in order to tackle the “big risks in life,” von der Leyen proposes the notion of a social market economy, which she discusses:

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Our social market economy was never exclusively about economic growth. It was always about human development. It never had the sole goal of market efficiency and liberalization. To the contrary: The social market economy functions in the interest of the worker and the community. It opens opportunities, also to set very clear limits. It rewards performance but also guarantees protection for the big risks in life. Beyond growth, it focuses on public goods such as healthcare, education and skills, workers’ rights, personal security, civic engagement and governance—good governance. Our social market economy, if you get it right, encourages everyone to excel, but it also takes care of our fragility as human beings....

First, when the pandemic hit us. Our recovery plan, [NextGenerationEU](#), has focused not only on restarting our economic activities after the lockdowns but also on transforming our economic model. With a push to de-carbonizing industries, energy and transport. With an emphasis on digital skills and digital infrastructure. With new investments for schools and hospitals. Beyond growth, NextGenerationEU takes care of the next generation’s future.

Von der Leyen has a truly “grand vision” for the future of Europe: with opportunities and clear limits. One such limit is expressed in the benign-sounding term “de-carbonization.” Because, that is what *The Limits to Growth* shows.

Sounds fancy, de-carbonization, but it is “just” the banning of all fossil hydrocarbons—coal, oil, gas—which has huge consequences for everyone. Von der

Leyen sees the “scientific need” to stamp out an entire global industrial activity—the petrochemical industry—in order to “save the planet,” explicitly without any real global or European alternative that could even come close to what this industry delivers to society:

No, this is emphatically not an indiscriminate moral approval of this particular or any other industry, but a mere statement of fact!

Be that as it may, there is only one route towards the goals proposed by von der Leyen. The eminent Dutch economist Jan Pen formulated that route already in 1972 in his reflections on *The Limits to Growth*, in a paper titled, “The Unknown Consequences of the Forrester and Meadows Model for Economic Policy” (my translation; emphasis added):

A massive destruction of purchasing power can be achieved along Keynesian lines, namely by levying additional taxes and not spending them. Simultaneously, a credit restriction must be implemented so that private money creation does not undo the effect. This, on paper, is a fairly simple procedure; *it amounts to creating a massive economic depression, which halts the growth of production....*

Total production must be curbed, and some “authority” needs to specify those economic sectors that should be curtailed the hardest. It takes little imagination to envision the difficulties such an agency faces. *It can only operate in a socio-psychological environment that accepts serious restrictions on freedom—which is not exactly the environment in which we live....*

Finally, a radical change of mentality is required (austerity, putting aside otherwise justified desires), because without this any form of politics is unimaginable. *Vital freedoms must be curtailed.* I simply fail to conceptualize such a new form of economic policy....

Pen could not envision any such developments coming to fruition, as he himself proposed. No wonder very few people are aware of this economist’s deadpan, pre-



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Eminent Dutch economist Jan Pen: To implement von der Leyen’s ideas, “total production must be curbed, and some ‘authority’ needs to specify those economic sectors that should be curtailed the hardest.... Vital freedoms must be curtailed.”

cise and inescapable analysis. How the world has changed half a century onward!

Institutionalizing Poverty

This brings me to the following closing observations: The primary thing to note is that von der Leyen implicitly and crudely monetizes all so-called crises that are supposedly solved by draining society of its capital for the greater good for society.

The extirpative expertocracy that so burglarizes the whole of society “for the greater good,” however, carries no (democratic) responsibility whatsoever toward anyone. Wealth is simply accrued as a means to stop growth for the masses, simultaneously

increasing the wealth and power of the expertocracy.

This, however, should not surprise us. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (1927–2022), Pope Benedict XVI, eloquently stated the following in his [article](#), “Eschatology and Utopia” (emphasis added):

[D]emocracy depends much more on mores than on *instituta*. *Where no common persuasion exists, institutions find nothing to lay hold of, and coercion becomes a necessity.* Freedom presupposes conviction; conviction, education and moral awareness. Wherever “utopia” becomes a mere treatise on institutions, it forgets the decisive truth that *the management of the forces of the soul determines the fate of a community more than the management of economic means.... The neglect of mores does not enlarge freedom; it prepares the way for tyranny: this prognosis ... has been confirmed only too exactly by the developments of the last hundred years....*

In the end, the ruined European citizenry, in the name of the ostensible planet-saving operations as proposed by von der Leyen, will need to beg at the footsteps of that same expertocracy. Perhaps then, and only then, will the *ex cathedra* proclaimed soullessness of humanity be abandoned, for a greater good that is not of this world.

Time will tell!