

Utopia - A Non-Profit Organisation

Yes, Virginia, there really could be a free lunch...

Decades ago, Buckminster Fuller wrote a book called *Utopia or Oblivion*.¹ He was right. And still is.

Life isn't perfect by any means, but to me, sometimes at least – with the best of friends or family, the ideal companions, after a perfect meal, relaxed in extreme comfort (no rotating knives in sight), the music just right, the senses elated, the spirits lifted, the conversation abuzz, the activity euphoric – it feels like utopia.

But I'm one of the luckier ones: I live in a modern developed nation (with an income a little above the average), so no wonder it feels to me closer to utopia than oblivion – at least in my *spare* time. Working hours are less euphoric. And a bit long. And commuting can be a bit rough too. Still, nothing to complain about really, not compared to the global majority, for whom it's closer to oblivion than utopia.

You can't expect perfection, but you'd think the modern world could do better than this spare-time minority utopia. Surely? We have the capacity, it seems, we just haven't organised properly. The esteemed economist John Maynard Keynes said as much, back in 1931: "the problem of want and poverty and the economic struggle between classes and nations is nothing but a frightful muddle, a transitory and an *unnecessary* muddle. For the western world already has the resources and the technique, if we could create the organisation to use them, capable of reducing the economic problem, which now absorbs our moral and material energies, to a position of secondary importance".² Hear, hear. But that was *eighty* years ago – you'd think we'd have made more progress since. You'd expect more utopia, less oblivion.

Little has changed in eighty years because too many of our actions are compelled by economic game rules and institutions based on aggression and territorial rights, enshrined as market competition. No surprise the results. No surprise we have *not* organised to reduce the economic problem but instead to entrench it. The struggle has mounted instead of eased, as economic issues have gained ever higher priority, as our energies have been devoted increasingly to the often impossible double-bind dilemmas of juggling inter-related concocted parameters and resources in the futile hope of achieving just the right Goldilocks levels of profits, jobs, growth, spending, debt, borrowing, productivity, wages, inflation, investment, interest, savings, currencies, imports, exports – all the while inventing ever more complex markets not for real wealth but for figments of the imagination: bonds, stocks, derivatives, shorts, mortgage-based bundles, collateralized debt obligations, credit swaps, and various other too-clever-by-half exercises in self-deception, glorified IOUs and bets upon gambles. A collective delusion, with oblivion for the weakest competitors guaranteed.

Nevertheless, there's a simple way to start organising a majority utopia. Stop juggling your economic balls and do your math. Stop peddling god the profit, the job and the holy growth. Concentrate.

Fuller estimated that, in the 1970s, seventy percent of jobs in the USA and similar developed countries were not producing "any wealth or life support".³ He defined 'wealth' quite sensibly as truly beneficial objects or services, not illth like weapons, and not money, mere "tickets for the transfer of wealth or illth."⁴ Thus, he included in that non-wealth-producing seventy percent of jobs, "inspectors of inspectors, reunderwriters of insurance reinsurers,... spies and counterspies, military personnel, gunmakers etc."⁵ To which I would add most or all work in advertising, marketing,⁶ red-tape-binding, consultancy, administration, lobbying, stockbroking, employment counselling, currency and other financial trading, cosmetic surgery, real estate, commercial law, research of the bleeding obvious or

¹ Buckminster Fuller, *Utopia or Oblivion* (Bantam, New York, 1969)

² John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (Volume 9 of The Collected Writings, MacMillan, London, 1972), p.xviii

³ Buckminster Fuller, *Critical Path* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1981), p.226

⁴ Robert Anton Wilson, *The Illuminati Papers* (And/Or Press, Berkeley, 1980), p.149

⁵ Fuller, *Critical Path*, p.226

⁶ According to Rowbotham, *Goodbye America! Globalisation, debt and the dollar empire* (Jon Carpenter, Charlbury, 2000), p.18: "Today, advertising, image-creation and various marketing strategies represent a staggering 18% of the American economy."

utterly useless, multi-level management and supervision, elevator assistance, door monitoring, and various other jobs that might lead to more *spending* but not more wealth.

Jobs like these persist only because they provide incomes and often profits – and income and profits feed economic growth. The unholy trinity of profits, jobs, and growth has become our modern imperative, much as human sacrifice compelled the Aztecs. But it is long past time to grow up and stop believing in false gods, to stop accepting second best (or worse).

What if somehow we could rid ourselves of non-wealth-producing jobs? The math: thirty percent of current forty-hour-a-week work shared equally and fairly would equal a twelve-hour working week for all – closer to ten or eleven if the unemployed are included and/or we start with a thirty-five-hour week. So two five- or six-hour working days a week – or *less* if we really tried... If we really aimed to save work instead of jobs, we could automate, we could build to last instead of to obsolesce, we could produce and consume with less pollution, resources, congestion, and waste, and we could work closer to our capacities. Sure, much work that isn't now done – that won't make anyone profits – really should be, and this would offset other savings to some extent, but even so, it might only take a decade or so to end up with a *one-day working week* for all – if we did things properly, really tried our best.

But a one-day working week with jobs shared properly would mean less income – less money (which usually ends the discussion then and there). However, it would also mean less costs for business, which *could* mean lower prices. Why not shorter hours and *equally* lower prices? Why not prices falling in proportion to income (or rising if circumstances change and we need to work longer hours)?

No need for growth then, spread the load and share the boon... except that without growth's increasing flow of money and sales, businesses would struggle to profit, and loans wouldn't be repaid. So, if we really want to share useful work fairly amongst all who want to work, and so allow us to abandon our wasted efforts and our obsessive-compulsive need for growth, we'd also have to jettison profit (and interest)...

There's really no need to have profit – we're just used to second best (or worse). Its usual defense – that it motivates people – ignores the dynamism of non-profit organisations. Besides, doing our best for a one-day working week should be sufficient motivation in itself (and if it proves to be sufficient for only the best of us, then profit might not be the best motivation for the rest). The proposals that follow perhaps could be adjusted to retain profit if we lack the nerve to abandon it, but its absence would make it a lot easier not only to rid ourselves of the seventy percent of jobs that don't produce wealth, but also to balance costs and prices as working hours adjust to suit changed circumstances.

In any case, like any orthodox economist, I'm going to assume: no more god the profit, job and holy growth. There will still be work to do, but done properly, and only as little (or as much) of it as we choose, as circumstances and tastes and motivations determine. That all requires big changes. Here's a few basic ideas (feel free to improve on or add to them)...

Firstly, even with *total* costs balanced by *total* prices, the price of any individual product need not equal its cost. Free (or discounted) goods – such as a fair quota of staple food and basic clothing, health care, education, even housing – could be afforded simply by increasing the prices of all non-free consumables by the appropriate proportion, the costs of the free (or discounted) goods, in effect, 'absorbed' into the prices of the rest. Likewise for costs of building factories, offices, and farms, environmental regeneration, welfare for the disabled and retired, infrastructure and other public spending – *any* necessary or desirable cost that does not directly produce consumable goods.

To handle this, at the start of each year, credit each producer/project account with enough interest-free funds to cover expenditures planned for that year. Credit consumer accounts each week with wages and/or welfare earned. A purchase debits the purchaser's account by the price, but credits the producer's account with the cost. Over the year, most producers undoubtedly spend more or less than they expect, or sell fewer goods, or suffer shortfalls – so by year's end, their accounts differ from at the start, data which should help inform future allocation of work and resources. At year's end, though, reset producer accounts to zero then re-credit them for the next year's expected expenditures. Do not adjust consumer accounts, keep them cumulative: then, hard workers and frugal spenders have accounts mostly in credit, while big spenders and lazy burdens more often have debits. Consumer accounts,

publicly available (even after death, as the ultimate epitaph), should evoke pride or shame, and so increase motivation towards working and spending responsibly.

These arrangements would be considerably enhanced by adopting a bottom-up decentralised participatory form of Internet-based democracy underpinned by small self-governing electorates arranged into progressively larger associations whose decisions require the majority agreement of constituent groups. Call this *plurocracy* (since it allows a plurality of views), and base it on electorates called *localities*, each consisting of (say) two hundred voters. Groups of (say) twenty localities form electorates called *towns*. Groups of towns, in turn, form larger electorates (*cities*) – groups of these, still larger electorates – and so on.

Each locality is represented (not facelessly) by one of its members, each town by one of its constituent localities' representatives (perhaps replaced or assisted at the locality level if the locality so determines), each city by one of its constituent towns' representatives, and so on. Votes for all levels' representatives are stored online, each vote accessible to its owner to change any time. However, representatives have mostly coordinative roles, providing or disseminating options and proposals to their electorates, and making sure they have all available and necessary information to make up their own minds. (There'd be plenty of time for this because of the one-day working week.)

Decisions are made from the bottom up: for any electorate to plurocratically pass any proposal requires approval not only by a majority of the electorate's voters but also by a majority of the electorate's constituent electorates – each, in turn, approved also by a majority of *their* constituent electorates – all the way down to the locality level. Nevertheless, electorates at every level function semi-autonomously. Although each locality, for example, must heed the plurocratic decisions of its town, these apply only to issues affecting two or more localities (such as construction methods or building height restrictions). Each locality makes its own rulings for purely internal affairs (such as where to build a new house or shop, though recommendations for this could be made by the town or city). Electorates could even settle on their own definitions of 'majority approval' or vary it according to the issue, or aim for consensus, or decide not to vote for but to roster representatives. Electorates can also secede from their 'parent' electorates, and join other more-like-minded electorates (not necessarily with common borders) or else become independent.

The online voting system could also be used to register anyone's opinion on any issue requiring a decision, seek and obtain 'expert' advice, bring any issue to the attention of those it affects, function as an electronic communal noticeboard, and allow any vote on any decision to be altered as voters plurocratically change their minds. True democracy from the comfort of your favourite armchair, with people self-governing – proposing, deciding, and implementing their own schemes whenever possible, advised by 'experts' when unavoidable, and coordinated by each level's representatives directly answerable to their electors.

Plurocracy provides a market surrogate, by allowing needs and desires to be tabulated and accrued from the bottom up, and by assisting producers and workers to plan and employ resources accordingly. It allows free land, homes, factories and other fixed capital to be *stewarded* rather than owned or rented. People living in the smallest plurocratic electorate with borders fully enclosing unused land have responsibility for looking after the land until they agree on how, if at all, to use or develop it. Home stewards have all the usual rights bestowed by ownership, except they cannot sell (or buy) their houses: those who look after or improve their homes (and perhaps, to provide additional motivation to work, who have also kept their accounts consistently balanced or in credit) simply move house – the more responsible their stewardship, the greater their options (assisted by nomination of preferences to create online waiting lists). Fixed capital stewards consist mostly of the people operating it – all the workers of a factory, for example – but also, and ultimately, of those most directly affected by the capital's operations: those living in the smallest plurocratic electorate with borders fully enclosing the capital.

Yes, of course this is radical. Real change is always radical. But a majority utopia won't happen without real change. And we've avoided real change for at least the eighty years since Keynes claimed we 'only' had to organise our capacities properly. Another eighty years of the same and even our minority utopia runs the risk of disintegrating into oblivion.

Capitalism's had its day, it just hasn't realised it yet. It is an antique running in ever-narrowing circles as it digs its own grave. Time for a new model economic vehicle suited to modern times and free from the contradictions and impossibilities of the present one – or go down in history as underachievers. Keep the work that needs doing, but abandon profit and the holy growth. And get our act together properly. Utopia for all and all for utopia. A non-profit co-operative organisation.

Herman Royce is [God Almighty](#)'s biographer and self-appointed spokesperson, inventor of [A Free Lunch](#), and the first person in history to say "Now I've seen you naked, I could never eat turkey."