

Ways towards an egalitarian post-growth society

Abstract

The early industrialized countries have yet not succeeded in stabilizing the economic growth. Long-term averages of the growth rates suggest that they ceaselessly move toward zero. Several signs of instability are already visible. A transition to a stable post-growth society is required as economic growth has reached ecological and social boundaries. This makes a transformation of the present social structures unavoidable. A stable and democratic post-growth society has to become more egalitarian. Without an abandonment or limitation of non-performing income that is based on privilege (e.g. capital income) an impoverishment of growing parts of the population will arise. For the stability of the society authoritarian structures would be required. Empirical evidence suggests that the majority of the general public supports the idea of an egalitarian post growth society, but not the elites. The large part of its members are not willing to accept limitations of their privileges. Due to the significant influence of this social group on the political decision-making, the interests of their members will most likely prevail. But if no measures are taken, a transition to an authoritarian post-growth society will inevitably take place. This threatens not only democracy but also the means of livelihood for future generations, since an authoritarian society is believed to have an insufficient capability for the transition to sustainability.

A possible way out could lie in the change of values of the society. Values determine the world view and thus also, to a significant extent, the behavior of individuals. Values can be characterized by the dimensions *materialistic – idealistic* and *individualistic - collectivistic*. In the framework of the integral model it is assumed that in order to obtain solutions to the current crisis it is essential that besides materialistic and idealistic goals, individualistic and collectivistic ideas are reconciled. Evidence is presented that in the here discussed context this assumption is plausible.

A linear extrapolation of the existing empirical data suggests that in the early industrialized countries the previous domination of materialistic values has recently reached its end. Instead, a majority of a *post-materialist* orientation has been reached. Post-materialist goals, e.g. individual self-development, emancipation, political participation or environmental protection, are idealistically and individualistically coined. The mentioned changes in predominant values, however, have not yet reached the older part of the population and thereby important parts of the influential decision-makers in politics and business.

In the early industrialized countries there is a pronounced dominance of individualistic and a corresponding negation of collectivistic values. This world view leads to a society where each individual seeks its personal advantage. These ideals contribute to the fact that its members are unaware of their responsibility for the common good.

A representative survey that has been carried out in Germany shows that the general public criticizes the overemphasis of individualistic (and materialistic) values: A big majority of the citizens sees an exuberant egotism and individualism as socially disruptive. The daily life would be coined by unfairness and disloyalty. A prevailing greed for more and more is lamented. In this context, representatives of politics and business are accused of a lack of decency.

Quite a number of empirical studies proves indeed that persons from the upper class and

thus the relevant decision-makers show a differing social behavior in comparison to members of the lower class. This manifests itself, for example, in a higher positive self-evaluation of the own greed, in a reduced social engagement and capacity for empathy or in an increased propensity for rule violations and immoral behavior. These studies show that the behavior of the tested social groups can be temporary changed to the opposite by external stimuli. The data suggests that the illusion of independence from other members of the society is elicited by the mere idea of money. For instance a poster with dollar bills stuck on a wall in the room where the experiments were carried out evoked in members of the lower class a similar behavior as shown by members of the upper class without this stimulus. Conversely, the findings show that for members of the upper class merely a supposed personal connection with socially disadvantaged persons causes an increased capacity for empathy. It is plausible to assume that in the described case an enhanced general pro-social behavior is evoked.

A reinforced orientation towards collectivistic goals emphasizes the social interconnectedness. The last mentioned finding suggests that this increases the level of empathy in a society and could lead to a more considerate behavior of all of its members. Together with the currently taking place shift towards idealistic values a social climate could thereby be established, which allows the members of the elites to agree to an abandonment or a limitation of their privileges.

Against this background, this question has gained importance: How can the values of the society be influenced accordingly? Referring to this, first ideas of an approach are sketched. It is based on the hypothesis that a modification of the social and economic order can have an impact on the values of the society. Although this statement is found in the literature, it has not been verified yet. The following proof uses the *induced-compliance paradigm* and needs in addition one plausible assumption.

The induced-compliance paradigm states that resolving a cognitive dissonance by self-persuasion may cause permanent changes in attitudes and behavior. Self-persuasion is required if no satisfactory justification of external reward or punishment is provided for the own behavior. The smaller the reward or punishment, the more effective it is. Great rewards and punishments only lead to short-term changes in attitudes and behavior.

A permanent change of behavior indicates a corresponding change of values. Otherwise a cognitive dissonance would arise. This can explain findings that the values of a person are influenced by the values of his or her parents. In a context of a family explicit and implicit rules apply which reflect the predominant values of the elder generation, usually the parents. A behavior according to or against these rules has positive or respectively negative sanctions as a consequence. If these sanctions are relatively small the resolving of the cognitive dissonance leads to a corresponding change of the behavior and the values.

It can be assumed that in the same manner the social and economic order has an impact on the values of the society. These rules explicitly and implicitly express "what's good" and "what's bad". Formal and, once they are assimilated, informal social control are sanctioning the behavior of the citizens. The resolving of the resulting cognitive dissonance leads to an according change of their values.

This effect can be used to set up a sequence of reforms in such a way that each reform accomplishes the change in values that is needed for the social acceptance of the following. For instance, though it probably may not be the very first step, a basic income

grant is probably more acceptable for the elites as an egalitarian post-growth society. Some models of this reform do not at all influence the level of the non-performing incomes that are based on privilege. An implementation of a basic income grant doesn't eradicate the reasons for the present instability. Instead it alleviates some of its symptoms. And even more important it induces a shift in values towards idealistic and collectivistic goals, which in turn, allows the realization of more comprehensive steps.