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G.N.P. vs. Quality of Life

by Richard Evanoff

Most people look at G.N.P. as a measurement of our economic well-being. When G.N.P. goes up, our standards of living go up. When G.N.P. goes down, our standards of living go down. The linkage between G.N.P. and quality of life can be found in any economic textbook. It's "common sense" after all. When people spend more money they get more goods and services.

The media keeps a close watch on just how "well" the economy is doing and politicians rise and fall with G.N.P. — one reason why G.N.P. is taken so seriously in high places. Economic growth is sacrosanct. When environmentalists point out all the harm that unbridled economic growth is doing to the environment, they're accused of wanting to push humanity back to Neanderthal lifestyles.

What we have to show, then, is that G.N.P. is *not* an accurate measurement of quality of life. We have to sever the link between G.N.P. and quality of life by pointing out that increased economic growth does not necessarily contribute to a higher standard of living. We have to defy conventional wisdom by showing how a *decrease* in G.N.P. can actually contribute to an *increase* in quality of life.

Let's start with a simple example. When I was a kid we had a television set that lasted for 25 years. I grew up with just one television. Whenever it went on the blink we'd call the repairman and he'd come to our house and put in a new tube. The first television I bought as an adult, however, lasted just 10 years. My oldest son, who is eleven, is already on his second television. When the picture went out on our old set, I called the repairman to fix it. He said the company didn't make parts for this particular model any more. I'd just have to junk the old television and buy a new one.

Here's the logic of G.N.P. Every time I buy a new television, G.N.P. goes up. The more televisions I buy, the higher G.N.P. goes. If I buy a new television every ten years rather than every twenty-five years, G.N.P. will increase by 150%. Will my quality of life have improved, however? Not in the least. I'll still have just one working television in my house. In fact, my quality of life will go down because I'll be shelling out more money over time just to keep one set in my house. This is money that I could be using for something else. I'll also be spending more of my time shopping for new televisions — time that could be more meaningfully spent on other activities. Life becomes a treadmill between home and shopping center — which is exactly what the manufacturers

and retail outlets that profit from our "consumer lifestyles" want.

Planned obsolescence is a fact of life in modern capitalism. Rather than create products which are long-lasting and repairable, more profits can be made by making cheap, shoddy products that break soon, cannot be repaired, and need to be replaced. Despite all the ballyhoo about how technology is giving us a higher quality of life, real technological improvement should mean that products are getting better, not worse. New televisions that last less than half as long as the older models is not a sign of technological advance.

Waste is another factor in the G.N.P. equation. Construction companies in Japan boost G.N.P. every time they burn plywood concrete forms and buy new ones instead of reusing the old forms. Soft drink companies boost G.N.P. by packaging their products in disposable plastic containers that have to be replaced instead of in glass bottles that can be recycled. And the increase in garbage also boosts G.N.P. since more money must be spent disposing of all these junk TVs and plastic containers.

The Fall 1990 issue of *Building Economic Alternatives* shows how *decreases* in our quality of life sometimes actually show up as *increases* in G.N.P. After the Alaskan oil spill the Exxon Corporation spent \$2.2 billion cleaning up the mess. Millions of dollars more were spent on litigation and public relations. All of this money was duly recorded as contributing to the United States' G.N.P. *None* of the ecological damage caused by the spill was figured into the equation, however, not even the income lost by fishermen who depended upon an ecologically healthy coastline for their livelihoods. Obviously oil spills are good for the economy since they contribute to a rising G.N.P.! Meanwhile the media foster the impression that our quality of life is rising with it.

The same issue of *Building Economic Alternatives* points out that if the total number of people doing volunteer work suddenly doubled, our quality of life would also double. Yet none of this increase in well-being would show up on G.N.P. since taking care of the elderly, offering free meals for the homeless, and cleaning up garbage-strewn highways contribute absolutely nothing to "economic growth."

G.N.P. and quality of life cannot be linked, despite what politicians, corporations, and the press tell us. Only Neanderthals could believe that an ever-rising G.N.P. is going to make our lives better. □