

Book Review

***Hooked on Growth: Economic Addictions and the Environment.* By Douglas E. Booth. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004, 277 pp., ISBN 0742527174.**

Booth's book argues that GDP (gross domestic product) growth is a social addiction fed by the continued need to consume conspicuously, and that getting "unhooked" from growth is as desirable as it is necessary. The author critically examines the environmental constraints on—and consequences of—unabated growth, as well as its undesirable social consequences, such as the consumption "arms race" or the trend toward more hours spent at work.

It is an important topic and a genuinely interesting read. In addition to the author's engaging writing style, the breadth of topic coverage makes the book a useful primer for undergraduates interested in either the social sciences or—especially—environmentalism. Another selling point is the skillful manner in which the author weaves a variety of strands (e.g. consumer behavior, macroeconomics, global warming) that seem—prior to reading the book anyway—tangentially related. The author's notion of an "environmental growth speed limit" as an alternative to the conventional economic growth speed limit (i.e. the point beyond which inflation becomes intolerably high) is sensible and, importantly, offers a more feasible alternative (politically, at least) to a steady state economy. His distinction between absolute and relative needs also deserves emphasis, and the author is on the mark in his critical discussion of our seemingly limitless race to consume. The policy inference that one can draw from his analysis is very important, especially in today's industrialized (and mass-consumption) economies: instead of greater material consumption, we can all lead happy—indeed happier—lives by consuming less material goods and enjoying more of *other types* of consumption—leisure or time with the family, for example.

In terms of developing an original, coherent argument, however, the book falls short. Perhaps the most salient weakness is in what I understand to be

Review of Social Economy

ISSN 0034-6764 print/ISSN 1470-1162 online © 2006 The Association for Social Economics

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>

DOI: 10.1080/00346760600721171

the book's principal thesis: that our society is "hooked" on GDP growth in a similar manner to how a drug addict might be hooked on his substance. To begin with, the analogy is inaccurate. While some of us may be addicted to shopping, we are mostly rather indifferent to growth. Insofar as it matters to us at all, we can thank the pundits and talking heads (as well as economics professors) for inculcating us with its importance. Many readers of the book will probably be familiar with some of the recent criticisms of GDP growth as a measure of progress, and will therefore recognize that some of the negative components of GDP (e.g. cleanup of environmental damage, increased cancer treatment expenditure) have little if anything to do with shopping or social addictions in general.

Rather than growth being a social addiction, a major oversight is the book's inattention to what we might call the "systemic addiction" to growth, related to the idea that the capitalist system cannot survive without continued growth. Even here the analogy is not perfect because while the addict would be better off without his fix (at least in the long run), capitalism would arguably cease to exist in the absence of growth. A fundamental problem is therefore the prominence in the author's analysis given to the consumer, resulting in inadequate attention to system dynamics. Consequently, the growth addiction is presented as a problem for which the solution mostly depends on individual agency, and the author appears to suggest that the alternative is a "win-win" proposition. The author's speculation, for example, about an eventual transition in the US to high density cities as a way of life for the majority, appears a bit quixotic. One need not accept the argument that capitalism without continued growth is impossible to find the author's description of a relatively harmonious transition away from the growth addiction (i.e. one devoid of class conflict) to be unduly sanguine.

The author is on the money in his lengthy discussion of the psychology behind our behavior as consumers. It is undoubtedly true that contemporary culture produces a pressure to conform to social norms, mostly through the conspicuous consumption of many products that we do not need. Most if not all of the material, however, is straight from the work of Veblen and Tibor Scitovsky, though the author, to his credit, makes no pretense to the contrary. It is nevertheless surprising to see that the work of Fred Hirsch is nowhere discussed. Hirsch's notion of "positional goods" certainly warrants mention, for example in the author's discussion of BMWs as expensive and rare commodities that communicate to others the status of the owner.

The omission is but one indication of how the book is, paradoxically, excessively and insufficiently broad at the same time. While the topic

coverage is at times so expansive that it is easy to lose sight of the main argument that the author is making, the opposite is the case for the manner in which each individual topic is addressed, where the focus is, in most cases, on one or two lines of research. As examples, for consumer behavior the commentary mostly emphasizes Veblen and Scitovsky (and a bit of Schumpeter to address the supply side); Aldo Leopold dominates the discussion of environmental values; Jürgen Habermas the remarks on discourse and politics. It seems almost as if the foundation for the book was constructed on the thought of half a dozen figures who have influenced the author and his work, and that the details were filled in later.

One gets a similar impression for the literature reviews in general, despite the fact that the author provides an impressively long list of sources. Among other problems, the author suggests that diminished health is linked to long-term unemployment. While the view is commonly held, there have been a number of studies arguing just the opposite (e.g. Eyer 1997; Ruhm 2000). Here is certainly not the place to resolve the matter, but it is important to present other perspectives, especially since the contrary view would appear to invalidate the author's assertion that unemployment is undesirable (clearly it is, but possibly in spite rather than because of the health effects).

There are several instances in which the book is plain sloppy. In his analysis of the environmental Kuznets curve, for example, the author repeatedly makes the mistake of treating it interchangeably with the original Kuznets curve. Undergraduates or other readers not familiar with the latter will not notice, but it is certainly a disservice to scholars in the field who have studied the growth-inequality relationship with no attention whatsoever to the environment. Elsewhere, in his discussion of energy efficiency, the author comments that "most of us" arise on a winter morning to a house of 1,800 square feet. Huh? Many readers will probably be struck by the statement, unless the majority happened to be trained professionals like the author. Judging from the accessible style in which the book is written, however, it does not seem that it would be the author's intent.

The author attempts to summarize all of globalization in less than two pages (as a mini-preface to the section on exotic species invasions); the treatment is necessarily very superficial, and I am not sure why he bothered. Similarly, the four detailed case studies on irreversibility of environmental damage, while useful and interesting, were too far off topic. Such are a few examples of the author's unnecessary digressions from the book's main theme, all of which are distracting if not confusing to the reader. Adding to the confusion, the author himself appears to indict the "broad-brush" approach that he employs, repeatedly inviting those of us already adequately

versed in certain areas—such as environmental irreversibility and consequences of global warming—to altogether skip the sections!

The reader likely will expect the final chapter, entitled the politics of getting unhooked from growth, to address some of the challenges involved in steering society to a more desirable equilibrium; that is, one in which we all lead more balanced lives, enjoying life more and polluting the environment less. Unfortunately, even here the book falls short. The chapter mostly provides an often-repetitive history of the environmental movement, examining in much more detail than necessary the temporal nature of its growth and decline. Neither in the final chapter nor elsewhere in the book does the author address the possible incompatibility between his goals (unhooking society from growth so as to diminish the human impact on the environment) and the present economic reality. It is not until the *final two paragraphs* that we read, in what almost seems a minor discursion, about the need to democratize corporations through greater employee power and ownership.

Booth's book is generally well written, enjoyable, and—most important—informative. It is important not to overstate its shortcomings. But it is disappointing in the sense that the book appears to promise a social or class analysis that is nowhere to be found. Despite a compelling and near exhaustive analysis of the social and environmental problems faced by the contemporary world, the author appears timid or reticent when it comes to the looming hard choices. He fails to acknowledge that most of us are *aware* (at least to some degree) of the problems that his book outlines, but are very uncomfortable with the implications that such knowledge bears on the manner in which we conduct our lives. The political economy implications are enormous and should not be ignored. Denial is widespread, yet it is also indispensable in serving the interests of the members of society who most benefit from it.

Mariano Torras, PhD
Adelphi University

REFERENCES

- Eyer, J. (1977) "Prosperity as a Cause of Death," *International Journal of Health Services* 7: 125–150.
- Ruhm, C. J. (2000) "Are Recessions Good for your Health?," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115: 617–650.