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Social Democratic Reflections on “Economic Growth or Quality of Life?” (April 11, 1972)

Speaking at a conference of the metalworkers' union, the social democratic thinker Erhard Eppler pleads for a move away from unlimited economic growth – and its deleterious environmental effects – and argues for greater attention to quality-of-life issues as a political goal.

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### **Erhard Eppler at the IG Metal International Conference in Oberhausen on April 11, 1972**

#### *1. From quantity to quality*

Today we speak of quality of life, although we don't know exactly what that is – much less how we can achieve it. We speak of quality because we have lost our faith in quantity. At the root of this, too, stands doubt, not knowledge. We doubt whether all of this is good for humanity:

- wider and wider streets for more and more cars
- bigger and bigger power plants to consume more and more energy
- increasingly elaborate packaging for increasingly questionable consumer goods
- bigger and bigger airports for faster and faster airplanes
- more and more pesticides for larger and larger harvests
- and not to forget: more and more people on an increasingly overcrowded planet

Because we have learned in recent years that this also means:

- increasingly polluted air
- increasingly disgusting garbage heaps
- increasingly intolerable noise
- less and less clean water
- increasingly angry people
- more and more toxins in the organism
- and more and more dead in the streets

We are noting this without being able to say precisely how economic growth is related to quality of life. All that is certain is that it seems as though the same economic growth that made our lives more pleasant in many ways over the last 100 years can also make them intolerable. What we, on the basis of our country, are gradually becoming aware of (the younger generation more quickly than the older), the Club of Rome computers have calculated for the entire world.

[ . . . ]

## 2. *New Benchmarks*

It will soon be indisputable that economic growth is not a suitable measure of progress. That a doubling in the consumption of sleeping pills within seven years – an achievement certainly not limited to the United States – is recorded statistically as a rise in the standard of living will soon be considered a curious piece of trivia. As will the fact that a housewife's work in her own household does not add to the gross national product, but her – paid – work in someone else's household does. The quality of life of a small child, in any case, ought to be exactly proportional to the amount of time in which the mother can concentrate her attention on the child.

Moreover, none of the common modes of calculation offer any information as to whether the economic and human potential of a country is being carefully used, partially wasted, or already overtaxed; whether this leads to satisfying more or less pressing needs; and whether investments will secure or threaten our future.

[ . . . ]

Just because qualitative benchmarks are incomparably more difficult to find than quantitative ones, that is no reason not to look for them. That is also how I understand the suggestion that Sicco Mansholt included in his letter of February 9, 1972, to [Franco Maria] Malfatti.<sup>1</sup> Mansholt is known to prefer the term *utilité nationale brute* over gross national product.

We also need new benchmarks for science and technology. This cannot mean that emotional protests against science and technology will help us along, and certainly not a romantic call "back to nature."

It is not a matter of frustrating the human spirit of invention, but of channeling it toward new tasks. If an environmentally harmful technology can exist, then so can an environmentally sound one.

[ . . . ]

## 3. *Challenges for Politics*

Whoever takes all the talk about quality of life seriously must want political and social change.

[ . . . ] Neither the common means of the market economy nor the methods of state capitalism will suffice for the new tasks. In other words: What now has to be done might embarrass dogmatists in both East and West just as much as those who pride themselves all too much on their pragmatism. The thought revolution from economy to ecology will not leave any social systems untouched. The dogmatists will probably continue to try for a while to dismiss the whole subject as an especially clever attempt to subvert their established order, before they set out to seize it and integrate it ideologically. The relationship between economy and politics will change – in both East and West. Where economic growth is the undisputed political goal, politics will

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<sup>1</sup> At that time Mansholt was European Commissioner for Agriculture. Malfatti was President of the European Commission. – trans.

have to provide the administrative structure for economic growth: Good policies promote growth, and bad ones retard it. People will continue to ask politicians how they contribute to growth.

Where quality of life is desired, politicians – pressured by public opinion – will ask economists and entrepreneurs how they contribute to it, whether positively or negatively. Policies will have the task of instantiating the interests of the common good in order to provide orientation for both industry and government.

[ . . . ]

Source: Erhard Eppler, *Maßstäbe für eine humane Gesellschaft: Lebensstandard oder Lebensqualität?* [*Benchmarks for a Humane Society: Standard of Living or Quality of Life?*]. Stuttgart, 1974, pp. 18-31; reprinted in Eckart Conze and Gabriele Metzler, eds., *50 Jahre Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Daten und Dokumente* [*50 Years of the Federal Republic of Germany. Data and Documents*]. Stuttgart, 1999, pp. 223-25.

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