

Beyond the consumer machine: a narrative for the new economy

Anthony James

There is growing recognition that our consumption-based growth economy has a limited future. A range of converging crises continue to bring this home. Occasionally there is some excitement at the prospect of decoupling economic growth from material impact. However, a number of studies show how elusive that notion is, at the required scale. And even if we could decouple economic growth from material impact, that still doesn't provide an answer to the question: what are we consuming and growing for? Or to put it another way, what's the overarching purpose of the economy?

This is something that advocates for a new economy also often overlook. Much effort remains focused on merely shifting energy sources or other technologies. Even innovative online platforms for the 'collaborative economy' and the like often operate largely on the basis of improving efficiency and equity. These are certainly essential aspects of any economy, but they're insufficient without a new overarching narrative. They are worthwhile ingredients. But we still need to ask: what are the overall material costs? And what are we cooking?

A narrative for the new economy would, as Schumacher put it, seek to optimise consumption to maximise wellbeing, as opposed to optimising production to maximise consumption. In addition, it would convey the potential for greater wellbeing, while releasing the fallacy of absolute human mastery over a mechanised world. In fact, these points would come to be recognised as one and the same. In turn, the role we ascribe to technology would come to assume a humbler, more purposeful and beneficial place. Given evidence of diminishing wellbeing in many parts of the industrialised world, and a growing call in powerful places for such a narrative, there is a great opportunity for demonstrating how we may navigate our way to life beyond the consumer machine.

Conference Themes: Our relationship with the natural world, Money, Work

Bio:

Anthony James is an educator, consultant, writer, speaker and musician. He is Executive Director of the Understandscope and a postgraduate educator at Swinburne University. Anthony features on national TV and radio, and is a regular speaker at conferences, festivals and a range of organisations. He also hosts public conversations with prominent Australian and international guests on how we can regenerate society's underlying systems and stories. He was co-editor of *Everyday Transcendence: The Influence of Frank Fisher*, founding Editor of the Journal of Swinburne University's National Centre for

Sustainability, and his writing has appeared in publications locally and overseas.