

Welcome to the world of Suzuki economics

BY PETER C. NEWMAN

Canada's best teacher is a 59-year-old geneticist named David Takayoshi Suzuki, whose lectures and broadcasts have turned science from being boring to being fun. Unlike most academics (he is a graduate of Amherst College in Massachusetts and the University of Chicago, where he collected a PhD; he still lectures, at the University of British Columbia), he is a social activist, at the leading edge of the environmental movement, applying his charm and propaganda skills to fight pollution in all its many forms. Along with his wife, Tara Cullis (who holds a PhD in comparative literature), Suzuki recently incorporated a foundation to fund the search "for alternatives to the destructive path we're on, and to define the ways we can make the change without a total upheaval in our lives."

What's most interesting about his new departure is that he's about to do to economics what he did to science: not only make it more accessible, but turn some of its most sacred precepts upside down and inside out. Suzuki has begun a serious campaign in Canada to replace the GDP as a measurement of our economic performance with an index called the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI).

"We do somersaults to keep our gross domestic product growing," he told me over lunch recently at a vegetarian restaurant housed in the same building as his Vancouver office. "Yet it's a meaningless figure. It just reflects the amount of goods and services sold. Everything adds to it, nothing is ever subtracted from it. If, for example, you have a factory that's polluting a river, that adds to the GDP; if people downriver start getting sick and require doctors, lawyers and hospitals, that adds to the GDP as well, as does the amount of money spent by the company to eventually clean up its act."

His point is that such negative activities as clear-cutting an old-growth forest, flooding a valley by a mega-dam or eliminating a fishing ground by drift-netting are treated as

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income-generating activities, not taking any account of the assets being depleted in the process. A new foundation based in San Francisco called Redefining Progress has launched a similar crusade, setting out clear cost and gain criteria under the GPI. Some examples: unpaid child care; cooking and housecleaning (all incalculable in terms of the GDP) are ascribed a dollar value based on the cost of hiring someone to do them, and thus appear in the GPI as gains; increases in leisure time (each hour is given a dollar value equivalent to a standard hourly wage) are also added to the index. Costs under the GPI formula include loss of farmlands, mineral extraction and environmental damage, all of which are assigned a replacement dollar value. Using this calculation, America's per capita GPI fell by 42 per cent between 1969 and 1992 although the GDP grew by 38 per cent during the same period.

Adds Suzuki: "Economics isn't really grounded in anything of substance, because economists essentially live in a world they believe is infinite. They think that if we run out of any particular resource, the human intellect is such that we can find substitutes. So, economics is fundamentally flawed, because

it is a human construct that far outweighs the realistic value of human contributions."

Another of Suzuki's pet peeves is globalization. He was recently shooting a film north of Toronto, where there happened to be many sheep. That evening, he went to a local restaurant and noticed they were featuring a special on "Genuine New Zealand Lamb." He talked to the owner and confirmed that it really was cheaper to bring lamb all the way from Down Under, instead of buying it from Farmer Brown down the street. "It's absolutely insane," he says, "the way we price things—we don't use energy properly, which makes it feasible to transport food thousands of miles all over the planet. Studies show that in North America food travels an average of 2,000 miles from where it's grown to where it's consumed, which means that we invest energy in order to obtain food that may ultimately provide fewer energy units when it's consumed."

He is equally appalled about what's happened to money. "Things have reached a point where money no longer represents anything tangible—it just represents money," he says. "With a trillion dollars a day coursing through the foreign exchanges, you can buy and sell money without having added anything tangible to the Earth. When the peso began to fall, nothing could save it, because the speculators were far more powerful than the government. The same thing happened to the French franc a couple of years ago, and is about to happen to the Canadian dollar. It's a frightening situation when some jerko on Bay Street says our dollar is overvalued, it plunges, and he makes a fortune because he sold short."

Although he was interned along with his Japanese parents during the Second World War, Suzuki celebrates being a Canadian and believes this is the luckiest country on Earth. "Imagine," he postulates, "Canadians waking up one morning and finding the whole world had disappeared, except for Canada and 200 miles of its oceans. We'd still have plenty of resources and an educated workforce to make anything we wanted. We really are the envy of the world, because when you apply that scenario to almost any other country—including such economic giants as Japan and China—they'd be in serious trouble overnight."

David and Tara Suzuki escape once a month to their cottage on Quadra, off Vancouver Island, to visit the eagles and enjoy nature. Their neighbor, who has lived on the island for 60 years, tells them tales of how residents used to be able to hear the approaching salmon. There were so many they had to keep jumping over each other and people could hear their thousands of splashes—then go out in a skiff and rake them in. "Because we come from downtown Vancouver," David Suzuki says, "our baseline is the city and we think Quadra is rich and wonderful. But we've just hammered everything—nature and animals—and without making radical changes within the next 10 years, we're heading for deep trouble."