

## **A "sitopian" vision** by *Niels Peter Hahemann*

### **What is sitopia?**

Sitopia is the imperfect messy place of exchange between people that barter ideas, thoughts, wants, plans for the future, etc.<sup>1</sup> The people engaged there have no overall guide for their actions, but they want to do it right. Sitopia is a place such as a table, kitchen, market, or city centre – even a whole city as opposed to its adjacent surrounding lands – where food operates as facilitator for a social discourse between human beings. It is the key space (room, location) of a household, and the household is the key space of society's organisation.

However, the place tends to be overlooked because it is only present by proxy. It is merely an abstract site where aspirations meet necessity. Sitopia is the unavoidable stake that we would like to bypass but cannot neglect in the action of putting means to an end. So the place becomes an enterprise, in fact any enterprise that we would want to pursue as efficiently as possible. Sitopia is creativity through food, and creativity through food is creativity that sustains itself. The question is then: how is such an enterprise maintained?

### **Why we need economics**

Maintaining any creative enterprise calls for the consideration of problems from the side of both production and consumption using certain technologies. But there is also a need to go beyond technologies looking at the maintenance of society going forward. That is the problem of sustainability. When we speak about the need for new technologies, we usually think about already available solutions to problems. We would, for example, want to engineer a cradle-to-cradle solution to a waste problem, but because technologies cannot by definition be predicted (otherwise they would already be invented) technological improvements seem like “manna from heaven” that comes

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of "sitopia" is described in the last chapter of Carolyn Steel (2008), *Hungry City*.

from outside of society. Economics is the technology that we haven't got yet, but need. We need to take the organisation of society into account so as to engineer the future presently non-existing inventions that we would like to apply. That would make our enterprise sustainable. This is not a matter of technological fixes. It is about markets.

Economics is usually defined as the theory about the allocation of scarce resources towards certain wants, how to allocate means to ends. I would rather define it as the art of decision making. In this manner it is better recognised that the origin of economics is in ethical and moral issues about doing the right thing. We tend to see an economy as something that others do, as something that is done for us, which constrains us. But people need to solve their own decision problems by themselves. They have their own reasons, and know what they are doing, and why. They turn to economics, that is, to an issue about how to do the right thing for themselves on their own accord. People cannot wait for politics to donate the money.

Economics is about decisions based on knowledge about what can and what cannot be done. It involves calculation. On markets, there is a trade-off represented by a price. By realising what it is that we do not know and cannot do, and acting accordingly, we can turn the messy place of exchange between people into a sustainable enterprise. By understanding the sources of maladjustment of prices we better understand the causes of environmental problems and unsustainable states.

We thus understand better how the world works, and why we cannot control the outcome of calculated decisions fully. We realise the inevitable errors in doing the right thing: it is because there are so many different people involved in deciding the same issues. We probably cannot ever be fully efficient in the organisation of society, but we can be more sustainable by taking the inevitable errors more into account.

Sustainability is actually a core problem addressed by economics. It goes back to its foundations. The classical economists saw the world through food, that is, as the maintenance of a population – the population of human beings. They wanted to create modern society. If we want to maintain the growth of a population, or even keep it steady, we would want to sustain it, and we then need to think about the future. If the resources of growth are not maintained, the future of the population cannot be main-

tained. Growth is not an end in itself, but try tell poor people about an economy without growth. Problems of poverty and unsustainability are therefore deeply interrelated.

It is the "we" involved in social creativity that activates the sitopian vision. We need to think about exhaustible resources in an economic perspective. If resources get exhausted, then that would be an error. Biodiversity is a resource that we would want to maintain, but food production and consumption – the maintenance of the human population – tends to reduce biodiversity. So we need to think about error in future, that is, about getting things right. This goes back to the philosophy of the enlightenment: we want to correct things in society that are wrong, making them right. We "merely" need to think about this as a problem about the future. And that is of course very hard to do. However, the point is that thinking and living with error, correcting wrongs, is facilitated through food at a messy place such as sitopia.

### **Food as facilitator**

Food has always been a facilitator in society. Think of the world as one hundred per cent sustainable with peasants only producing daily necessities for themselves, and production distributed evenly around the earth's arable land. Then comes division of labour because we cannot help wanting to make things better and differently. How is life now sustained? The classical economists' economic model had food as input that maintained the human population, and food as output (for example wheat production). That was cradle-to-cradle technology. Everything derived from this.

The problem of sustainability was approached as a problem about the location in space and time of this facilitating role. There would be a centre with food consumption located in the market place, that is, in the city. It was Johann Heinrich von Thünen who about 200 years ago firstly formulated the foundations of the sitopian vision that is implicit in classical economics. von Thünen considered the city as a place located according to economic principles, that is, centrally as an isolated state surrounded by land.

But there would then be a problem because the same commodity, the output that sustains the human population, was now produced in different places on different lands of different quality. The price of the same commodity should be the same, and the cost

of the same input for the same commodity should be the same, but there would be unintended advantages or disadvantages coming from different places of location so that, for example, the producer with the most fertile land would receive a rent. A rent is the effect of an unintended consequence that generates a benefit or cost complementary to the intended effort of the barter that determines the value of the commodity (the price). It is these unintended consequences and their effects on rent that causes unsustainable states.

Industry would start to locate on the most fertile lands or its most productive sites, and then returns would decline going outwards equivalent to an unintended cost that gives rise to a payable (negative) rent. The closer to the market centre, the more favourable for an industry because the less rent it has to pay. Transport costs are paid out of rent, and rent is paid out of the price of a commodity. The higher the transportation costs of a commodity, the closer to the market centre would an industry be located.

That was the origin of the city around which there would be concentric circles with food production (or with any input necessary for the growth and maintenance of the human population) located in the countryside according to increasing (negative) rent and falling transportation costs from moving production on to less and less fertile marginal land. The economy seemed therefore in principle to be capable of handling the sustainability problem, but only in principle. We now know better. As long as rent is there, the problem of sustainability is there. Is the economy actually sustainable? The story of industrialisation and capitalism over the last 200 years is that it in many respects is not, but that it can be.

### **The sitopia of slow money**

What part of the equation is it that is missing? The story of von Thünen begins with food, that is, food production. It can also end with food, that is, food consumption. That would be its modern version. Food is not only a means to an end but also an end in itself. It is a source of pleasure and happiness that leads to other things of which we do not, and cannot, know. But we can try to see the world through food – try to make designs based on its position in the economy. This means that food really becomes a facilitator of creativity in a network of human social exchange.

Food is the entangled place of a complex shared network or a "rhizome", which is without overall order or organisation and merely is a collection of a complex distribution of externalities in a market. Externalities exist when market 1 is linked to market 2, and then a new link between market 2 and market 3 exposes market 1 to indirect shocks. Externalities are like happiness: it goes under the radar.

Food is the externality of the modern economy, not only regarding the damaging consequences of food production but also regarding the pleasurable consequences of food consumption. We tend to presume that food is there. So let's use this assumption as facilitator. Let's use it to produce something different that is right here. That would basically mean to employ food as a shared way of thinking that serves to develop human designs concerning a different future. This is what the sitopian vision is about. Sitopia is not a place of waste and destruction. It is a place of happiness.

This is then the challenge. The joy from food should be a subject for market economics. We have had slow food. Why not supplement it with slow money?<sup>2</sup> Money does not need to be only a source of greed. Perhaps the challenge is to try to figure out, what money would do if it were left to its own devices. Slow money is not donated or invested money. It is money that restores and preserves itself by facilitating exchanges that are brought to develop on their own accord through the creation of markets that did not exist before. That would maintain the sitopian vision.

Slow money brings out the best in things as we imagine they really could or ought to be. Food merely acts as facilitator. But perhaps that is more than enough.

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<sup>2</sup> As proposed in Woody Tasch (2008), *Inquiries into the Nature of Slow Money*.