

The Other Economic Summit 1985

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It may not be saying much, but the OES conference was one of the most enjoyable I've been to. The whole idea got started last year, when the official Economic Summit of the world's ten or so most powerful non-communist governments was held in London. Most of the publicity this received concerned measures required to protect the various presidents and prime ministers from the wrath of some of their angrier subjects; not surprisingly since the content of the summit amounted to (less than) nothing. In anticipation of this non-result, a group of people largely out of the Ecology Party set up the 'Other' Economic Summit. This was a considerable success, hence the decision to hold TOES 1985.

The people there were from a variety of libertarian, green and conservationist currents from all over the (non-communist) world, and the motivation seemed to vary from influencing government to stimulating and exchanging information about community initiatives. The unifying theme of the conference was the creation of a 'new economics', as a way of analysing present trends (e.g. the debt crisis, unemployment, the informal economy), new initiatives (papers on demedicalisation, and on community use of currency), and analytical tools (critiques of GNP, Roy Carr-Hill's and my papers, of which summaries follow).

The conference was extremely well organised, accommodated some 500 participants (the ones I talked to seemed to find it well worthwhile), and took place in a very pleasantly non-aggressive, non-competitive and humorous atmosphere, such as is rarely found at political or academic conferences. However (here come the constructive criticisms) the emphasis on cooperation and the tight time schedule sometimes led to a reluctance to engage in fundamental debates, while the sheer size of the conference led to some unrealistic timing (10 minutes to present each paper in the plenary sessions).

And of course many questions of a where-do-we-go-next character remain. Hopefully there'll be a OES 1986. Meanwhile, anyone for an RSG subgroup on the economy and economic statistics?

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EDITOR'S NOTE

John and Roy presented papers at the Other Economic Summit conference. A summary of both of them is given overleaf: if you would like to see the full papers, please write to John, at the address on the inside front cover.

"National Accounting and Beyond" - John Lintott

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The development of economic and social statistics can be better explained in terms of the role and interests of the State, than as a search for more, and more objective, information. Moreover the concepts to be measured, and the data which result, stem largely from the particular policies adopted by the State.

Debates about different definitions of national income, for instance, reflected deeper differences over the appropriate policies for dealing with the 1930's slump: the Keynesian view prevailed because of the adoption by governments of Keynesian policies, not because of technical considerations. In the 1960's and 1970's, increasing dissatisfaction with the narrow focus of national accounting largely reflected the growth of various social movements.

One proposal, for enriching Gross National Product to include the money value of leisure, unpaid production and other 'goods', and subtract the money value of pollution, resource depletion and other 'bads', leads to technical nonsense and uninterpretable measures. More promising is the social indicators approach, which has been subject to serious political contradictions (in the hands of governments), but which is flexible enough to be adapted to the needs of critics of government.

"Measuring Health and Human Activities" - Roy Carr-Hill and John Lintott

This paper describes a project concerned with producing an alternative to the governments Social Trends.

The social indicator 'movement' includes a wide range of approaches. Some, like the proposal of a welfare index or a social accounting framework, make the fundamental mistake of proposing a technical solution to the fundamentally political problem of assessing the relative importance of different aspects of the quality of life.

We should concentrate on the measurement of individual well-being, on indicators of the population who reach a certain reasonable standard in respect of different aspects of well-being rather than on hasty aggregates into an overall satisfaction index.

There must be a plurality of visions of hu(wo)manity. As a first approximation, well-being might be divided into the following aspects:-

- being: the state of the individual, including health and knowledge
- doing: the nature of peoples' activities in all spheres
- having: the satisfaction of basic needs
- relating: the nature of peoples' relationships with each other
- surviving: threats to the security of individuals

In measuring levels of health, we should measure life expectancy free of disability, broken down according to a variety of socio-demographic characteristics; but we should also assess potential health by, for example, the birthweight distribution.

In measuring the pattern of human activities, five aspects can be distinguished: the use of time, the quality of activities, social aspects of activities, the productiveness of activities, and access to activities. The data presented compares and contrasts the distribution of people between statuses with their patterns of time use.