

**“Once [our ecological] footprint has grown beyond the sustainable level, as it already has, it must eventually come down—either through a managed process (for example, through rapid increases in eco-efficiency) or through the work of nature (say, through declining use of wood as forests disappear). There is no question about whether the growth in the ecological footprint will stop; the only questions are when and by what means.**

**Population growth will essentially cease, either because the birth rates fall farther, or because deaths begin to rise—or both. Industrial growth will essentially cease, either because investment rates fall, or depreciation begins to rise—or both. If we anticipate these trends, we may exert some rational control over them, selecting the best of the options available to us. If we ignore them, then the natural systems will choose an outcome without regards to human welfare.” (Donella Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth, The 30-year update*, 48)**

Questions for discussion:

1. What, exactly, are the limits of human economic and social activity?
2. What are the key sources of disagreement between the Malthusian and Promethean positions in the limits debate?
3. How do the positions in this debate affect the interpretation of “sustainability”?
4. Can you explain, in your own words, how the limits debate is related to the question of *reason*?

### **Attitudes to economic growth**

The limits (to growth) debate encapsulates the central problem underlying debates concerning environmental protection, namely the way in which human behaviour must be regulated to avoid significant environmental damage. To emphasise: the question is not whether environmental damage *matters*. Rather, it is whether the environmental changes that we currently see are evidence of unsustainable degradation, or whether they are the acceptable (and manageable) costs of necessary human development. Where one stands on this debate is a function of how one understands the regulation of human behaviour. In practice, it is impossible to avoid regulation (e.g., you regulate the behaviour of other people in your household; the market regulates resource use). But regulations differ in their centralisation and systematicity. They also differ in the values they are intended to secure, and the behaviours they engage. Underlying the limits debate is a dispute over these different forms of regulation, and whether the environmental results to which they lead are reasonable.

The dominant position in the debate is that the growth of economic activity and consumption is unsustainable, and that without drastic social changes, we will face catastrophe. The explanation is that the environmental resources we rely on (e.g., arable land, clean air, a viable climate) have fixed limits and tolerances, which humans are currently overshooting. These overshoots are systematic, in that they are all related to the systemic tendency of economies to grow their resource inputs and waste outputs exponentially. Against this position, economists offer both active and passive resistance. The active resistance is neatly encapsulated by Julian Simon’s arguments, which emphasise the rationality of market discipline. Markets encourage people to find new ways of solving problems, which ensures that there are in practice no fixed limits to growth—growth, after all, can take many forms. More passively, while few economists have embraced Simon’s Panglossianism, mainstream models of the economy assume that even if markets fail to properly price the environmental effects of market activity, regulators can impose corrections (e.g., via taxes or subsidies—or, in the limiting case, central planning).

This dispute clearly indicates the complexity of environmental questions and the highly contentious nature of the responses to them. In this seminar, we will examine these responses with a view to highlighting the diversity of viewpoints within contemporary environmental politics.