

A breeding farm for economy

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Marianne explains that she was born with Spina Bifida, in her case a closure defect of the spinal cord at the level of the sacrum. Officially a sacral myelomeningocele. As a result, it was necessary for Marianne to have surgery 2 days after birth, whereby the neurosurgeon covered the incomplete closing of the spinal cord with meninges and then skin. In her life it went surprisingly well so far. In the meantime, she is a paediatrician herself. During the interview, she says with a wink that it's time to pay back society. It makes me wonder.

A cynical perspective equates modern civilization with a "breeding farm" for economic growth, the ruthless engine behind what we call progress. Via local differentiations - which are subsequently "swallowed up" in hierarchical integrations (Werner's orthogenetic principle of development) - this engine (economy) generates an increasingly globalized world. Because infinite growth from finite resources is logically impossible, the engine crashes periodically. These crashes can't be predicted. However, in retrospect experts "explain" that it was all plain to foresee. In addition, the ruthless engine "promotes" most members of modern society above all into "laying hens" for the economy. Such a breeding farm for the economy requires more consumers than producers.

Last week I wrote a chapter about Spina Bifida (SB) for a new neuropsychology book. I spoke to a few people with SB, some of whom have had excellent careers like Marianne. In my literature search I regularly came across studies that purported to chart the average economic costs of SB. On average, according to several large-scale studies, people with SB (and/or hydrocephalus) do not experience a reduced quality of life compared to a "normal" population. On average, however, (slightly) more malfunctions are experienced with regard to sexuality and sometimes finding a partner (due to, among other things, the possible occurrence of any incontinence and the resulting uncertainty). Cognitive development certainly does not have to lag behind. However, the physical discomforts (of a temporary but sometimes more permanent nature) can lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, reduced concentration at school and - from a combination of these - cognitive deficits. My column from last week (the power of restriction) applies here: a part of the children develops even better than their siblings without SB, and also a part is lagging behind.

Counting the costs of a certain condition such as Spina Bifida in an economic breeding farm is absurd. We are all consumers that keep the economic engines running, no matter if we are obese, or anorectics, if we do sport or if we don't, or if we have SB as a condition, or not. Of course, there are necessary costs for SB (surgery, sometimes lifelong incontinence materials, adapted braces, etc.). But for every person, lifelong costs are incurred: food, clothing, entertainment, education, etc. There are large, small, fat, thin, stupid, smart, predictable and unpredictable people and corresponding costs. The whole system that ensures that you and I do not have to grow our own food, or, if we happen to be farmers, do not have to produce our own penicillin, for example, runs by the grace of our different consumption needs and (in an increasingly lesser degree) productivity (services and goods). Living with a disease is therefore "fuelling" the economic engine of progress. Consequently, costs cannot be calculated without taking into account the benefits (health care workers earning a living, production of new treatments and materials, etc.). The economic value of lifestyle gurus, magazines and gyms would evaporate immediately if healthy behaviour was self-evident. Sometimes, discussion about SB prenatal tests are sometimes presented in the context of (social) costs (and/or suffering) reduction. Although nobody can thrive without a headwind, of course I understand future parents' fears of extra care. Some people with SB live without SB related problems. It's absurd to opt for life or abortion on the basis of an economic argument. Besides, extra care and costs can only be estimated on average, and therefore do not necessarily apply to the individual in the uterus of the tested mother. Nothing is what it seems!