



Robert Orzanna <orschiro@gmail.com>

"Is less more... or is more less? A critique of degrowth

21 messages

Robert Orzanna <robert@orzanna.de>

15 June 2018 at 16:55

To: SCORAI Network <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Quoting Giorgos Kallis:

I read it, and I think it is one of the best reasoned critiques of degrowth I've ever read. I send it attached.

Read it here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B5L61s7LfvFNUTNRMHVPemhFQU1nMmY1YUIXeGh4dkICVUg0>

—
<https://orzanna.de>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/orschiro>

Jean Boucher <jlb964@gmail.com>

15 June 2018 at 19:57

To: Robert Orzanna <robert@orzanna.de>

Thx, JB

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Justice is what love looks like in public. -- Cornell West

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNMAAT_AzzY

Robert Orzanna <robert@orzanna.de>

15 June 2018 at 20:06

To: Jean Boucher <jlb964@gmail.com>

Welcome!

—
<https://orzanna.de>

<https://linkedin.com/in/orschiro>

[Quoted text hidden]

Rees, William <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>

16 June 2018 at 01:44

To: Robert Orzanna <robert@orzanna.de>, SCORAI Network <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Hmm...

I wonder. The author is trying to find a political-ecological middle ground between techno-optimistic eco-modernists approaches (basically expansionist) and ecologically-constrained visions of the future (particularly 'degrowth'). As a starting point, he assumes that the future will be one characterized by a 'scarcity of labour' (or sometimes 'work' or 'jobs?') and an abundance of energy and from there launches a critique of the two extremes. Right of the top I have a problem: there are plenty of energy analysts who argue that despite gains in renewable alternatives, the assumption of future energy abundance is shaky at best.

More generally, Robbins' critique is springs from a fairly common humanist post-modern perspective that competing future scenarios are mere *social constructs* or matters of opinion not necessarily anchored to biophysical reality. For example, from an political ecological perspective, "...scarcity is a construct... allied with elite power, not emancipatory process" and "Degrowth's insistence on the urgency of less, as a discourse, puts it in friction with political ecology's rejection of austerity focused argument and policy." Also, along the way, the author seems to accept the *mythic beliefs* that technology has "dematerialized" the human (eco-)footprint; that "every energy revolution has brought with it diminished environmental impact" and that "it takes less stuff... to make more stuff all the time." [Fact: absolute dematerialization is not happening--eco-footprints increase with income and techno-efficiency (and the total human EF also increases with population growth.)]

In the end, the sought-for moderate eco-philosophical perspective seems to be a kind of *constructed* melding of extremes, a "chasing away of the shadows" of both techno-utopias and constrained dystopia as if neither 'extreme' has any more grounding in the real world than the other.

Is this *really* the case.

Bill

From: scorai-bounces+wrees=exchange.ubc.ca@listserver.njit.edu [scorai-bounces+wrees=exchange.ubc.ca@listserver.njit.edu] on behalf of Robert Orzanna [robert@orzanna.de]
Sent: Friday, June 15, 2018 7:55 AM
To: SCORAI Network
Subject: [SCORAI] "Is less more... or is more less? A critique of degrowth"

[Quoted text hidden]

Ashwani Vasishth <vasishth@ramapo.edu>
 To: scorai@listserver.njit.edu
 Cc: director@nelson.wisc.edu

16 June 2018 at 13:25

Dear Bill,

Thank you, as always.

However, I read this somewhat differently. Less a quest to "resolve" the apparent contradictions embedded in two oppositional positions, but rather a REJECTION of the impulse to resolve such contradictions. The position, as I read it, is that it's not about either-or, but more instead and-and.

As Robbins puts it, the simple answer is yes.

Or, as Edward de Bono has it, Po--neither yes nor no.

Both positions hold--degrowth AND techno-optimism. Which of these one sees is a function of the level of organization one focuses on, from within a scale-hierarchic nested systems view of the world.

In my world, the "contradictions" are a function of perspectival shifts in what reality IS. In a complex systems view of the world, such realities are necessarily multiple. Then a facile argument becomes, instead, a deep one.

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 -

Ashwani
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 Associate Professor of Sustainability Planning
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Ashwani Vasishth <vasishth@ramapo.edu>

16 June 2018 at 15:27

To: "Paul Robbins Director, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies" <director@nelson.wisc.edu>, "scorai@listserver.njit.edu" <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Thank you for playing with us, Paul. That is appreciated.

Could you give us a bit more on your own position on this issue?

In your view, are the "contradictions"--perhaps better characterized as tensions--resolvable? Is it possible to singularize a position on these "debates"?

Or are they in the nature of "essential" tensions, a condition of the complexity of occurant reality?

Cheers,

--
-

Ashwani

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On 6/16/18 7:55 AM, Paul Robbins Director, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies wrote:

Hi all,

First, this paper is a draft, circulated without my permission, after sending it to a discussant who couldn't attend our session (no fault to anyone on this; we live in an instantly global, integrated world, degrowth notwithstanding). I was looking forward to a friendly discussion with my degrowth colleauges, for whom I have great respect.

Second, I am materialist. The conditions of the world are terribly terribly real. It is degrowth and ecomodernism that are discourses, ideologies, theories, stories, and tales. Both of which I sort of like. Sort of.

Happy reading.

Cheers,
Paul

Paul Robbins
Director, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies

Note: Written on my phone.

From: Ashwani Vasishth <vasishth@ramapo.edu>
Sent: Saturday, June 16, 2018 6:25:04 AM
To: scorai@listserver.njit.edu
Cc: Paul Robbins Director, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies
Subject: Re: [SCORAI] "Is less more... or is more less? A critique of degrowth"

[Quoted text hidden]

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Rees, William <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>

17 June 2018 at 02:10

To: Ashwani Vasishth <vasishth@ramapo.edu>, "Paul Robbins Director, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies" <director@nelson.wisc.edu>, "scorai@listserver.njit.edu" <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Hi, all (with a special thanks to Paul Robbin for climbing aboard and not squelching the discussion) --

If I may, I'd like to address Ashwani Vasishth's helpful comment on my initial remarks on Paul's paper.

I had suggested Paul was seeking a middle ground, but Ashwani is correct that Paul was writing less to resolve the contradictions between the techno-optimists (eco-modernist) and the de-growth perspectives than to accept both. As Ashwani says, Paul is arguing that "Both positions hold--degrowth AND techno-optimism.")

I suppose I have difficulty in accepting this position which strikes me as too relativist for the issues at hand. I happen to believe that there are dimensions of biophysical reality that simply *are* regardless of "perspectival shifts", i.e., differences in how we perceive them. In other words, one's perceptions may be deep, profound and preferred but reality may be something else altogether--*and this difference matters*.

Now there are no doubt many cases where one might enjoy a long a happy life despite adherence to widely-held perceptual illusions (e.g., the sun rises in the east; the world is flat) but there are probably many more circumstances in which personal and community survival depend on social constructs that 'map' well to some external reality. Note that I admit freely that human beings, regardless of culture, exist in a world of social constructs (it cannot be any other way), but as philosophers and scientists ranging from Karl Popper and Neil Postman to Max Planck have insisted, *some social constructs are much better than others*. They are better because they are truer to reality. Is it not crucial that that in the quest for biophysical sustainability, policy, regulations and law be based on physical facts as we know them (recognizing that we are learning more all the time)?

Which brings me back to the eco-modernist perspectives advanced in Paul's paper:

While eco-modernists might like to believe that 'a car weighs a fraction of what it did thirty years ago', this is simply untrue. In the US, 'The average new car weighed [3,221 pounds in 1987 but 4,009 pounds in 2010](http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2011/06/your_big_car_is_killing_me.html)' and since there are also many more vehicles today the embodied materials in them are collectively much greater. http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2011/06/your_big_car_is_killing_me.html

And again, the techno-optimist assertions that 'every energy revolution has brought with it diminished environmental impact, with wood and other biofuels replaced by coal, in turn replaced by natural gas, giving way towards wind, solar, and nuclear power' are mostly illusion.

The facts are that the eco-impact of energy use is still growing; coal has not been replaced by gas (coal still provides 28% of primary energy); and, despite all the hype, wind and solar are so far a very small part of the picture (hydro, wind, solar, geothermal together represent only 5% of global primary energy consumption, and most of that is hydro). Bottom line (according to a respected energy analyst friend): **The world has never used more energy (approaching 4-times**

1965), has never used more fossil fuels, and has never produced more GHGs (because contrary to some shared illusions, fossil fuels still provide about 80% of the world's energy). And despite progress in renewable energy, so far, hydrocarbons still account for much/most of even the *increase* in global consumption. In 2017, almost ¾ of the uptick in energy consumption came from fossil fuels, not renewables. Moreover, my analyst friend argues that "It is highly unlikely, given the scaling and technical limitations, that solar and wind will ever replace fossil fuels at current consumption levels; and by the way, nuclear power peaked (so far) in 2006. Per capita consumption of energy is increasing globally (and by 2.1%/year in China and 4%/year in India). With population growth total energy consumption is increasing by 1.3%/year."

My point is that, on an issue critical to climate change, global energy supplies, food-production, transportation, etc., etc., indeed, the future of global civilization, **both the eco-modernist assertions and factual reality (as de-growthists might see them) cannot hold**. The former are simply wrong-headed; the latter provide a much sounder basis for future policy and planning.

Sometimes it is important that contradictions be resolved.

Enjoy your weekends,

Bill

From: scorai-bounces+wrees=exchange.ubc.ca@listserver.njit.edu [scorai-bounces+wrees=exchange.ubc.ca@listserver.njit.edu] on behalf of Ashwani Vasishth [vasishth@ramapo.edu]

Sent: Saturday, June 16, 2018 6:27 AM

To: Paul Robbins Director, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies; scorai@listserver.njit.edu

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Ashwani Vasishth <vasishth@ramapo.edu>

17 June 2018 at 14:35

To: "scorai@listserver.njit.edu" <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

At the risk of pushing too hard on this issue, I'd like to make one final attempt to clarify my actual assertion.

I am not a subjectivist nor a relativist. The world is very, very real, for me. My only point is, in the case of complex systems, objectivity is not singularizable. Reality is not the one thing. Under complexity, there is--actually--more than one thing happening at the same time. We see, in fact, often a handful of truths cohabiting the same phenomenon. And these truths are irreducible.

In these cases, we CAN'T agree on singularities. A thing can be both good and bad simultaneously.

This is not about subjective "perspectival shifts" This is about irreconcilable differences within singular phenomena.

I agree with Bill. "Sometimes it is important that contradictions be resolved."

I disagree with Bill. Sometimes they just can't be.

Rittel, Horst W.J. & Melvin M. Webber. 1973. "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," Policy Sciences, v4n2 (June 1973):155-169.

Excerpted listing of "[wicked problems](#)," for ready reference.

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Philip Vergragt <pvergragt@outlook.com>

18 June 2018 at 08:25

To: Ashwani Vasishth <vasishth@ramapo.edu>, "scorai@listserver.njit.edu" <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Dear Paul, Bill, Ashwani, and SCORAI-ers,

I only now read Paul's thought-provoking piece; Paul thank you encouraging us to discuss this draft.

I encourage all SCORAI-ers to read it and to think about the issues.

It is clear to me that neither techno-optimism nor degrowth alone can solve the present and future problems. We do need small-scale experimentation; as well as a completely different economic system; less based on competition and profits, and more on cooperation and human well-being. The degrowth movement deserves credit for promoting those types of experimental solutions. Growth itself it not the issue; although ecological boundaries are real; the issue is capitalism backed by a corrupted political system. Having said that, another viable system is not in sight; hence we need all these experiments.

Another issue that the roles of technology and technological innovation are often obscured in these discussions. To me it is clear that technology is completely out of control; and that the issues raised by technology assessment in the 60s and 70s have now exploded, as forcefully exemplified by Paul. Again, there are no easy solutions; technology has created a lot of good things, but also has huge undesirable "side effects" which are in reality inherent of technology as we know it. We have made very little progress in the "social control of technology", because "our" technology encompasses capitalist values.

Ultimately politics and power relationships are the core; and I sometimes feel that degrowth in the global south has understood this better; where the link is made with the critique of "development" (Escobar c.s.). For that reason I am especially looking forward to the Degrowth conference in Mexico city in September.

Warm regards,

Philip Vergragt

From: scorai-bounces+pvergragt=outlook.com@listserver.njit.edu [mailto:scorai-bounces+pvergragt=outlook.com@listserver.njit.edu] **On Behalf Of** Ashwani Vasishth

Sent: Sunday, June 17, 2018 2:36 PM

To: scorai@listserver.njit.edu

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Robert Orzanna <orschiro@gmail.com>

18 June 2018 at 08:59

To: Philip Vergragt <pvergragt@outlook.com>

speaking of which, Ubuntu is an interesting technology to look at from this perspective.

<https://orzanna.de>

<https://linkedin.com/in/orschiro>

[Quoted text hidden]

Colby, Ashley Lynn <ashley.colby@wsu.edu>

18 June 2018 at 17:41

To: "scorai@listserv.njit.edu" <scorai@listserv.njit.edu>

The thesis of this draft document by Paul Robbins is basically the thesis of my dissertation, which I just completed. May I highlight, alongside Phillip Vergragt below, that I too agree we must not have dogmatic thinking that keeps us from pursuing any level of solutions that help us develop a more just, equitable and sustainable future.

My dissertation argues that there is so much work to be done on so many levels in re-making entire ways of being from how to make food to how to relate to one another to how to get energy and how to raise children. I especially like Paul Robbin's (Mieville's) point, "Yes. It is worse to hope or to despair" (21). We must 1. Not spend our time entirely dwelling in apocalypse or utopia, it stops us from doing the day in, day out work that needs to be done and 2. Move beyond dogmatic or dualitistic thinking in which 'all technology is bad' or 'all degrowth is bad,' but be open to the fact that there can specific iterations that include myriad social organization that can get us where we want to be.

I'll pull out one quote from my dissertation that puts it better than I can:

Solving every problem at once is usually not possible through everyday practice. There is a common paralysis among the traditional left in which oppositional politics leads to the constant deferral of non-capitalist/transformational initiatives since they are seen as standing little chance to actually be structurally transformational (Gibson-Graham 2006a). The problems of these initiatives should not be glossed over, but they should also not be used as imperfections that justify the dismissal of these actually existing alternatives... dismissal in this way can be a manifestation of a *debilitating politics of perfection* that will not create widespread change, and that can hide and perpetuate hegemony (cf. Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2006b, DuPuis et al. 2011) (Galt et al. 2014, 135).

Ashley Colby

Galt, Ryan E., Leslie C. Gray, and Patrick Hurley. 2014. "Subversive and interstitial food spaces: transforming selves, societies, and society–environment relations through urban agriculture and foraging." *Local Environment*. 19(2): 133-146.

From: scorai-bounces+ashley.colby=wsu.edu@listserver.njit.edu [mailto:scorai-bounces+ashley.colby=wsu.edu@listserver.njit.edu] **On Behalf Of** Philip Vergragt
Sent: Monday, June 18, 2018 3:25 AM
To: Ashwani Vasishth <vasishth@ramapo.edu>; scorai@listserver.njit.edu
Subject: RE: [SCORAI] "Is less more... or is more less? A critique of degrowth"

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Rees, William <wrees@mail.ubc.ca> 20 June 2018 at 03:03
 To: "Colby, Ashley Lynn" <ashley.colby@wsu.edu>, "scorai@listserver.njit.edu" <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Thank you Philip and Ashley for your elaborations on the questions raised by Paul Robbins' paper. I agree with much of what you say. However, I do feel a need to elaborate on the rather separate point I have been making lest it get lost:

Any strategy for sustainability must be grounded in biophysical reality. This is arguably a precondition for social equality, universal human rights or other dimensions of social sustainability.

In short, our discussion was not a question of accepting/rejecting 'dogmatic thinking' or of favouring 'degrowth' over 'eco--modernism' (or vice versa). It is a question of recognizing what is real in whatever socially-constructed framing of the issues one chooses to support. Admittedly, the epistemological conundrum of 'what is real' is highly contested, but I really believe that much of the confusion results from fuzzy thinking.

Let me try to de-fuzzify (and I promise this will be my last punch at this bag):

First, let's remember that humans *necessarily* act out of socially constructed sets of beliefs, values and assumptions. Some post-modernist (extreme relativists) would say that 'all reality is social construction' and that there is no objective truth. Ergo, one construct is as valid as another. This is what I took, rightly or wrongly, to be the main message from the Robbins' paper -- that both techno-optimistic eco-moderism and degrowth (*as described in the paper*) should stand more or less as equals.

Before I reject that notion (again), let me set the boundaries of my argument. While all religious doctrines, political ideologies, academic paradigms, cultural narratives, and scientific theories are indeed social constructs, *they are not all constructs about the same kinds of entities or phenomena*. All real entities, abstract and concrete, exist along a spectrum from those that are virtually entirely products of the human mind (e.g., democracy, human rights, social justice) to those that exist independently of what, or even whether, humans think about them (e.g., gravitational force, friction, various forms of energy and matter). In the absence of modern *H. sapiens*, the abstract concepts of democracy, equality and dictatorship would not exist; but the phenomena we call gravity, magnetism and protons existed before humans evolved and will still be there if we manage to extinguish ourselves.

Now, humanist and social-science paradigms--the socio-political-cultural constructs by which we generally conduct ourselves--belong mainly to the first class of phenomena. Because these are wholly *constructed products of the human mind*, they are readily contestable, subject to likes and dislikes, prejudice, bias, previous experience, etc., etc. It may, therefore, be legitimate to say that there is no objective way of choosing among such socio-economic constructs such as capitalism, socialism, communism or among religious doctrines as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, (atheism), etc. Which of these one prefers 'depends'; it's a matter of personal experience, social norms, cultural history, entrenched values and even individual personality. And, in any case, we might not want to reject any of these political philosophies or religious faiths outright because (to borrow from Ashwani), they all exhibit a "handful of truths cohabiting the same phenomenon".

The 'hard' sciences are another matter. Science is qualified to focus primarily on the other extreme of the spectrum--things that are 'real'; entities that can be measured in time and space. This is not to say that everything is fixed, that there are not disputes in

science. There are, in fact, bitter debates and great intellectual rivalries, but the scientific method is the only 'way of knowing' that explicitly designs experiments to test and compare our socially constructed hypotheses about reality.

It is through through such experimentation and multi-observer replication that we move ever closer to operationally valid 'truths' about the biophysical world. Despite the grudge matches, jealousies, cheating, data falsification and other human behavioural traits that can muddy the experimental waters, reliably solid theory about particular phenomena does eventually emerge from this process. Our theories may not be perfect, but they become *increasingly less contestable*. If this were not true, we would have no cell-phones or flat-screen TVs; we would all fear going on the operating table; none of us would dare travel by air (Would you fly in a beautifully styled aircraft crafted by artisans who insisted that gravity and friction were fictions that could safely be ignored in the design of the machine?) etc., etc.

In short, such things as gravitational force, electro-magnetism, friction and the properties of various materials are *real* phenomena, not products of our collective imaginations. It is a rare relativist who would dare test the opposite hypothesis by stepping off a 30 story building (which suggests that even they recognize the limits of relativism).

Of course, things are rarely quite so clear cut. People regularly confuse or conflate the properties of pure mental constructs with those of real things. Particular problems emerge when abstract constructs -- products of mind -- incorporate faulty beliefs and assumptions about important aspects biophysical reality (or fail to acknowledge them at all).

Economics provides an example: remarkably, the neo-liberal economics with which we are trying to run planet Earth makes no useful reference to the structure, behaviour and temporal dynamics of the ecosystems with which the economy interacts in the real world! This is a potentially fatal flaw (a violation of Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety) and the kind of weakness that undermines all dogmatic approaches to the (un)sustainability conundrum.

Which (finally) brings me back to the assertions of eco-modernists cited in the Robbins paper. As previously documented, all the 'factual 'data' offered in support of techno-optimism/eco-moderism were demonstrably wrong. Surely we can agree that if a particular intellectual construct is founded on assertions of faith (e.g., in unflinching technological progress) and supported by demonstrably incorrect 'facts', then one is justified in questioning its validity. At the very least, given what is at stake, one has an obligation to call its proponents to account.

Bottom line: Not all approaches to sustainability are created equal and people need sound criteria to identify those containing the greatest quanta of 'truth'. Hope should not be asked to survive on a diet of vacuous myth.

Cheers,

Bill Rees

From: scorai-bounces+wrees=exchange.ubc.ca@listserver.njit.edu [scorai-bounces+wrees=exchange.ubc.ca@listserver.njit.edu] on behalf of Colby, Ashley Lynn [ashley.colby@wsu.edu]

Sent: Monday, June 18, 2018 8:41 AM

To: scorai@listserver.njit.edu

[Quoted text hidden]

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Noel Gerard Keough <nkeough@ucalgary.ca>

20 June 2018 at 05:45

To: "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>, "scorai@listserver.njit.edu" <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Agreed, the greatest failing of our economics and notions of progress are founded on a hubristic belief that humans are somehow immune the the physical and ecological realities of the world that existed billions of years before we showed up - in other words as Bill says we ignore that we are 'grounded in biophysical realities' at our peril. Perhaps with our intelligence and technology we can scramble out of this vortex of destruction we have created - but I'd bet that wisdom, humility and a conscious dial-back of our impact on the living systems of our planet are more appropriate to that task. As an aside the recent Cohen et al on 'The Infinite Desire for Growth' is certainly germane to this discussion.

Noel Keough (see you in Copenhagen, hopefully there is room for more of this kind of debate)

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John de Graaf <jodg@comcast.net>

20 June 2018 at 05:53

To: "Colby, Ashley Lynn" <ashley.colby@wsu.edu>, scorai@listserver.njit.edu, "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>

Bill, I'm a great fan of what you do. What I'm seeing among a lot of environmentalists who agree with you that wind/solar etc. can't meet expectations for replacing fossil fuels is that they are using this as an argument for nuclear. Michael Shellenberger used the same data on wind/etc. as you do during his recent campaign for CA governor, arguing that anti-nuke enviros want to condemn the world to famine. How do we best answer that and what are the facts here. thanks! John

John de Graaf

www.johndegraaf.com

On June 19, 2018 at 6:03 PM "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca> wrote:

Thank you Philip and Ashley for your elaborations on the questions raised by Paul Robbins' paper. I agree with much of what you say. However, I do feel a need to elaborate on the rather separate point I have been making lest it get lost:

Any strategy for sustainability must be grounded in biophysical reality. This is arguably a precondition for social equality, universal human rights or other dimensions of social sustainability.

In short, our discussion was not a question of accepting/rejecting 'dogmatic thinking' or of favouring 'degrowth' over 'eco--modernism' (or vice versa). It is a question of recognizing what is real in whatever socially-constructed framing of the issues one chooses to support. Admittedly, the epistemological conundrum of 'what is real' is highly contested, but I really believe that much of the confusion results from fuzzy thinking.

Let me try to de-fuzzify (and I promise this will be my last punch at this bag):

First, let's remember that humans *necessarily* act out of socially constructed sets of beliefs, values and assumptions. Some post-modernist (extreme relativists) would say that 'all reality is social construction' and that there is no objective truth. Ergo, one construct is as valid as another. This is what I took, rightly or wrongly, to be the main message from the Robbins' paper -- that both techno-optimistic eco-moderism and degrowth (*as described in the paper*) should stand more or less as equals.

Before I reject that notion (again), let me set the boundaries of my argument. While all religious doctrines, political ideologies, academic paradigms, cultural narratives, and scientific theories are indeed social constructs, *they are not all constructs about the same kinds of entities or phenomena* . All real entities, abstract and concrete, exist along a spectrum from those that are virtually entirely products of the human mind (e.g., democracy, human rights, social justice) to those that exist independently of what, or even whether, humans think about them (e.g., gravitational force, friction, various forms of energy and matter). In the absence of modern *H. sapiens*, the abstract concepts of democracy, equality and dictatorship would not exist; but the phenomena we call gravity, magnetism and protons existed before humans evolved and will still be there if we manage to extinguish ourselves.

Now, humanist and social-science paradigms -- the socio-political-cultural constructs by which we generally conduct ourselves -- belong mainly to the first class of phenomena. Because these are wholly *constructed products of the human mind*, they are readily contestable, subject to likes and dislikes, prejudice, bias, previous experience, etc., etc. It may, therefore, be legitimate to say that there is no objective way of choosing among such socio-

economic constructs such as capitalism, socialism, communism or among religious doctrines as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, (atheism), etc. Which of these one prefers 'depends'; it's a matter of personal experience, social norms, cultural history, entrenched values and even individual personality. And, in any case, we might not want to reject any of these political philosophies or religious faiths outright because (to borrow from Ashwani), they all exhibit a "handful of truths cohabiting the same phenomenon".

The 'hard' sciences are another matter. Science is qualified to focus primarily on the other extreme of the spectrum--things that are 'real'; entities that can be measured in time and space. This is not to say that everything is fixed, that there are not disputes in science. There are, in fact, bitter debates and great intellectual rivalries, but the scientific method is the only 'way of knowing' that explicitly designs experiments to test and compare our socially constructed hypotheses about reality.

It is through through such experimentation and multi-observer replication that we move ever closer to operationally valid 'truths' about the biophysical world. Despite the grudge matches, jealousies, cheating, data falsification and other human behavioural traits that can muddy the experimental waters, reliably solid theory about particular phenomena does eventually emerge from this process. Our theories may not be perfect, but they become *increasingly less contestable*. If this were not true, we would have no cell-phones or flat-screen TVs; we would all fear going on the operating table; none of us would dare travel by air (Would you fly in a beautifully styled aircraft crafted by artisans who insisted that gravity and friction were fictions that could safely be ignored in the design of the machine?) etc., etc.

In short, such things as gravitational force, electro-magnetism, friction and the properties of various materials are *real* phenomena, not products of our collective imaginations. It is a rare relativist who would dare test the opposite hypothesis by stepping off a 30 story building (which suggests that even they recognize the limits of relativism).

Of course, things are rarely quite so clear cut. People regularly confuse or conflate the properties of pure mental constructs with those of real things. Particular problems emerge when abstract constructs -- products of mind -- incorporate faulty beliefs and assumptions about important aspects biophysical reality (or fail to acknowledge them at all).

Economics provides an example: remarkably, the neo-liberal economics with which we are trying to run planet Earth makes no useful reference to the structure, behaviour and temporal dynamics of the ecosystems with which the economy interacts in the real world! This is a potentially fatal flaw (a violation of Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety) and the kind of weakness that undermines all dogmatic approaches to the (un)sustainability conundrum.

Which (finally) brings me back to the assertions of eco-modernists cited in the Robbins paper. As previously documented, all the 'factual 'data' offered in support of techno-optimism/eco-moderism were demonstrably wrong. Surely we can agree that if a particular intellectual construct is founded on assertions of faith (e.g., in unailing technological progress) and supported by demonstrably incorrect 'facts', then one is justified in questioning its validity. At the very least, given what is at stake, one has an obligation to call its proponents to account .

Bottom line: No t all approaches to sustainability are created equal and people need sound criteria to identify those containing the greatest quanta of 'truth'. Hope should not be asked to survive on a diet of vacuous myth.

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Jean Boucher <jlb964@gmail.com>

To: John de Graaf <jodg@comcast.net>

Cc: SCORAI Listserv <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>, "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>

20 June 2018 at 07:25

Yes, the nuclear question is big isn't it? It seems to me that the only thing bio-physically viable is a major back-to-the-land movement but that doesn't seem culturo-politically viable (but doesn't much of the world still live off the land?). I

love the approach taken by Nate Hagens, he calls humanity a super organism with a voracious appetite for energy. He has a cool website here with videos of his presentations:

<http://www.themonkeytrap.us/>

I also like his very simple photo (below) illustrating the wonderful power of petroleum: he shows human power as a fraction of a horse and then petroleum's multiplier effect (while toxic) and how it "serves us." Like George Bush once said, we're addicted (with its gifts and dark trade-offs). Jean



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Justice is what love looks like in public. -- Cornell West

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNMAAT_AzZY

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Colby, Ashley Lynn <ashley.colby@wsu.edu>

20 June 2018 at 15:38

To: "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>, "scorai@listserver.njit.edu" <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Hi there!

I agree with Bill about the importance of knowing well and accepting the limits of biophysical reality. I also agree that using the best tools we have for knowing that the ecomodernist claims are by and large wrong, especially as a large scale solution to any of the very real problems we are facing.

(Let me say as an aside that I think science is one of a few tools, all of them flawed, that best helps us objectively understand biophysical reality. Another one I keep thinking of that helps fill in where experimental science lacks is lived experiential/experimental indigenous knowledge for example about ecosystems. All these ways of knowing are flawed but certainly there are some that are better than others and these two examples are among the best I've come across.)

My question then is this: **is it possible that *in general* or on a large scale the eco-modernists are wrong (based on what we can discern through science), but *in specific cases* there can be ways to use technology touted by ecomodernists appropriately in conjunction with degrowth and myriad other strategies to get where we want to be?** I don't know the answer to this question.

I live in Uruguay and our entire electrical grid is powered on renewables (actually something like 97%). That's very ecomodernist, and it's not ideal but it's better than the alternative (it seems) than running everything off of fossil fuels in a world where people use electricity. It's also better (from what I've read) than having a bunch of individuals with highly inefficient household solar systems that rely on terrible lead batteries (all that is available here). In conjunction with that, it's a country of peasants who practice all sorts of degrowth-looking initiatives like small-scale agriculture. Is there room for both? Or am I ignorant that Uruguay's power grid is actually a nefarious thing and bad in the long run?

I wonder this because it marries Bill's point with mine and (if I understand correctly) that of the Robbin's essay, which is that (yes) the claims of ecomodernism are objectively wrong overall. But, can we move beyond that overall assumption to open ourselves up to the possibility that some of the tools ecomodernists point to as *the answer* are in fact not the whole answer, but can be part of one?

Warmly,

Ashley Colby

Doctoral Candidate

Washington State University

Sociology

Co-Founder

[Rizoma Field School](#)

From: Rees, William [mailto:wrees@mail.ubc.ca]

Sent: Tuesday, June 19, 2018 10:03 PM

To: Colby, Ashley Lynn <ashley.colby@wsu.edu>; scorai@listserver.njit.edu

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John de Graaf <jodg@comcast.net>

To: Jean Boucher <jlb964@gmail.com>

Cc: SCORAI Listserv <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>, "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>

yes, and the argument against back to the land is that with modern agricultural productivity we will take up far more of the land from other species. I've been trying to work out a comprehensive argument for de-growth, shorter worktime and lower consumption as a route to a happier more sustainable world, but what are the numbers on how much production/consumption the world can accept. Dana Meadows once said we could support a standard of living roughly the same as 1990 Europe over the long run. is that still true? Don't we need to make a huge case that much of our current employment is simply the creation of waste and lay out the industries--including most of marketing--that we need to jettison. I'm asking because I'm working on a new book on "the backpacking theory of life" about the need for balance and separating essentials from what doesn't matter and want to extend the theory to the economy but need to find some good sources of data.

thanks!

John

John de Graaf

www.johndegraaf.com

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Magnus Bengtsson <bmbengtsson@gmail.com>

21 June 2018 at 05:44

To: John de Graaf <jodg@comcast.net>

Cc: SCORAI Listserv <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>, "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>

Dear John,

Perhaps you can find some answers to your questions in Michael Lettenmeier's recently published PhD thesis with the title "A sustainable level of material footprint — Benchmark for designing one-planet lifestyles". You can access it at the bottom of this page: <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/31300>

Best,
/Magnus

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John de Graaf <jodg@comcast.net>

21 June 2018 at 05:48

To: Magnus Bengtsson <bmbengtsson@gmail.com>

Cc: SCORAI Listserv <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>, "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>

thank you Magnus!

John de Graaf

www.johndegraaf.com

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Philip Vergragt <pvergragt@outlook.com>

21 June 2018 at 09:26

To: "Colby, Ashley Lynn" <ashley.colby@wsu.edu>, "Rees, William" <wrees@mail.ubc.ca>, "scorai@listserver.njit.edu" <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Hi Ashley,

For me, the answer on your question is a resounding "yes". I have always argued that we need all the technologies we can muster to develop sustainable solutions; but we also have consistently argued that technologies alone cannot be the solution, because of rebound effects, and because of the many other arguments we have summarized in our latest SSPP publication <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/tsus20/current>

Philip

From: scorai-bounces+pvergragt=outlook.com@listserver.njit.edu [mailto:scorai-bounces+pvergragt=outlook.com@listserver.njit.edu] **On Behalf Of** Colby, Ashley Lynn
Sent: Wednesday, June 20, 2018 3:39 PM
To: Rees, William; scorai@listserver.njit.edu

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Anna Ignatyeva <aignatieva@gmail.com>

21 June 2018 at 11:33

To: John de Graaf <jodg@comcast.net>

Cc: SCORAI Listserv <scorai@listserver.njit.edu>

Dear John,

A partial answer to your question can be found in Kubiszewski et al. (2013), who compared GPI vs GDP dynamics and estimated that global GPI per capita peaked in 1978. Their analysis suggests that the average 'threshold' level of income at which GPI stops growing - with broad variance across nations - is around \$7000 per capita. Even if that doesn't directly correspond to how much production and consumption the world can sustain, it may be a good starting point for conceptualizing an optimal standard of living.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800913001584>

There's probably more recent research along similar lines out there, this is just something off the top of my head. I hope it helps.

Cheers,

Anja

Anja Ignatyeva
Independent researcher
Moscow, Russia // Santa Cruz, CA

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