

Degrowth, American Style: *No Impact Man* and Bourgeois Primitivism

David Correia*

At the conclusion of the first “Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity” held in Paris¹ in April 2008, the 140 participants from nearly 30 countries concluded that the “decoupling between ecological degradation and economic growth appears insufficient after years of important eco-efficiency improvements.” Collectively they issued a declaration that called for “a paradigm shift from the general and unlimited pursuit of economic growth to a concept of ‘right-sizing’ the global and national economies.” This “right-sizing,” according to the declaration, was not a one-size-fits-all prescription. “In countries where [the] per capita footprint is greater than the sustainable global level, right-sizing implies a reduction to this level within a reasonable timeframe.” But, continued the declaration, “In countries where severe poverty remains, right-sizing implies increasing consumption by those in poverty as quickly as possible, in a sustainable way, to a level adequate for [a] decent life, following locally determined poverty-reduction paths rather than externally imposed development policies.”

At the same time that conference attendees were working out the principles enshrined in the Degrowth declaration, author Colin Beavan was in the middle of filming *No Impact Man: The Documentary*,² a companion to his book *No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process* (Beavan 2009). Both book and movie were based on Beavan’s “No Impact Man Project,” a blog he started in November 2006. The blog, as with the book and movie, chronicled the exploits of one upscale, Manhattan family’s efforts to transform their consumption patterns, and thus their social and natural relations, in order to “save the planet.” Beavan sought a way out of their current lives he described in an early blog entry as “typical convenience-addicted, New York City take-out slaves.” Through reduced consumption he hoped to find “a middle path that is neither unconsciously consumerist nor self-consciously anti-materialist.” Beavan, unlike the conference attendees in Paris, put his faith in a version of environmentalism he called “eco-effective,”³ a term popularized by a number of business and urban design writers, and explained by Beavan in a blog post early on in the project:

This is largely how every other species on earth lives—in harmony with the environment. Lions neither starve themselves nor gorge to the point of wiping out the gazelle population. Instead, they promote the health of the gazelle herd by culling its weaker members and preventing herd overgrowth which in turn prevents overgrazing of the savannah. Animal

* dcorreia@unm.edu

¹ See <http://events.it-sudparis.eu/degrowthconference/en/> for the conference proceedings including the declaration.

² Dirs. Laura Gabbert and Justin Schein. Perfs. Colin Beavan and Michelle Conlin. Shadowbox Films, 2009 noimpactman.typepad.com.

³ The term was first used by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Schmidheiny 1992) as a term to describe the green transformation of capitalist production in which the increased production of consumer goods could occur without increasing waste and pollution. Two books, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (McDonough and Braungart 2002) and *Natural Capitalism: The Next Industrial Revolution* (Hawken, et al. 2000) took up the (magical and convenient) concepts of eco-efficient and eco-effective to develop an argument for sustainable capitalism.

waste does not poison the ground but fertilizes the soil so that it can produce more vegetation for the animals to eat. Bees feed on the pollen of flowers, but far from damaging them they provide the crucial service of pollinating them.

This is what I mean by “eco-effective.” The philosophy is based not only on restricting consumption but on changing what is consumed so that it actually helps or at least does not hinder the world. If bees had the idea that they wanted to save the planet, they would not go on crash diets and start eating less pollen. They would continue to live their lives abundantly, because their lives are already eco-effective. (Beavan 2007)

And so Beavan set out to practice “sustainable anti-consumerism,” a lifestyle approach in which his choices around consumption were guided by his simple aphorism/algorithm (“negative impact + positive impact = zero. No net impact, get it?”). While Degrowth has found limited purchase outside existing anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist or scholarly circles, Beavan has become a media darling. His blog found the attention of a variety of media outlets and, after numerous articles and television and radio appearances, has become hugely popular. The effort of “one guilty liberal,” it seems, tapped into a growing environmental zeitgeist among affluent, urban consumers surrounding questions of sustainability, green consumerism, and green capitalism.⁴ Awards and accolades accumulated. *Time Magazine* included No Impact Man in their list of the world’s fifteen top environmental websites. *Elle Magazine* named Beavan an “Eco-Illuminator” in their 2008 Green Awards. Microsoft Network included him among their “Ten Most Influential Men of 2007.” A New York environmental organization named him an “Eco-Star” of 2008.

But the project and its hero were not without critics. The comments following early posts were often aggressively derisive. Some gently mocked his take on Thoreau, the logic of engineering, and the contradictions of the project: “i bid you good luck on your al gorian, yuppie experiment,” wrote an early visitor to the website. Others rejected his anti-consumption stance as unrealistic: “So I respectfully ask you to include a Light Impact plan for us folk who lack what it takes to go No Impact.”

By the time the book and movie came out and the media barrage subsided (a media campaign that included regular segments on the daily U.S. television show *Good Morning America* as they followed Beavan’s project with frequent updates), more substantial critiques of his project and his environmental position surfaced. Elizabeth Kolbert, a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and the author of *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change*, a book based on a series of climate change essays published in *The New Yorker*, pilloried Beavan for what she called his “dramaturgy of austerity” (Kolbert 2009). According to Kolbert, his “nouveau Thoreauvian” version of environmentalism, obsessed with “ecological footprints” and “eco-effective” living, was, like Thoreau’s year in Walden, nothing more than a literary stunt. Beavan-as-environmental-activist was just a way to make Beavan-as-writer a wealthy man. “Beavan is, after all,” she wrote, “a man whose environmental activism began over lunch with his agent.”

⁴ No Impact Man is on the vanguard of a largely urban environmental movement slowly redefining the contours of bourgeois environmental identity. Another example would be Justin Ladda, for example, who *The New York Times* profiled in January 2010. (Green 2010). Ladda eschews heat in winter in his Lower East Side loft because “Proper temperature control, you see, would require insulating his wooden ceiling, and ruining its fine acoustics.”

One way to read Kolbert's critique, though she's not explicit in this manner, is that Beavan's environmentalism was a recalibration of more conventional expressions of bourgeois consumption. In Beavan's engineering logic, we could express his motivation as follows: increased consumption + environmental angst = personal dissatisfaction. In a recent blog post, Beavan offered an algorithm consistent with this idea: "environmentalist 2.0 defined as, happier planet = happier people." It is bourgeois because his newfound environmental and personal happiness is an expression of class privilege. A happy Beavan was only happy because, as Kolbert wrote, his life was being subsidized by the misery of others:

Even during the year that Beavan spent drinking out of a Mason jar, more than two billion people were, quite inadvertently, living lives of lower impact than his. Most of them were struggling to get by in the slums of Delhi or Rio or scratching out a living in rural Africa or South America. A few were sleeping in cardboard boxes on the street not far from Beavan's Fifth Avenue apartment.

As Beavan's project continued, so too did the Degrowth conferences. In Barcelona in 2010, 150 academics, activists, and scientists attended the second Degrowth conference where they wrote the "Barcelona Declaration," a manifesto based on various conference working groups. The declaration anticipated "right-sizing" as an inevitable process.

An international elite and a "global middle class" are causing havoc to the environment through conspicuous consumption and the excessive appropriation of human and natural resources. Their consumption patterns lead to further environmental and social damage when imitated by the rest of society in a vicious circle of status-seeking through the accumulation of material possessions. While irresponsible financial institutions, multi-national corporations and governments are rightly at the forefront of public criticism, this crisis has deeper structural causes.

So-called anti-crisis measures that seek to boost economic growth will worsen inequalities and environmental conditions in the long-run. The illusion of a "debt-fuelled growth," i.e. forcing the economy to grow in order to pay debt, will end in social disaster, passing on economic and ecological debts to future generations and to the poor. A process of degrowth of the world economy is inevitable and will ultimately benefit the environment, but the challenge is how to manage the process so that it is socially equitable at national and global scales. This is the challenge of the Degrowth movement, originating in rich countries in Europe and elsewhere, where the change must start from.⁵

As O'Connor (1998) has argued, the mad scramble to harmonize the terms of access to nature and labor amid existing and looming social and ecological crises to capitalist production means that what Degrowth calls "right-sizing" could very well mean—depending on how the struggle plays out—the intensification of the domination of nature and labor. In O'Connor's formulation—and Degrowth's predictions—existing bourgeois democratic economic and political structures, institutions, and movements struggle within existing class divisions with new social movements over ecological legitimacy and the control of nature. Without effective counter institutions to overcome the work of existing class divisions to reinforce social and ecological inequality, bourgeois institutions become even more powerful, and bourgeois logic becomes even more persuasive (the conventional wisdom). This contributes intellectual and cultural weight to the logic of green capitalism. This is a process,

⁵ <http://www.degrowth.org/Barcelona-2010-Declaration.119.0.html>.

of course, that has been underway for decades and is evident, for example, in rhetoric like “eco-effective” and the absurd but hugely popular idea of a sustainable capitalism. The result is a restructuring of production/consumption that serves as nothing more than the amplification of the domination of capital over nature and labor in the pursuit of bourgeois “eco-happiness.”

This essay considers what kind of social movements Degrowth and No Impact Man (the latter an illustration of what I call here bourgeois primitivism) represent in this struggle. Both are examples of modern anti-consumption environmental social movements. Movements that, as O’Connor has argued, emerge from the crises of capital’s claim to unlimited access to nature. The fiction of unlimited natural resources provokes cost-side crises as capital seeks to “defend or restore profits by strategies that degrade or fail to maintain over time the material and social conditions of their own production” (O’Connor 1998, 242). New environmental social movements make “demands that capital better provide for the maintenance and restoration for these conditions of life” (O’Connor 1998, 242). What the declarations of Degrowth describe, and what Beavan claims as his goal, is a radical reworking of the politics of nature that *starts* with a new resistance to consumption as one way to resolve the environmental problems of capitalism. But Beavan’s version reflects a form of bourgeois environmentalism that locates environmental degradation *solely* within the sphere of consumption and the problem of environmental degradation as something not inhering in capitalism itself but in the consumption choices of individual consumers. The proliferation of new and enormously profitable green markets, for example, fits nicely within the logic of bourgeois environmentalism, and has cleared a path for capital to re-legitimize and reinforce claims to a fictional unlimited nature in ways that resolve, at least temporarily, crises based on access to nature. Degrowth, in contrast, seeks to develop economic and ecological alternatives to capitalism along the path to a society that produces “happiness for everyone” as “the foundation of justice, and collective utility” which is itself “the measure of happiness” (Latouche 1993, 75).

But Degrowth’s critical version of anti-consumption competes—and so far it seems not very well—with the growing popularity of a bourgeois primitivist version that offers a capitalist-friendly critique of existing green capitalism. Can anti-consumption politics of the kind Degrowth advocates escape the clutches of bourgeois environmentalism? Can the “pursuit of happiness,” a commitment shared by Degrowth and Beavan, serve as the terrain of collective anti-capitalist struggle, or will it, *à la* Beavan, merely reinforce existing class privilege? These are the key questions addressed in this essay, and I begin the search for answers by first examining the bourgeois environmental politics of No Impact Man. This requires tracing the origins of bourgeois environmentalism through to Beavan’s primitivist politics. Both share an important legacy with romantic writers like Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Muir. And in fact, the primitivist version is much more consistent with the early romantic writers that mainstream environmentalists have for so long jealously claimed for themselves. Indeed, as Richard White (1996) has argued, the mainstream environmental movement has owed much of its political philosophy to progressive conservationists like Gifford Pinchot and Teddy Roosevelt. The business-friendly commitment to resource conservation for, ultimately, industrial and commercial uses was the centerpiece of progressive-era environmental politics and serves as the intellectual legacy of “green” capitalism today—not romantics like Thoreau or Muir. This hidden history of conservation explains the apparent contradictions of the “selling nature to save it” logic that has come to dominate

contemporary environmental rhetoric in the U.S.

No Impact Man offers a useful critique of mainstream environmentalism. He does not offer visions of techno-green capitalism supported by an uncritical faith in markets to resolve environmental issues. The obvious environmental implications of consumption and the contradictions that come with consumption as the mechanism of conservation and the consumer as its political subject have sent No Impact Man in another direction. But is it a direction that leads to a rejection of the socio-ecological consequences of class privilege?

After sketching the contours of bourgeois primitivist environmentalism, I consider whether Degrowth can account for this surprising turn in green politics. A critique of techno-capitalist production and consumption lurks in Beavan's brand of affluent, urban environmentalism, and it is as easily incorporated into the dominant logic of green liberalism as it is into Degrowth. After all, despite a critique of over-consumption and a strong anti-consumption focus, bourgeois primitivism ignores class, race, and gender in the production of environmental inequality. Instead it taps into a kind of eco-entertainment niche in green capitalism that redefines the *leitmotif* of existing bourgeois environmentalism: environmentalism as self-improvement via an urban lifestyle performed as an alternative expression of class distinction. Since food and housing security aren't a problem, bourgeois primitivists explore "extreme" anti-consumption as a lifestyle choice that relies on and reinforces existing class privileges as expressive forms of taste and distinction.⁶ Beavan charts a privileged environmental path in his version of anti-consumption, one that not only ignores the interconnections of race, class, gender, and political ecology, but also reinforces environmentalism in the image of the white, male, urban, middle-class consumer. The socio-ecological transformation of capitalism as called for by Degrowth must engage the eco-political logics of bourgeois primitivism, a growing thread in bourgeois environmentalist thought that reinforces the logic of capitalist reproduction.

Bourgeois Environmentalism

Bourgeois environmentalism has a long and sordid history. Attacked by William Cronon and Richard White in the 1990s for its largely urban, affluent, privileged claim to resources and its tendency to reduce nature to de-peopled wilderness, mainstream environmentalism long has been obsessed with the preservation of non-human nature at all costs (Cronon 1996). Wild nature in this formulation has been defined through the amenity-based nature-society relations of privileged consumers against the rapacious industrial uses of nature imagined as somehow abstractable from capitalist reproduction. As Karl Jacoby (2003) has shown, however, these views have rarely made class distinctions regarding the uses of nature and are almost willfully blind to the differences between what Jacoby called "working class nature" and the industrial uses of nature in capitalism. The poor, according to mainstream environmentalists, were just as culpable of environmental degradation as transnational extractive firms—and usually an easier target.

Bourgeois environmentalism thus has never been a rejection of modernity, but a reworking of the idea of progress refracted through a worldview dominated by class privilege.

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) is useful here as a guide to explain how expressions of taste and distinction serve to reinforce class divisions.

This reworking has fixed bourgeois consumer subjectivities at the center of environmental activism such that individualized claims to bourgeois sustainability appear as the only means to interrupt unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. This rarefied worldview has privileged nature as something wholly abstracted from society—nature as something on which certain individuals could, from afar, “make an impact.” For White these claims to appropriate nature-society relations operated within the ironies of bourgeois anxieties over a degraded nature. Bourgeois consumers expressed their environmentalism through consumption as a means largely to resolve their own anxieties over a degraded nature. They recycle, buy bottled water, wear facemasks in polluted cities, avoid tuna for fear of mercury, and buy organic vegetables for fear of the pesticides (White 1996).

This bourgeois formulation of nature has depended on constantly reproducing the idea that certain kinds of consumption, and therefore certain kinds of consumers, are the problem. It has been a view of nature that, according to Cronon, is in “flight from history”; or perhaps better yet, in Raymond Williams’ (1981) words, bourgeois environmentalism requires the active “suppression of the history of human labor” as the key means by which nature is remade in the image of the bourgeois consumer, i.e., orderly, pristine, non-human.

When an appropriate relationship with nature is defined by (1) a middle-class, affluent subjectivity; (2) a subjectivity located spatially in the urban bourgeoisie; (3) lifestyle values rather than philosophical, political, economic, or scientific terms; and (4) focused on individual consumption, the conclusions and solutions reinforce bourgeois values rather than resolve socio-ecological inequality.

And this is why mainstream environmentalism has been a reactionary social movement. While the bourgeois discourse of green liberalism has transformed capitalism’s class victims into nature’s enemies, it has been even better at disguising its neo-Malthusian logic in a veneer of “sustainability,” that slipperiest of terms. The rhetoric of sustainability has therefore become terrain heavily mined and guarded by capital for its ability to shed responsibility and harmonize existing practices with the new green terms of access to natural resources. This harmonization of capital and nature has required not only a bourgeois green logic but also an “unprecedented transformation” of technology (O’Connor 1998, 238)—the “eco-efficiency” racket initially celebrated by No Impact Man—in order to protect access to nature for capital. This has been the corrosive logic of green liberalism: the opening of new green markets that require new kinds of privatization⁷ and the production of new green products that stand alongside, rather than replace, existing products and therefore increase overall consumption. The effect has not been to transform production and consumption but rather to transform the idea of sustainability to fit within the logic of capital. O’Connor (1998) anticipated this struggle and understood that one possible outcome was that nature would become unrecognizable outside of capitalist relations. This is nature in the image of capital, governed by the laws of value and capitalist accumulation, or in the engineering language of No Impact Man, governed by principles of efficiency and the application of a perceived neutral science and technology.

⁷ Carbon markets would be an example of the opening of new green markets which first require new forms of privatization, in this case the privatization of the global carbon sink. Hybrid cars would be an example of a parallel green product line.

Bourgeois primitivism, however, appears as much a reaction to mainstream environmentalism as it is to environmental degradation more broadly. Like Degrowth, it recognizes the inherent contradictions of continued accumulation in the name of green, sustainable capitalism. Like Degrowth, it is skeptical of techno-fixes to existing patterns of production and consumption. But unlike Degrowth, it ignores what Marx called the “general communal conditions of production” and locates the fight over the conditions of capitalist accumulation, and the conditions of social and biological life, only in individual consumption decisions, not collective struggle.

Bourgeois Primitivism

The “back to basics” romanticism of bourgeois primitivist thinking has long been a lurking and contradictory force in mainstream environmentalist thinking. The nostalgic notion that life was better or more moral somewhere in the recent or distant past has had a powerful effect on a variety of environmental lines of thought. Anarcho-primitivist thinking, for example, offers a pointed critique of the idea of techno-progress when it comes to nature. Social stratification and environmental degradation are inherent functions of techno-industrial societies, according to anarcho-primitivism, and social inequality and ecological crises are products of all authoritarian systems of control. Like bourgeois strains, the ecological focus of anarcho-primitivism is largely drawn from the anti-authoritarian, anti-technology work of writers like Thoreau and has been elaborated by contemporary writers like John Zerzan, Edward Abbey, and Derrick Jensen. Bourgeois primitivism shares this skeptical view of technology and the focus on individual political agency, but departs from anarcho-primitivism in important ways. Bourgeois primitivism is defined here as follows.

First, bourgeois primitivism offers an expression of class concerns around urban aesthetics, luxury, leisure, public safety and individual health as a way to influence the shape of urban spaces so as to reinforce these privileges.

Second, whereas mainstream environmentalists understand sustainability in terms of the economic “freedom” to maintain existing levels of consumption refashioned as “green,” the primitivist ideology demands sacrifices, but these are couched as new paths to a better “quality of life” (consume less, be happier). The language of self-improvement rather than socio-ecological justice obscures the connections between environmental degradation and social inequality on one side and bourgeois values on the other. The magic act of bourgeois primitivist thought, then, has been to fashion forms of consumption that reduce environmental impact without requiring any sacrifice of class-based luxuries.

Third, the “no net impact” logic of bourgeois primitivism provides a means to truncate any consideration of the connections between production and consumption. Instead “appropriate” technology serves as the magic bullet: a (hypothetical) technopolitical solution deployed to resolve the serious environmental impacts of those elements of bourgeois consumption off limits to scrutiny (bicycles, for example, are deployed as alternative technologies in bourgeois primitivist thinking in ways that close off more thoughtful examinations of the socially uneven development of urban transportation).

Fourth, bourgeois primitivism obsesses over urban order and aesthetics. Green parks and public spaces provide the means for well-being and “quality of life” in ways only affluent

residents can experience. In the film, for example, the scenes of garbage accumulating on the sidewalks served to illustrate the costs of a growing urban consumption disorder. But the costs were aesthetic. They got in the way of Beavan's walks with his daughter, for example. Later the film briefly examined the environmental health impacts of consumption via the landfilling of urban wastes in sites adjacent to public housing in the south Bronx. Beavan presented the problem in strictly individual consumerist terms.

Degrowth and Bourgeois Primitivism

The point of this essay has been to argue that the enormous popularity of *No Impact Man*, along with its critique of mainstream environmentalism, means that a critical politics of anti-consumption as part of a transformation in socio-ecological relations must take bourgeois primitivism seriously. Otherwise bourgeois primitivism, like mainstream environmentalism before it, will offer capital the environmental legitimacy it requires to resolve crises and restructure the terms of access to nature and labor. Degrowth, as of yet, has not done this. For the remainder of the essay, I offer a brief summary of six areas where it could.

First, the focus of bourgeois primitivism on material objects has eclipsed a concern for structural processes, the role of political institutions and the politics of scale and space. This, I would argue, is a function of seeing the city, and all the privileges that the capitalist city bestows on its affluent residents, as an ontology of space, a pre-existing politics that makes challenging the socio-ecological foundation of capitalist relations impossible through a bourgeois primitivist lens. Bourgeois primitivist environmental political philosophy considers the social costs and ecological collapse of economic restructuring only in terms of individual happiness and bourgeois socio-ecological security. Left without a critical vision of the uneven distribution of social and environmental costs, Beavan's environmental politics is an aspatial, asocial politics. Therefore primitivist answers to environmental problems can only be located in certain privileged subjectivities of consumption.

If *No Impact Man* demonstrates anything, however, it is the political possibility of anti-consumption to transform individual subjectivities. In the documentary, the practice of anti-consumption, though individual in nature, brought Beavan increasingly into contact with people, institutions, and radical politics that transformed an initial commitment to reduce waste in order to "save the earth," to one that included a nascent concern for environmental justice. While Beavan's personal political transformation is important (offering up the possibility of a radical transformation of bourgeois environmental politics at least among certain "consumers"), a more important question remains: Does the bourgeois primitivism of *No Impact Man* offer in itself a revolutionary path for the socio-ecological transformation of society? The short answer is, in its current expression, probably not. Food quality, not hunger or food insecurity, preoccupy bourgeois primitivist thinking. Quality of life, not day-to-day survival, is its rarefied concern. The lens of bourgeois primitivism is not calibrated to register the relational nature of class privilege and socionature. Therefore, if the politics of consumption are to be made a transformative force in socio-ecological change, and if the goal is to reveal the socio-ecological consequences of capitalist relations, then Degrowth must offer a compelling analysis of the problems of bourgeois primitivist privilege and define the forces driving "right-sizing" in ways distinct from those offered by Beavan.

Second, in order for Degrowth to develop this critique of bourgeois primitivist environmentalism, it must begin by first demonstrating where it differs from it. Despite some obvious differences offered above, there is much in common between Degrowth and bourgeois primitivism. For example, both elaborate an environmental vision of “living differently to live better” that places individuals at the privileged center of environmental politics. In addition, progress remains at the center of both notions but, importantly, for both it is a “[p]rogressing backwards,” as Latouche (2003) put it, that is important. And neither emphasizes a technocratic notion of progress.

And for both, the terms of the struggle are resolutely cultural terms. As Latouche has argued, “the absolutely necessary change is not, of course, one of those, which a simple election could solve by putting in place a new government or by voting for another majority. What is necessary is much more radical: a cultural revolution, neither more nor less” (Latouche 2007). Beavan made a similar argument in a blog entry on April 3, 2008:

[W]hy is it that we aren't adopting the sorts of cultural and societal changes that can help right now? Like more villages instead of more suburbs. Or a materials economy based on things that last instead of things designed to be thrown away.

Why is it that we aren't moving forward with weatherizing every building in all the cities? Why aren't we investing in rapid transit busing? These things could improve our situation right now. RIGHT NOW. It doesn't make sense.

Perhaps it is because the powers that be don't want to accept that our emergency is dire enough to consider lifestyle change. Which is too bad, because it is within the cultural lifestyle changes that the climate crisis offers real opportunities for human improvement.

Third, the environmental political philosophy of bourgeois primitivism ignores any question of the politics of scale. Beavan makes no serious exploration of decentralization or the devolution of production, processes that would have to occur if his ideals of a new resistance to consumption were to take hold (neither, in fact, does Degrowth). Rather, Beavan highlights existing social relations of consumption that he thinks are less productive of waste: bicycling, farmers' markets, solar power, urban gardens, volunteerism, etc. In addition, anti-consumption in bourgeois primitivist philosophy serves as a force for individual ecological education. In like manner, Degrowth appeals to a pragmatic politics of consumption that assumes a coming contraction is in store but fails to specify how, where, and in what context this “right-sizing” will occur.

Fourth, any concern at all for the socio-ecological production of the city is absent in bourgeois primitivism. The urban environmental security experienced by Beavan in his Fifth Avenue co-op apartment is not understood as playing an integral part in the production of space that produces uneven socio-ecological vulnerability and inequality. In his formulation, homelessness, hunger, crime, and social segregation are not environmental issues and therefore figure nowhere in his environmentalism. While the film offers a brief interlude of environmental justice in the south Bronx, the issue remains one of consumption not of property, the right to the city, and the intersections of race, class, gender, and socio-ecological security (rents, land prices, exclusionary zoning, and the like are absent).

In addition, the reification of local agriculture via farmers' market consumption

elevates rural spaces as sustainable objects in opposition to the unsustainable city. This romanticism of nature and the rural is an essential component of bourgeois thinking—and one that obscures the fact that the same socio-ecological processes that transform the city also transform the country (Williams 1975). While farmers' markets, biking, and solar energy production, all highlighted by Beavan, are not solutions in themselves, particularly when placed within capitalist social relations, they do provide a means to rework ecological terms. Degrowth in contrast, does offer a more critical formulation, an explicitly spatial politics of urban nature that offers a way out of this primitivist ontological trap. The production of space, therefore, must be emphasized. While Beavan is out to find something “real,” his environmental lexicon (garbage, waste, consumption) keeps the focus on space as an aggregate of objects and artifacts. Degrowth, on the other hand, posits space as a product of socio-ecological politics in a way that brings into view what Lefebvre calls “a political economy of space” (Lefebvre 1991, 104). Seeing space as a process, and the city as politics, is essential if we are to rescue anti-consumption from its bourgeois clutches.

Fifth, both Degrowth and bourgeois primitivism privilege the pursuit of human happiness—or, perhaps more precisely, the problem of widespread existential dissatisfaction among high-consuming populations. As Beavan wrote in his book (2009, 8-9):

Many of us work so hard that we don't get to spend enough time with the people we love, and so we feel isolated... those of us lucky enough to be well compensated for these sacrifices get to distract ourselves with expensive toys and adventures—big cars and boats and plasma TVs and world travel in airplanes. But while the consolation prizes temporarily divert us from our dissatisfaction, they never actually take it away.

Oh, the crushing ennui of the idler classes. Sell your expensive toys and be free! But despite the absurdities of this angst, it is a line of thought that Degrowth has latched onto as a way to convert bourgeois concerns into more critical considerations of the socio-ecological costs of bourgeois consumption.

While Degrowth to some degree shares Beavan's rhetoric of existential torment related to consumption, it does not do so to elevate bourgeois consumption to a privileged pedestal, but rather to argue for a principled resistance to consumption rather than a comfortable reduction in consumption as the goal of anti-consumption politics. The latter merely follows the logic of green liberalism. This argument, while interesting, is where critical politics usually goes to die. There is no solidarity in the individual other than self-interest and no radical politics in personal consumption decisions. If Degrowth is to continue to advance a rhetoric of individual happiness, it must find a formulation that could somehow reveal the social and ecological costs of class privilege rather than merely soothe the guilt and wounded psyche of the bourgeoisie.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, bourgeois primitivism and Degrowth share the belief that no technological fix or market correction can engineer a way out of nature's limits. And this is perhaps the most important similarity: nature's limits. The anxieties that drive the anti-consumption rhetoric in bourgeois primitivism and the logic of “right-sizing” in Degrowth are both premised on a looming ecological collapse, a coming catastrophe in socio-ecological relations, the end of nature. Based on that premise, the calls for devolution and “right-sizing” are logical, the recommendations are persuasive, and the concern a clarion call

for a new pragmatic politics. Both Degrowth and bourgeois primitivism, whether they have looked for it or not, have found intellectual purchase in a world awash in anxiety over peak oil, resource scarcity wars, and perceptions of overpopulation. But as of yet, both have merely capitalized on those fears.

This is a troubling development. The neo-Malthusian trap of “overpopulation” has long provided a powerful ideological, bourgeois weapon to disguise class struggle as pragmatic environmentalism. As David Harvey (1974, 273) put it, “whenever a theory of overpopulation seizes hold in a society dominated by an elite, then the non-elite invariably experience some form of political, economic, and social repression.” Many Degrowth writers, to their credit, make explicit the argument that raising living standards among the world’s poor while lowering consumption standards among the wealthiest must be among the first goals of any collective anti-consumption politics. But much is left unexplained. What are the forces that make “right-sizing” *necessary* or *inevitable* in the first place? What mechanism produces this transformation to the existing socio-ecological order? Answers are not forthcoming. It is assumed instead that we share a kind of cultural knowledge of catastrophe—the idea that this just can’t go on much longer, that it is unsustainable. As a result, Degrowth offers no careful critique of the reactionary conclusions of the Club of Rome drawn from the idea of a looming ecological collapse stalking humankind. Instead it relies on this cultural anxiety.

Degrowth therefore must explain the etiologies and forces that promise to produce “right-sizing.” Unless Degrowth can effectively engage the question of socio-ecological change and crisis in capitalism, “right-sizing” will be merely another trope in the ongoing drama of eco-panic no different than Paul Ehrlich’s (1968) neo-Malthusian “population bomb.” Karl Polanyi (1944) could be helpful here. As he argued, capitalism treats nature as though it is produced capitalistically. As a result it undervalues and overuses the very resources upon which continued accumulation relies. O’Connor drew on this insight to suggest that the result of such a process is not the inevitable exhaustion of nature, the coming up against of nature’s limits, though he did not deny this possibility. Rather what is important here is that the terms of capital’s use of nature become the very terrain of socio-ecological struggle among the state, capital, and social movements. This is first and foremost a political struggle over the realization of value in the accumulation of capital. The theory of peak oil is a good example. The politics of energy reflected in the logic of peak oil relies on the idea that a coming collapse based on real physical limits looms. Yet, what appear to be crises of resource exhaustion have been waves of crises of industrial restructuring and, of late, financial systems. Treating these crises as resource crises of a solely biological foundation, however, does capital’s work for it. The anti-consumption politics of Degrowth therefore should locate “right-sizing” not in a looming collapse or in nature’s limits, but rather as a consequence of the struggle over the control of nature and accumulation.

As it stands, however, there is little yet to distinguish Degrowth from bourgeois primitivism. Meanwhile, various capitals have effectively maneuvered to resolve the contradictions of treating nature and labor as commodities. And No Impact Man promises to make quite an impact.

References

- Beavan, C. 2007. No Impact Man philosophy. Blog post. February 19.
noimpactman.typepad.com/blog/2007/02/the_no_impact_m.html.
- . 2009. *No impact man: The adventures of a guilty liberal who attempts to save the planet, and the discoveries he makes about himself and our way of life in the process*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Richard Nice trans. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Cronon, W. 1996. The trouble with wilderness; or getting back to the wrong kind of nature. In *Uncommon ground: Rethinking the human place in nature*, W. Cronon, ed. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Ehrlich, P. 1968. *The population bomb*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Green, P. 2010. Chilled by choice. *The New York Times*. January 20.
- Harvey, D. 1974. Population, resources, and the ideology of science. *Economic Geography* 50 (3): 256-277.
- Hawken, P. et al. 2000. *Natural capitalism: The next industrial revolution*. Washington, D.C.: Earthscan.
- Jacoby, K. 2003. *Crimes against nature: Squatters, poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.
- Kolbert, E. 2009. Green like me: Living without a fridge, and other experiments in environmentalism. *The New Yorker*. August 31.
- Latouche, S. 1993. *In the wake of the affluent society: An exploration of post-development*. London: Zed Books.
- . 2003. Would the West actually be happier with less? The world downscaled. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. December 12.
- . 2007. De-growth: an electoral stake? *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy* 3 (1).
- Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- McDonough, W. and M. Braungart. 2002. *Cradle to cradle: Remaking the way we make things*. San Francisco: North Point Press.
- O'Connor, J. 1998. *Natural causes: Essays in ecological Marxism*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Polanyi, K. 1944. *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. Beacon Press.
- Schmidheiny, S. 1992. *Changing course: A global business perspective on development and the environment*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- White, R. 1996. The nature of progress: Progress and the environment. In *Progress, Fact or Illusion?*, eds. B. Mazlish and L. Marx. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press.
- Williams, R. 1975. *The country and the city*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- . 1981. *Problems in materialism and culture: Selected essays*. New York: Verso Books.