



## COMMENTARY

# Getting Hitched and Unhitched with the Ecomodernists

**Bronislaw Szerszynski**

*Sociology, Lancaster University, UK*

The authors of *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* offer us a new twist on an old argument: to avert ecological collapse we need not *less* modernity, but *more*.<sup>1</sup> According to the ecomodernists, our global predicament is like that of a truck driver in the midst of an emerging multiple-vehicle pile-up; if we lose our nerve, and jam on the brakes, the disaster will overwhelm us. We must instead keep faith in the technological, progressive project, and press the accelerator down even further; only then can we get through the moment of danger and leave the pile-up of history behind us.

Let us decompose this *vehiculum novum* into its two halves, and look at the torsion involved in this particular coupling of ideas—the ecological cargo and the modernist tractor unit, as it were. The ‘eco-’ prefix refers to their recognition that “humanity must shrink its impacts on the environment to make more room for nature.”<sup>2</sup> Here, they seem to align with the direction of travel of the wider environmental movement. Yet the ‘-modernist’ half of their name firmly asserts their belief that if this is to happen, it will not come about through any slowing or reversal of the modernisation process but only through greater energy use, urbanisation, technological innovation and agricultural intensification.

In this they seem to set their trajectory at an angle nearing 180 degrees to the usual orientation of the environmental movement, which would more usually call for degrowth, ecological agriculture, contraction of energy and resource use and more ‘natural’ lifestyles. The ecomodernists believe that there is no contradiction here: anti-technological sentiments and romantic ideas of pristine nature were always stowaways, illicit passengers that did not really belong in the environmentalist package. If they fall off the back of the accelerating wagon, all the better. However, from the point of view of the wider ecology movement, the ecomodernist pantechicon is overloaded with contradictions and its attitude wilfully obtuse; it is already

---

<sup>1</sup> John Asafu-Adjaye, Linus Blomqvist, Stewart Brand, Barry Brook, Ruth de Fries, Erle Ellis, Christopher Foreman, David Keith, Martin Lewis, Mark Lynas, Ted Nordhaus, Roger Pielke Jr., Rachel Pritzker, Joyashree Roy, Mark Sagoff, Michael Shellenberger, Robert Stone, and Peter Teague, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” accessed 9 October 2015, <http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto>, 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

jack-knifing, and can only spill its precious and irreplaceable consignment: the integrity and stability of nature.

\*\*\*

But let us try out another metaphor. For, although ecomodernism consists of a coupling of ecology and modernisation, it also consists of a decoupling—of human systems of provisioning from natural ecosystems. The ecomodernists insist that this is the only way we can have *both* “universal human dignity” and “a biodiverse and thriving planet.”<sup>3</sup> Their call for “accelerated, active, and conscious decoupling”<sup>4</sup> is reminiscent of the phrase used by the actress Gwyneth Paltrow in March 2014 when announcing the end of her marriage with musician Chris Martin. According to an essay on “conscious uncoupling” by Doctors Habib Sadeghi and Sherry Sami posted by Paltrow on her website, this approach to the end of a relationship “brings wholeness to the spirits of both people who choose to recognize each other as their teacher. If they do, the gift they receive from their time together will neutralize their negative internal object that was the real cause of their pain in the relationship.”<sup>5</sup> The curious intertextuality between Paltrow’s therapy-speak and the discourse of the ecomodernists may itself be ‘conscious’ or otherwise, but it suggests that we might read the latter as saying that humans and nature have come to a mutual agreement that the relationship was not working—that nature was unable to give humanity what it needed, and that humans were causing nature pain. The essay by Sadhegi and Sami concludes by insisting that, even after you have decoupled from your partner, “you can still receive the lessons he or she has to give you, resist being baited into dramatic arguments, and stand firm in your internal, spiritual support system. By choosing to handle your uncoupling in a conscious way ... you’ll see that although it looks like everything is coming apart; it’s actually all coming back together.”<sup>6</sup>

*Although it looks like everything is coming apart; it’s actually all coming back together.* This could be a motto for the ecomodernists. “You may feel,” they want to say, “that what we propose would be the end of your relationship with nature. But no, it is only when you have both gained autonomy that you will both really appreciate and respect each other.” Sadhegi and Sami argue elsewhere in the essay that relationships teach us how to evolve from an emotional *exoskeleton*—a protective hard shell we use for survival—to an *endoskeleton*—an internal support mechanism, a “psycho-spiritual spine ... made from conscious self-awareness so that we can evolve into a better life.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, ecomodernists are saying that, if humanity can develop a ‘technological endoskeleton’ that will enable it to meet its needs for food, shelter, energy and waste management independently of natural ecosystems, and thereby “consciously decouple” from nature, then the relationship between humanity and nature will at last achieve a mature, respectful distance in which both can flourish and appreciate each other.

---

<sup>3</sup> Asafu-Adjaye *et al.*, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Habib Sadeghi and Sherry Sami, “Conscious Uncoupling,” accessed 4 October 2015, <http://goop.com/conscious-uncoupling-2/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

\*\*\*

As well as 'ecomodernists,' this group also call themselves 'ecopragmatists,' so let us for a while take seriously the second half of this name too. Let us test them pragmatically—not just in the sense of no-nonsense practical realism, but in the philosophical sense as developed by Pierce, James and Dewey. The 'American Pragmatists' argued that we should understand and judge thought and language in terms not of representational accuracy but practical consequences for action. I would suggest that this is not an unreasonable approach to take to the ecopragmatists. Firstly, stories of their grandness of sweep do not so much offer themselves to be tested against the evidence; rather, they organise our interpretation of those facts, offer to weave them into a new coherence. Secondly (and to use pragmatics in a different, Austinian sense), theirs is a particular kind of speech act: a manifesto; and the felicity conditions of a manifesto are that it should succeed in convincing others. Thus the truth of the ecomodernist manifesto will be judged rather by whether they succeed and persuade people to hitch a ride on their particular 'discourse coalition'—and whether the story will make itself true by guiding action and producing results, as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And I would agree with the ecomodernists that we do need a new story to carry us through the current century, if we are to have any chance of ending the century in a world that is just and bearable for humans and non-humans alike. I agree that we should not be afraid to challenge deeply held assumptions about the nature of our ecological predicament. And I would agree that we need stories that inspire hope and action, and not just fear and resignation. We need to get damn good at stories—at inventing them, telling them, hearing them, inhabiting them—but also judging them. We need to get better at the difficult task of identifying which stories are genuinely helpful for setting us on the path towards a sustainable future, and which are part of our current self-mystification, functioning to allow us to continue on an unsustainable path by giving us the illusion (but only the illusion) of meaningful action and transition out of unsustainability. These are genuinely important questions and ecomodernists have done us a service by offering a new narrative.

So let us look a bit further at the narrative they are offering us. Through my two metaphors above, we have seen that it is a story of decoupling and recoupling. Of getting unhitched—from natural systems, but also from many deeply-held values, beliefs and instincts of already-existing environmentalism (and by implication from those parts of the ecology movement that cleave to them)—but also getting hitched, to a new intellectual and ideological engine, one characterised by technophilia and a profound belief in progress. And we have seen that it is a story of accelerating through disaster and leaving it behind.

But let us also look at some of the details of their narrative, to see the discursive selectivity involved in weaving such an overwhelmingly positive ecological tale from the ongoing experience of modernisation—and how the very threads from which they have woven their cloth provide other kinds of hitches, snags that catch and threaten to unravel the story. So, for example, contemporary instances of reforestation are seen as evidence that we are undergoing a global "forest transition" from net deforestation to net reforestation—rather than being, for example, just a local side-effect of fossil-fuel-driven liberation from dependence on

territory for energy needs.<sup>8</sup> The dematerialisation of various national economies through expansion of the service sector and 'knowledge economy' is seen as a sign of a genuine shift in socio-metabolic regime which all economies can copy—rather than just a symptom of a respatialisation of production to elsewhere in the global economy.<sup>9</sup> The past dynamics of decarbonisation of energy sources are seen as pointing to the potential to greatly accelerate this same dynamic in the future—rather than as evidence that decarbonisation has been driven by and further strengthens capitalism's never-ending search for cheaper and more mobile energy sources, with the effect that efficiency gains are always swallowed up by economic growth.<sup>10</sup> The green revolution and the global spread of intensive agriculture are seen as liberating huge areas of the earth's surface from food production and humans from back-breaking work—rather than, for example, as necessary elements in the provision of the cheap food and labour power that made possible the establishment of industrial capitalism, and the creation of unequal colonial and postcolonial relations.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the smooth, orderly flow of the ecomodernist story is surrounded by a turbulent maelstrom of the damned—of rejected facts and alternative interpretations. But other literary devices are used to marshal even counterfactuals to the narrative stream. The text is without diagrams, but nevertheless gets us to imagine various temporal curves as we read—and these are not the ever-increasing exponential curves of energy use, or the violent, irreversible discontinuities of catastrophe theory but the more reassuring levelling-off into plateaus, or peaking of inverted U's. Thus, for example, modernising processes are "far from complete," and material consumption has "only just" begun to peak in the wealthiest societies.<sup>12</sup> These textual 'chronotropes' serve to reassure us that, through the 'noise' of historical accident, the clear 'signal' of progress can nevertheless be discerned.

\*\*\*

I like the idea of ecomodernism, and the idea that we need to find new and more positive stories; but the particular narrative offered by the ecomodernists fails to enrol me, for one. I also like the idea of modernising modernity—of turning the remarkable engine of modern thought onto itself. But we need to do it in a different way. The ecomodernists are modernist in the particulars of their meta-narrative—but also in their insistence on providing a singular meta-narrative in the first place. Yet in a postcolonial context the authority of the West to tell the (fundamentally Hegelian) story of the inevitable incarnation of reason in the liberal state, or

<sup>8</sup> Asafu-Adjaye *et al.*, "An Ecomodernist Manifesto," 13; Simone Gingrich *et al.*, "Long-Term Dynamics of Terrestrial Carbon Stocks in Austria: A Comprehensive Assessment of the Time Period from 1830 to 2000," *Regional Environmental Change* 7, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Asafu-Adjaye *et al.*, *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, 14, Richard York and Eugene A. Rosa, "Key Challenges to Ecological Modernization Theory: Institutional Efficacy, Case Study Evidence, Units of Analysis, and the Pace of Eco-Efficiency," *Organization & Environment* 16, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Asafu-Adjaye *et al.*, "An Ecomodernist Manifesto," 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13; Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart, *A History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis*, trans. James H. Membrez (London: Earthscan, 2006); Jason W. Moore, "The End of the Road? Agricultural Revolutions in the Capitalist World-Ecology, 1450-2010," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Asafu-Adjaye *et al.*, "An Ecomodernist Manifesto," 29.

in the free market, or in technocratic reason, has been challenged like never before. The climate justice movement of the global South refuses any simple pragmatic solution to climate change, if moving to that future requires an erasure of the claims of the past, so that the present beneficiaries of historical injustices will be allowed to keep their ill-gotten gains.<sup>13</sup> And more than this—the very ideas of knowledge and justice and freedom and the future are multiplying. The Earth *bristles*—with anger at the wilful destruction of its resources and resilience for the benefit of the few—but also with multiple narratives that sprout forth across the planet and refuse to be woven into one simple story of progress. In this narrative diversity is a new kind of hope: so let there be a thousand ecomodernisms—and eco-non/a/post/hyper/trans/modernisms too.

I close by returning to the image with which I opened this essay. The ecomodernists insist that if we accelerate we will leave the pile-up behind. Unlike Walter Benjamin's reading of Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, in which the 'angel of history' is being propelled blindly upwards and backwards by the rising tragedy before him, the modernists see the ecological and human ruins around us as transitional, and as accidental to the project of modernity.<sup>14</sup> They do not see any inherent link between their own forward motion and the piling up of victims, which persists even if it takes new forms that elude their forms of accounting. Anyway, they can afford to avert their gaze because they are confident that they will accelerate past them, speeding to sunlit uplands in which the 'conscious decoupling' of society and nature has ended the pain and suffering of both parties. But what if the violence is structural, the carnage caused by the slewing truck of modernist progress? What if the existence of winners depends on there being losers—if the very forward motion of the modernist juggernaut requires the violence that the ecomodernists claim is receding in their rear-view mirror? And what if the attempt to decouple society from nature results in an even greater entanglement between human projects and non-human becoming, in ways that are hard to predict?<sup>15</sup> If this is the case, then, however many people were persuaded by its seductive story, the ecomodernist manifesto could never make itself true through its application; the ecological and human ruins would simply pile higher and faster.

## Bibliography

- Asafu-Adjaye, John, *et al.* "An Ecomodernist Manifesto." Accessed 9 October 2015.  
<http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto>.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, 253-64. New York: Harcourt, 1968.
- Gingrich, Simone, Karl-Heinz Erb, Fridolin Krausmann, Veronika Gaube, and Helmut Haberl. "Long-Term Dynamics of Terrestrial Carbon Stocks in Austria: A Comprehensive Assessment of the Time Period from 1830 to 2000." *Regional Environmental Change* 7, no. 1 (2007): 37-47.
- Mazoyer, Marcel, and Laurence Roudart. *A History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis*. Translated by James H. Membrez. London: Earthscan, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> John McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1989).

McPhee, John. *The Control of Nature*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1989.

Meister, Robert. *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*. Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Moore, Jason W. "The End of the Road? Agricultural Revolutions in the Capitalist World-Ecology, 1450-2010." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10, no. 3 (2010): 389-413.

Sadeghi, Habib, and Sherry Sami, "Conscious Uncoupling." Accessed 4 October 2015.  
<http://goop.com/conscious-uncoupling-2/>.

York, Richard, and Eugene A. Rosa. "Key Challenges to Ecological Modernization Theory: Institutional Efficacy, Case Study Evidence, Units of Analysis, and the Pace of Eco-Efficiency." *Organization & Environment* 16, no. 3 (2003): 273-88.