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ECOMODERNISM: THE FUTURE OF ENVIRONMENTALISM?

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK LYNAS

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ECOMODERNISM

S: You portray classical environmentalism as a negative movement and Ecomodernism as a positive one. Can you speak to that?

L: I think in many ways the environmental movement, in its classical form, is not a progressive political force. I think in some ways it is quite reactionary, politically and socially, and it is quite backward looking. It is fundamentally invested in the world view that somehow humans have gone too far in certain areas whether it is with technology or human dominance of the planet or whatever, and therefore we need to reduce what we do, we need to curtail our activities in various senses.

For me, that’s not fundamentally progressive. It’s not about moving forward; it’s not about solving problems. It is about somehow stopping ourselves and I think it fundamentally believes that things were better before. Things were better in the past. Preindustrial society was better than industrial society.
I think that flies in the face of all the historical evidence which we have which really confirms that life was not better in the past. People’s life expectancies were much shorter; people died of preventable diseases. Poverty was endemic across all of human society, so was violence. One’s expectation of violent death was much higher. So in many ways the foundational ethos of the environmental movement is simply historically wrong. That’s a fundamental challenge, realizing that, and that’s what Ecomodernism came out of really: a different world view. And a different set of values.

S: Do you see Ecomodernism as a more right-wing conservative solution to the problem or do you think it should be defining with the liberal side?

L: I don’t see it as right wing in any sense, except that it is progressive and it is pragmatic. So in some ways I am sympathetic to a more right-wing attitude that says ‘we can solve problems’. I don’t think necessarily that these problems will resolve through the power of the free market, as the right wing is sort of obsessed with. In some ways government intervention is essential to address social problems and to foster technological innovation. These things don’t happen by magic and they certainly don’t happen in company offices. These things by and large happen in the public sector which is funded by government investment, such as the internet or the iPhone. Initially these technologies emerged through public sector investment and it is important to remember that.

So no, I think that I see this as the next step for the liberals, really. I think that this is a movement that has emerged on the center-left, and that is why our concerns on things such as poverty and human rights are really essential to the narrative, as we are not saying that poor people need to remain poor because you have already used up the Earth’s resources. I think that we are saying actually that there is a real legitimate potential for development that benefits everyone, including biodiversity, through solving climate change.

S: Do you see the environmentalist movement as an anti-capitalist movement? I personally have trouble understanding why it’s so reactionary towards everything.

L: Because that’s the essence of the philosophy: that we have got it wrong in the modern world. So why would you feel comfortable with any aspects of modernity. You can see this in aspects of Naomi Klein’s writing quite clearly. It is all about celebrating people in some traditional, or under developed society, as a model for us to aspire to. The implication is that we need to tear down our cities and, sort of, somehow, return to living more closely with the land. It’s a deluded world view.

GOVERNMENT ACTION

S: A consistent theme throughout is aggressive government action in these topics, whether it is development of new technology or planning cites or dealing with the correct incentive structure.

L: Yes, I think so. And so that’s why I do not see it as philosophy of the right-wing. It is not about reducing government, and I do not see this as an anti-capitalist either. It is actually quite centrist, and it is more about Keynesian mixed economies. People don’t just respond to selfishness. The myth of the single self-interested actor that you get in classical economics doesn’t ultimately help. That isn’t how people work. People work in complex social peer networks, and the incentive of money is one among many. It isn’t necessarily the most important. There are lots of other reasons why people strive and innovate, and we need to remember that. Those of us who consider ourselves Ecomodernists are not concerned about money. We have a sort of passionate belief and we are interested in making the world a better place. And oddly, it feels like we are swimming against the tides in many ways. We are seeing a real polarization in politics. You’ve got the Donald Trumps, you’ve got the Bernie Sanders—you’ve got the far right and the far left who are dominating all the debates at the moment and it is certainly not just in the U.S. You can see this right across Europe, with extreme
left with Syriza in Greece, the right wing just won in Poland too. There is not much center ground left anymore, there is only polarization.

In many ways I think we are trying to reclaim democratic values. People seem to have forgotten what that really means. People do not believe in truth anymore. No one believes in evidence-based thinking. It is kind of the ultimate triumph of postmodernism: anyone’s choice could be what they want. You see that with Putin and Russia. Putin’s regime is the ultimate post modernist regime. There is no truth; it is all relative. Whatever you say can be true if you say it loudly enough multiple times. You see the same philosophy in humanitarian academic circles.

S: The standard textbook environmentalism typically involves stock solutions, such as government subsidies for renewables and the Clean Power Plan. These solutions are very offensive to many Republicans. What do you see as the other options? If they hate the solutions, they will not accept the climate science. Do you see a way around that?

L: Nuclear power seems like a good option; I have never met a Republican that was anti-nuclear. They may not trust the science of climate change, but, if they invest more in nuclear power, they can solve it by accident. They can pump more low-carbon electricity into the grid that way. In some ways their perspective is less dangerous than that of the liberals who want to remove nuclear power entirely, and insist on this faith-based approach of one hundred percent renewables. We know that’s less likely to work, and we know renewables have an import-

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L: I think COP21 is in a reasonable position for a compromise. Its very different from Copenhagen, because we have now moved into a very different system, effectively “pledge and review.” Countries each put a pledge on the table on mitigation actions and these then become codified in some international sense. It’s not going to be a treaty, because that would have to go through the U.S. Senate, but they will have to find some kind of words that will give it some kind of meaning internationally.

Ultimately, it’s a recognition that countries are not going to accept their energy and development to be constrained by an international treaty. These are such fundamental areas of national interest that you are going to have a multi-national voluntarist approach. That is going to continue and Paris will recognize that. But it is not necessarily all bad news because the pledges on the table, if they are fulfilled, will constrain global warming. So we are not going to see 4, 5 or 6 degrees [of temperature rise]. The best case scenario is well below 3, or even below 2 if we move aggressively forward with mitigation. I am not particularly pessimistic, but we shouldn’t aim for another Kyoto, because that’s simply not going to happen.

THE FUTURE OF ENERGY

S: I’d like to ask two questions that are linked: What do you hope will be the primary energy mix of let's say thirty forty years in the future, and also, what do you think will be the reality?

L: I don’t care as long as it is low carbon and sustainable in other ways. I am very concerned about biomass as a renewable technology. So I guess it is renewable, since you cut down trees and they grow again, but it is pretty devastating to ecosystems and it is not low carbon in the short to medium term. Similarly with hydropower, if we start with dams along the Mekong Rivers, that is going to harm the dolphin and affect biodiversity in the aquatic ecosystems which are really important. But that’s a low carbon technology. So overall, we need to assess energy not only on how it is on carbon, but also on its overall sustainability. Nuclear wins hands down, along with solar. I cannot see any objections to solar photovoltaic. Along with the cost reductions we are seeing, that technology can make a huge difference, especially in the tropical world where there is strong sunshine and very low grid penetration, so I am pretty enthusiastic about that too.

S: How do you try to convince people who have always been anti-nuclear, whether due to the Soviet Dezinformatsia, or Chernobyl and Fukushima?

L: Four of the world’s top climate scientists: Jim Hansen, Kerry Emanuel, Tom Wigley and Ken Caldeira, will be in Paris giving a press conference, pleading with the environmental lobby to give up their anti-nuclear ideology in the interests of having a habitable climate. If environmentalists can’t be persuaded to take climate change seriously, one doesn’t feel very optimistic about the rest of the world. So in some ways, that is the litmus test.

We need a more supportive regulatory system so we can move forward much more rapidly with some of the state of the fourth generation nuclear technologies. The waste issue is easily solvable. The proliferation issue can easily be addressed as well; we can stop all uranium mining and still have hundreds of years of fuel if we moved to fast reactor technologies.

There is no fundamental shortage of energy, which I think the environmental movement believes that energy is fundamentally limited, in some zero sum thermodynamic way. Its really not the case if you allow nuclear fission to be part of the mix.

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