

Assimilation, Blind Spots and Coproduced Crises

Another ‘Black Friday’¹ just passed and unlike the previous year, in England at least, there were no headlines of one citizen bashing another over some special deal consumer good; also a considerable amount of tweeting and some news coverage occurred on the theme of ‘Buy Nothing Day’. Currents and counter-currents to driving-up consumption were also evident in more supermarkets joining the long weekend of special offers, while at least one online vendor deliberately closed for trading on Black Friday. Therein lies the conflict of modern economies seeking to boost aggregate demand for economic growth via mass consumption which increases social division and environmental harm.

Core to *Environmental Values* is thought-provoking interdisciplinary discussion on citizen-consumer tensions, individual agency and social behavioural change, and human–nature relationships, often with direct reference to accelerated, human induced, environmental and climate change (e.g. Braito et al. 2017; d’Amato et al. 2017; Groves et al. 2016; Howell and Allen 2017; Librová and Pelikán 2016). This issue includes contributions that critically examine how the concept of economic growth has deep, culturally embedded roots and while we are becoming better at assessing and signposting value pluralism and capturing the many facets of environmental values (Arias-Arévalo et al. 2018), we are witnessing an impoverishing standardisation of language and reduction of biological and cultural diversity (Poole 2018). Why do we lean towards modes of thinking and behaviour that ultimately normalise, and naturalise, economic growth (Koch 2018)? Even when there is recognition of the need for change, and the political will to do so, specific (individual or shared) self and place based perceptions can form barriers to supporting and living that change (Herrick 2018).

A relevant global frame to discuss subtle contradictions and tensions between worthy social-ecological goals and chosen economic models with their associated political power disparities is the *2030 Sustainable Development Agenda* (UN 2015) with its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs provide fertile ground for an ABC of **a**ssimilation, **b**lind spots and **c**oproduced crises and illustrates some of the links between the contributions to this issue of *Environmental Values*. Finalised and published in 2015, the SDGs² quickly found traction in international development work. My concern over them was raised by a masters’ degree student who was working on setting

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1. Black Friday is the informal name for the day after Thanksgiving Day in the United States (US) and in the early 1950s marked the start of Christmas shopping in the US with many special offers; since 2010 it has spread to other countries, including the UK, and is one of the busiest shopping days in the year.
 2. For more details see Poole 2018, Table 2; and <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.

up a Children's Eco Village and wanted to use the SDGs as an assessment framework for planning and evaluating projects in East Africa. What immediately struck me was the focus of SDG8 on 'economic *growth*' rather than 'economic *wellbeing*'; by 2015, after all, we had had plenty of evidence that economic growth over previous decades did some good but when weighed up against all the negative environmental and social impacts it seems a somewhat imperialistic and simplistic formula. Also, the language used across all the goals reads like a neoliberal development agenda of the apologist's 'good kind', i.e. with some social and environmental concerns, but essentially economic and growth driven. Political realities are conveniently left unarticulated. General and specific environmental, social and economic challenges are mentioned as an opportunity to improve environmental, social and/or economic conditions, stating worthy goals while the text skims over any inherent tensions and evidence of how policies elevating economic growth have, in many cases, created environmental and social injustice rather than greater equity (e.g. Temper et al. 2016). It also ignores how attempts to decouple gross domestic production from resource consumption and impact have not materialised (e.g. Fritz and Koch 2016).

The SDGs thus are an example of what Karl Polanyi termed a 'double movement' (Polanyi 1944/2001: 79). Essentially, the free-market system operates and is extended across social and environmental domains (e.g. 'through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation', UN 2015: 19). Global cooperation of all stakeholders is believed possible because excessive negative impacts are to be addressed via regulation, programmes and measures to help and protect those disadvantaged (by past, present and future marketization/capitalism): this amelioration of impacts being the 'counter movement'.

Another, nowadays common yet highly problematic, characteristic in the phrasing of goals is the use of 'we' and how commitments and responsibilities are negotiated and assigned. Engebretsen et al. (2017: 365), for example, draw attention to how 'we' is used to refer to those who agreed the goals, and a broader 'we' to ensure that the goals are implemented. This use of language in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (and other instances!) 'launches a double-duty paradox: sustainable development is about both committing oneself to a promise and committing others to an obligation. Responsibility becomes both all-encompassing and non-existent.' Horton (2014: 2196) criticises the SDGs as 'fairy tales, dressed in the bureaucratise of intergovernmental narcissism, adorned with the robes of multilateral paralysis, and poisoned by the acid of nation-state failure.' Yet taking a pulse check of how popular the SDGs have become, an online search³ for work published over the past 12 months came up with over 100,000 publications. Of

3. I used my institution's SUMMON search facility. The results will vary with institution but here has been chosen to trawl more widely than just journal articles to gauge the popularity / use of the SDGs.

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these 13,159 were scholarly articles that had SDG in the title or main text covering a considerable range of disciplines, in descending order: economics (5261), environmental sciences (2928), engineering (2885), business (2241) and public health (2157); and based on a quick scanning of the first 100 these were mainly applications and assessments of one or more SDGs rather than criticisms. Thus, many scholars and professionals are using the SDGs, despite their fundamental shortcomings and purposefully naïve language. Nilsson *et al.* (2016: 320), for example, view the UN's sustainable development agenda as 'a new coherent way of thinking about how issues as diverse as poverty, education and climate change fit together' and emphasise how the SDGs should work as an 'indivisible whole'. Their focus is on operationalising the SDGs (as given, without any scrutiny), highlighting the importance of context and interactions between the different goals and proposing a simple scoring framework to facilitate such an evaluation.

Assimilations have happened in the way societal goals are phrased and in the form of a narrowing of language (reflected in the choice of words, concepts and statements). Examples can be found across the SDGs and the whole 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and many current national, regional and local sustainable development related policies and plans. Certain ways of thinking and arguing are becoming 'normal' and 'accepted'. Koch (2018) observes that 'influential think-tanks [...], policymakers and the wider public all came to see growth as the optimal means by which to provide prosperity for all' (p. 10). Poole (2018) in relation to the SDGs observes that 'values underlying the sustainable management of non-human resources' (p. 57) are conspicuously absent and that 'threats to cultural diversity and alternative forms of economies will remain a blind spot in development discourse' (p. 58) if not explicitly prioritised.

In some recent research, I have been looking at the last decade of UK government practice with respect to language change and content.⁴ An assimilation in language towards economic growth dominated discourses and blind spots through dropping or marginalising concepts, certain values and ways of thinking (if they ever made it onto the political agenda). For example, comparing Defra's action plan for embedding an ecosystem approach (Defra 2007) with the language and concepts used in the cross-departmental Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP) (Defra 2011). Four years, and an election,⁵ later shows a noticeable shift. In the 2007 document 'ecosystem approach', 'environmental limits', 'cumulative impact', 'internalising environmental costs' were key concepts. NEWP, on the other hand, makes no mention of 'ecosystem approach',

4. Carter, C. 2015. 'Assessing the potential for ecosystem-based thinking at the landscape scale focusing on city regions'. Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society on 'Geographies of the Anthropocene', Exeter, 1-4 September 2015.

5. The election resulted in a change from a Labour-led to a Conservative-Liberals Coalition government.

‘threshold’ or ‘tipping point’, but frequently uses ‘natural value’, rather than ‘nature’, and refers to ‘economic growth’ rather than ‘economic development’.

I also use the expression ‘co-produced crises’ in the title of this editorial. Based on many contributions within *Environmental Values* and other journals, evidence is mounting that our social, economic and environmental crises are not so much a matter of being in principle unable to respond but more a matter of what culturally and politically ‘gels’ and how power relationships support, ignore or suppress certain values, evidence and ways of thinking. It is also about how effectively the masses can be kept satisfied, distracted or preoccupied not to challenge the *status quo* and demand a change. In essence, whether out of ignorance, (a feeling of or actual) lack of power, diverted attention or wishful thinking, in one way or another most of us are active contributors, and all are implicated, in the continuing and seemingly worsening environmental and social crises. We co-produced them, be it willingly or unintentionally.

Compared with the 1960s/70s, there is today better awareness amongst younger people about the environmental impacts and problems of excessive consumption. Yet, despite the huge increase in information and ease of connecting socially, there seems to be relatively little that challenges or offers alternatives to the current *modus operandi*. I picture a stunned generation in the headlight of a truck of economic production and consumption with a trailer overflowing with environmental and social challenges. Money has become a goal rather than a means of life; environmental skills and communal practices seem to be declining. On my way to work through a shopping mall (to stay dry when it rains) I often wonder how the people in there would fare if all the shops had gone and we would have to get back to providing the basics for ourselves...

The article by Koch (2018) crystallises many salient points about our current lock-in and normalisation of economic growth. Taking a historical approach and drawing on influential theories by Marx and Bourdieu, Koch explains the naturalisation process of economic growth. This normalises behaviours involving excessive and luxurious material consumption and deeply embeds them within economic, political and cultural realms. Acts of appropriation and symbolic violence are discussed by Koch as part of how the lifestyle of consumerism and accumulating money/capital becomes symbolic of cultural capital. ‘This accelerates the never-ending cycles of definitions of taste by the avant-garde and keep-up strategies by the mainstream’ (Koch 2018, p. 22). This in turn helps explain why we have not seen a fundamental realignment of policy focus away from growth and support for alternative economic thinking and systems. Koch, drawing on Bourdieu’s work, suggests that change requires a significant ‘new’ crisis (to hit certain classes or all of society) to elevate alternative thinking so that it can initiate new political, social and cultural mutations towards a more sustainable development trajectory and new symbolic markers and practices.

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Counter-acting the trend of assimilation in language and economic growth naturalisation are efforts to bring plural values (back) onto the political and decision-making radar, and along with that valuation methods that are capable of capturing and communicating this value plurality. Arias-Arévalo et al. (2018) focus specifically on the valuation of ecosystem services, proposing a taxonomy of plural values, paying attention to social and political contexts and different disciplinary and interdisciplinary contributions. While largely offering a useful resource for practitioners, their paper also highlights the importance of relational values being considered, drawing attention to fundamental and eudaimonistic values; furthermore they hope to limit or avoid blind spots in current ecosystem and biodiversity valuations as for example evident in ‘cherry-picking’ of certain ecosystem services and in focusing merely on monetary valuation.

The apparent lack of considering bio-cultural and linguistic diversity and explicit attention to subsistence-based cultures, heritage and autonomy is a core theme in Poole’s (2018) article. Like Arias-Arévalo et al. (2018), Poole draws attention to relational and intrinsic values and the need to consider indirect drivers and eliciting plural values. Importantly, in her focus on the seventeen SDGs, she highlights that cultural diversity and attention to what drives unsustainable practices and development are seemingly ignored, and that the narrow focus of policy goals further fragments and destroys ecological memory and human-nature connections. Importantly, such ‘deterioration disrupts not just the experience of what once was, but also of what could be’ (Poole 2018, p. 75). She therefore proposes an eighteenth goal, namely to ‘[p]rotect, promote and engage biocultural heritage to reinforce and support sustainable interconnections between diverse societies and their distinct environments’ (p. 74).

Even if practitioners and politicians recognise the importance of the myriad of social-ecological connections, and wish to address environmental and climate crises, there may be resistance from some citizens in some localities. Herrick (2018) considers some of the underlying factors of resistance by citizens to climate change adaptation policies. He approaches the issue by reviewing culture, self-identity and sense of place, and references Schein’s definition of culture as being ‘the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to problems’ (Schein 1984: 3). This helps explain the assimilations and blind spots, but also the ‘lock in’ that we experience due to the dominance of neoliberal policies and the political agendas of economic growth. Herrick argues that people’s reaction to (and potential non-cooperation with) climate change adaptation policies may closely relate to their cultural ties, perception of place and self-in-place. Thus, policy formation requires proper deliberations and ‘empathetic understandings of why people adopt particular attitudes or positions’ (Herrick 2018, p. 85). Abstract quantifications and third party assessments may be less effective than policy-making processes that are centred on conversations and deliberations, making connections, developing

awareness and feelings of empathy. Ultimately, good governance processes should be able to account for uniformity and differences, elicit and debate alternative pathways (and underlying values), balance administrative procedures and policy efficiency with scope for respectful engagement with professional stakeholders and publics and the implicit range of individual and shared values.

How to account for value pluralism and make it work better in national and global assessments and politics is not just a fruitful academic exercise it is crucial if trends such as continuous loss of habitats and wildlife are to be halted and possibly even reversed (Spash and Aslaksen 2015). This issue provides insights into why economic growth has such a tight grip on politicians and society and also offers thoughtful prompts, tested tools and meaningful policy recommendations as to how value plurality can edge its way (back) into overarching policy frameworks (such as the SDGs) and decision-making.

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