

The Futility of Symbolic Environmentalism

By Michael Goldberg, March 9, 2019

While individual lifestyle habits remain a primary focus of environmental policy, unchecked economic growth is straining the planet beyond its physical capacity. Most individuals who possess economic agency remain loyal to the market, and policymakers across the political spectrum remain loyal to preserving the individual's right to consume with abandon. It is thus crucial that any attempt to address the environmental crisis also factor in economic forces.

The United States Department of Commerce reported that [holiday sales were up 4.2% from a year earlier](#). According to some economic research firms, the increase was propelled primarily by an elevated consumer confidence indicative of a humming economy. The ascendant figures presented in the Commerce Department report prompted Macroeconomic Advisors to boost its forecast of fourth-quarter U.S. economic growth to a 2.5% annual rate from 2.1%.

Rising GDPs serve as an inconsequential backdrop for working people in many of the wealthiest Western countries, as their living costs increase in tandem with [stagnating wages](#). Working people hope that economic mobility is a real possibility, but the reality is that for most it only exists in the abstract; as something promised but never grasped. In recent months, the *gilet jaunes*, or “yellow vest” protests have underscored the continued plight of working-class people in the context of a disoriented climate change agenda. Most strikingly, the protests laid bare a sense of disorientation within another movement; a movement comprised of individuals unaware of the extent of their material impotence.

Faith in the efficacy of individual action is a defining characteristic of two overlapping sets of social strata: the richest segment of the population and the self-identified eco-conscious individuals. In [a study](#) published in the June 2017 edition of the journal *Environment and Behavior*, researchers Stephanie Moser and Silke Kleinhüchelkotten sought to uncover the main drivers of environmentally significant behavior. Their investigation focused on the diverging role of a pro-environmental stance under two contradictory research perspectives: intent-oriented research and impact-oriented research.

Intent-oriented research focuses on motivational aspects, such as a self-imposed “green” identity, as the primary drivers for eco-conscious behavior. The research posits that self-identification is a better predictor of eco-conscious behavior than other factors such as socioeconomic status. In contrast, impact-oriented research does not conflate eco-conscious behavior with an individual's overall energy use or carbon footprint.

An impact-oriented framework places its subject's *actual* carbon footprint at the center of its research. The results indicate that various socioeconomic factors, primarily income, are the most precise determinants of an individual's carbon footprint. While [the research](#) confirmed the intent-oriented idea that “environmental self-identity was the strongest and only significant

predictor of pro-environmental behavior,” such behavior was shown to be relatively insignificant with respect to the reduction of one’s actual carbon footprint.

Even though fastidious recycling and earnest acts of water conservation during quotidian personal hygiene routines are worthwhile endeavors, well-intentioned individuals who engage in eco-conscious behavior are often the same people who jet off to an environmental conference or vacation abroad, thus neutralizing the already marginal benefits of their efforts. [2015 research](#) by Oxfam, a nonprofit confederation of independent charitable organizations, found that the richest 10% of the world’s population are responsible for almost half of total lifestyle consumption emissions.

In order to counterbalance the ecologically calamitous effects of an economically privileged lifestyle, individuals would have to make drastic changes to nearly every facet of their daily lives, most notably consumption habits related to diet, transit, and housing. But even if a vast swath of the world’s richest households were to make the necessary sacrifices it would not suffice to ameliorate a climate change effort falling far behind its already modest emissions reduction targets.

Like offering a band-aid for a bullet wound, behavior modifications prove to be little more than effective moral signifiers. Symbolism is out of its depth when faced with the material concerns of climate change.

It is no doubt true that for a social movement to transcend the symbolic, its individual members must work to inaugurate a cultural shift. As individuals take small measures to challenge widespread assumptions and forge new ways of thinking, the window into new ways of living is gradually thrust open. But the effort to spark a cultural shift one individual at a time cannot distract from the more critical fight—corporate accountability.

The futility of lifestyle alterations in combating climate change is further displayed by the failure of political imperatives that target the individual behavior of consumers. Emmanuel Macron’s ineffectual carbon tax was worthy of elimination, not least due to its failure to address the structural forces that inhibit, and on an enormous scale, the drafting and execution of climate policy.

Weighing in on the political strategy behind Macron’s Carbon Tax, Neera Tanden, President of the Center for American Progress, [tweeted](#) “The theory is that people consume less energy intensive products, lowering the sales and ultimately profitability of those companies.” Tanden’s line of reasoning bespeaks an unwillingness to address the ways in which corporations circumvent accountability for ecologically destructive practices. Through well-financed [lobbying campaigns](#) against green infrastructure and innovation investment, corporations effectively hinder the structural reforms necessary for reducing carbon emissions on a global level—the only level that matters in the long run.

For a body politic restrained by the will of the market, summoning electoral support for sweeping environmental policy requires strategic fortitude. Even so, a pro-green stance is an increasingly crucial token of political capital for center-left politicians as right-wing populism proliferates across the West. A dilemma thus becomes unavoidable: politicians must decide between protecting the market or the climate. As these same leaders fail to attacking corporate profit margins, and, by proxy, the world's most ecologically damaging operations, they hone in on the pockets of working people.

While France's highest-income earners—largely urban residents with easy access to mass transportation—may barely notice the carbon tax, rural working-class people dependent on personal vehicles bear the brunt of tax revenue initiatives. Make no mistake, Macron's carbon tax is as much an ill-fated attempt to cut the deficit, concurrent with corporate tax cuts, as an eco-conscious policy.

Touting what is ostensibly [a reform-based agenda](#) upon taking office, there exists a stark disparity between Mr. Macron's campaign promises and his policies. The boyishly charming former investment banker's inventive idea for stimulating the economy involves [tax cuts](#) for France's wealthiest taxpayers and an assault on labor regulations. To date there is little sign of any stimulus effect, though the fruits of Macron's labor do include a €3.2 billion drop in state revenue.

When the deficiencies of the carbon tax's legislative debt are highlighted alongside its concomitant political ramifications, concerned bystanders are left to wonder what tethers politicians to doomed political imperatives.

An [ecological dooms-day scenario](#) might be approaching sooner than originally thought, but rest assured that economic growth will soldier forth. Those who canonize economic growth above all other concerns often justify their fervor by promulgating the idea that growth is the key factor in mitigating poverty. A [paper](#) in the World Economic Review indicates otherwise, finding that “the poorest 60% of the world's people receive only 5% of the additional income generated by rising GDP.” Not only do the spoils of growth fail to reach the people most in need, the planet does not grow in lockstep with GDP.

Renowned environmental activist and Guardian columnist George Monbiot notes that a “global growth rate of 3% means that the size of the world economy [doubles every 24 years](#). This is why environmental crises are accelerating at such a rate. Yet the plan is to ensure that it doubles and doubles again, and keeps doubling in perpetuity.”

Environmentalists should support an approach through which a government could work to address climate change and poverty as conjunctive factors, rather than two crises in isolation from or opposition to one another. In order to promote the technological shifts that large-scale green infrastructure requires, innovation investment must be allocated to modify our antiquated economic model. For this model is precisely what enabled the social conditions that made climate change a matter of inevitability rather than worst case scenario.

Monbiot continues, “We need a different system, rooted not in economic abstractions but in physical realities, that establish the parameters by which we judge its health. We need to build a world in which growth is unnecessary, a world of [private sufficiency and public luxury](#). And we must do it before catastrophe forces our hand.”

Harsh physical realities are seldom experienced behind the fortifications of affluence. The issues facing the planet could not be more pressing, but daily life is *already* rife with austerity induced devastation for the bottom rung of income-earners. Brushing aside the brutality of poverty is symptomatic of a social movement; a social movement comprised of individuals with the luxury of private sufficiency.

In the face of a problem as daunting as climate change, personal action might seem necessary, perhaps even a moral obligation. However, research tells a different story. Individual lifestyle choices are largely [immaterial](#) to pro-green *outcomes*. Furthermore, the green movement’s directed effort to exalt the ecological significance of individual behavior may be deleterious to socioeconomic relations. As of late, affluent eco-conscious people have become less discrete with masking the contempt they possess, but working people have long been acquainted with a scorn that trickles down.

Some [media depictions](#) cast the *gilet jaunes* as ignorant “yokels,” and their demands as irrational pleas for handouts. In reality, though, [many](#) of their stories resemble that of Vincent Picard. A 32-year-old pastry maker from Northern France and self-described “military ecologist,” Picard told the New York Times “I am conscious that we have reached the end of fossil fuels and that we have to modify our habits, [but] you have to continue to live.”

How can governments bridge the gap between pro-climate behavior and pro-climate outcomes? Researchers, activists, and journalists alike make a strong case for [policy that seeks to enhance living standards rather than GDPs](#). The path toward enacting smarter policy begins with a language that digs deeper and projects wider—a vernacular that penetrates symbolic gestures of environmental awareness.

Those who seek to evade accountability may very well be driving a Tesla. It is time for environmentalism to eschew symbolic gestures.

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