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Bjorn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist*: a sociocultural perspective

Bjorn Lomborg's critique of environmentalism has been praised by The Economist as 'right' on its main points and 'just' in its criticism of much green activism, and damned by Scientific American as a 'failure' in its purpose of describing the state of the world. Most of the debate has centred on Lomborg's treatment of environmental issues. But the book is about more than the environment, and its flaws extend beyond his use and interpretation of the data.

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Those who debate the future of the world and the fate of humanity are usually divided into optimists and pessimists. They might better be labelled linear optimists and systemic optimists. Linear optimists believe we are 'on track' to a better future, and that the problems we face are mere 'glitches' we can iron out of the system. Systemic optimists, on the other hand, argue that we are straying ever further off the track and that current problems are symptoms of a deeper condition which must be addressed through whole-system change.

In this debate, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, by Bjorn Lomborg , a Danish statistician, is important for two reasons, one scholarly, the other political. [1] At first glance, at least, it is probably the most comprehensive and convincing case for 'go for growth' linear optimism; and it has appeared at a time when linear optimists, faced with growing opposition to their prescriptions for a better world, need evidence that they are right.

Lomborg targets for criticism what he calls 'the Litany' of environmental doom propounded by environmentalists, some scientists and the media: the global environment is in poor shape and getting worse because of the depletion of natural resources, overpopulation, pollution and species extinction. Instead, he says, energy and other natural resources have become more abundant; food production per person is increasing and fewer people are starving; the rate of global population increase is falling and the world's population will stabilise by about 2100; most forms of pollution are either exaggerated or transient (associated with early industrialisation and best cured by accelerating economic growth, not restricting it); species extinction is occurring but greatly exaggerated; and global warming is unlikely to be devastating and that fixing the problem could be more costly than the problem itself.

Few, if any, would disagree with some of his central claims: human life has improved in many respects; past prophecies of environmental catastrophe have not materialised and some environmental conditions are improving; innovation has allowed us to sidestep or defer resource limits; we should prioritise our actions on the best evidence. None of these points is new, but I accept that the public, the media and those of us (myself included) whose work focuses on the problems of the world, all need reminding occasionally of the gains that have been made.

But Lomborg goes further than this. He states that his book 'attempts to measure the real state of the world': to gauge the most important characteristics - 'the fundamentals' - on 'the best available facts' (p. 3). He concludes that 'mankind's lot has vastly improved in every significant measurable field and that it is likely to continue to do so': '…children born today – in both the industrialised world and developing countries – will live longer and be healthier, they will get more food, a better education, a higher standard of living, more leisure time and far more possibilities – without the global environment being destroyed. And that is a beautiful world.' (pp. 351-2)

The book is flawed in several respects. Environmental scientists (who were not his main target) have strongly criticised his treatment of their subjects. John Rennie, editor-in-chief of *Scientific American*, says many scientists have expressed their frustration at Lomborg's misrepresentations, misinterpretations and misunderstandings. [2] 'In its purpose of describing the real state of the world, the book is a failure', he says. The Union of Concerned Scientists states that its expert reviewers demonstrate Lomborg's analysis is characterised by consistent misuse of data to underestimate environmental and human problems, poor logic and hidden value judgements, and uncritical and selective citation of the literature. [3] Lomborg's book, it says, 'fails to meet basic standards of credible scientific analysis'. *The Economist* has hit back, saying the *Scientific American* critiques, for example, are 'strong on contempt and sneering, but weak on substance'. [4]

Most of the criticism of the book has addressed the issues of truth and accuracy concerning environmental conditions and trends. There are other, conceptual failings. First, Lomborg focuses, like other linear optimists, almost exclusively on material wellbeing. Emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing barely register in his view of progress. And it is in these areas that progress has become most problematic, especially in rich nations.

We all know that human needs go beyond clean air and water, and adequate food, clothing and shelter. As human ecologist Stephen Boyden has said, the universal psychosocial conditions of life conducive to health and wellbeing include an environment and lifestyle that provide a sense of personal involvement, purpose, belonging, responsibility, interest, excitement, challenge, satisfaction, comradeship and love, enjoyment, confidence and security. [5]

It is puzzling that, as individuals, we readily recognise that our relationships with our partners, families, friends and the wider community, our job satisfaction, and our religiosity or spirituality are important to our health and happiness. Yet, when it comes to assessing how well we are faring as a nation or a society, we neglect these qualities. The focus is firmly on the material. We may believe that these things are impossible to measure; or that they are properties of individuals, unshaped by society; or that the

processes by which we pursue material improvement do not affect other areas of our lives. All these suppositions are wrong.

Lomborg hints at the importance of the psychosocial when he discusses the demoralising effect of the Litany (p.330). But environmental fears are not the only – or even the most important – source of worry. They are not the main reason why so many people believe quality of life is not improving. [6,7] These reasons are not distant and detached, but reflect deeply felt concerns about the nature of modern life.

Surveys suggest a deep tension between people's professed values and the lifestyle promoted by modern Western societies. Many are concerned about the greed, excess and materialism they believe drive society, underlie social ills, and threaten their children's future. They yearn for a better balance in their lives, believing that when it comes to things like individual freedom and material abundance, people don't seem 'to know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

We may be tempted to brush aside these concerns as a self-indulgent existential angst, as implied in the expression Lomborg cites (p.331): 'No food, one problem. Much food, many problems'. However, this dismissal of the non-material aspects of life flies in the face of a huge body of psychological knowledge about the importance to human health and wellbeing of qualities such as meaning, belonging, identity, autonomy and hope. [8]

The second conceptual flaw is that Lomborg, again like many other linear optimists, attributes human progress over the past two centuries almost wholly to economic growth and development, overlooking the contribution of many other social changes over this period. While he acknowledges things have gone so well because 'we have worked hard to improve our situation' and 'tackled the problems', he also says that in some circumstances this has happened 'almost automatically' (p. 351). His basic premise this that the world is getting better because we are getting richer and 'we have become richer…primarily because of our fundamental organisation in a market economy'.

His analysis ignores the evidence that knowledge and institutional development, not just economic growth, have played important roles in improving health and opportunity – including in capturing the benefits of growth. [9] Poor societies have achieved remarkable gains in life expectancy and literacy, and reductions in birth rates, through investment in public health and education. Many of the gains in wellbeing over the past 200 years have come from institutional and other reforms that were only brought about by decades of effort by people in the social reform, public health, labour, and women's movements, for example.

As in the case of the environment, the achievements were not those of people who looked around them and said, 'well, things are a lot better than they used to be, and I'm sure they'll continue to get better', as Lomborg does. They were those of people who devoted themselves to changing the attitudes and practices of their day. It required enormous commitment and determination to make things better. There was nothing 'automatic' about it.

Furthermore, Lomborg fails to recognise that economic growth has very different impacts at different stages of development, and in developed nations growth offers diminishing benefits and rising costs. [6,7] There is now strong evidence, for example, that materialistic values, central to a consumer-based economy, not only fail to enhance

wellbeing, but are hostile to it, and are associated with increased dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger and alienation. [10]

Thirdly, Lomborg stresses the importance of prioritising, and doing this on the basis of facts, not fears: in investing in a better world, he says, 'we must prioritise the environment as against better education, more health care, and better infrastructure as well as improving conditions in the Third World' (p.327). For US$2 billion we could reduce oxygen depletion in the Gulf of Mexico and conserve many marine life forms - or save at least 30 million people in the Third World (p. 210).

Yes… but we could also use some of the hundreds of billions of dollars a year that growing obesity costs the world, or the trillions spent on superfluous consumption, to do both. The fallacy of Lomborg's appeal to simple arithmetic in setting global priorities is evident from what is happening in this sphere. The Worldwatch Institute says that, despite a more than 30 percent expansion in global economic output since 1992, foreign aid spending declined from US$69 billion in 1992 to US$53 billion in 2000. [11] Broad geopolitical changes such as the end of the Cold War and ideological shifts, not increased environmental spending, are behind this fall.

'When we fear for our environment', Lomborg says in extending his argument against the Litany, 'we seem easily to fall victim to a short-term feel-good solution which spends money on relatively trifling issues and thus holds back resources from far more important ones' (p. 351). It is spending on such 'trifling' issues that our present economy requires for its growth, and it relies on a massive media, marketing and advertising complex and government policy to ensure it gets this expenditure.

Prioritising should not be limited to public spending. It should extend to private choices as well as public, and to how much we spend in each domain. It must also take into account more than the costs and benefits to GDP, which Lomborg emphasises. GDP is a flawed measure of welfare. [12] As the OECD states in its report, *The Wellbeing of Nations*, wellbeing is more than economic wellbeing which, in turn, is more than what GDP measures, while not all of what GDP measures contributes to wellbeing. [13]

Lomborg's bias in assessing the state of the world is apparent from his long quotation from the historian, Lawrence Stone, on life before growth (p. 55), which he also paraphrases in his final chapter (p.328): 'We are no longer almost chronically ill, our breaths stinking of rotting teeth, with festering sores, eczema, scabs, and suppurating boils'. He uses this to warn against 'a scary idealisation of our past' and as a descriptive benchmark against which to judge progress. It is recited as if it represents the human condition before modern times.

I have travelled through many poor African and Asian countries; the description applies to no communities I saw. Nor does it fit many other societies and times, including indigenous and hunter-gatherer peoples. It is not how animals in the wild are – and humans have been, for most of their history, animals in the wild. Stone's description is of one time (the 18th Century) and place (England) in human history – a period of rapid population growth and large-scale social dislocation as rural people flocked to the cities. We might compare it with this assessment of life in medieval England:

> 'We have more wealth, both personal and national, better technology, and infinitely more skilful ways of preserving and extending our lives. But whether we today display more wisdom or common humanity is an open question, and as we look back to discover how people coped with the daily difficulties of existence

a thousand years ago, we might also consider whether, in all our sophistication, we could meet the challenges of their world with the same fortitude, good humour, and philosophy.'[14]

Lomborg is a statistician: statistics are his stock in trade. But behind the mass of statistics he assembles to argue that there are blue skies ahead – and beyond some of the undoubted truths he expresses - is a simplistic conceptualisation of the nature and sources of human health and wellbeing.

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