



Austerity Ecology & the Collapse-porn Addicts: A defence of growth, progress, industry and stuff

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Economic growth, progress, industry and, erm, stuff have all come in for a sharp kicking from the green left and beyond in recent years. Everyone from black-hoodied Starbucks window-smashers to farmers' market heirloom-tomato-mongers to Prince Charles himself seem to be embracing 'degrowth' and anti-consumerism, which is nothing less than a form of ecological austerity. Meanwhile, the back-to-the-land ideology and aesthetic of locally-woven organic carrot-pants, pathogen-encrusted compost toilets and civilisational collapse is hegemonic.

Yet modernity is not the cause of climate change and the wider biocrisis. It is indeed capitalism that is the source of our environmental woes, but capitalism as a mode of production, not the fuzzy understanding of capitalism of Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben, Derrick Jensen, Paul Kingsnorth and their anarcho-liberal epigones as a sort of globalist corporate malfeasance.

In combative and puckish style, science journalist Leigh Phillips marshals evidence from climate science, ecology, paleoanthropology, agronomy, microbiology, psychology, history, the philosophy of mathematics, and heterodox economics to argue that progressives must rediscover their historic, Promethean ambitions and counter this reactionary neo-Malthusian ideology that not only retards human flourishing, but won't save the planet anyway.

We want to take over the machine and run it rationally, not turn the machine off.

Austerity Ecology & the Collapse-porn Addicts: A defence of growth, progress, industry and stuff Details

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From Reader Review Austerity Ecology & the Collapse-porn Addicts: A defence of growth, progress, industry and stuff for online ebook

PhebeAnn says

This was mostly an enjoyable read despite being a pretty heavy one and a bit repetitive at times. It was certainly thought provoking and I have a lot of admiration for Phillips's audacity and rigour in tearing apart a long-standing shibboleth of the left: de-growthism, which is basically the idea that in order to achieve ecological sustainability and avert impending ecological disaster (such as overpopulation or, most topically, climate change) we have to scale down - to live more simply, to buy and consume less, to move away from technology and progress, and in its most extreme iterations such as the ecoprimitivism of Derek Jensen and others - that we go back to a pre-agrarian way of life.

One-by-one Phillips convincingly uses science and his own rhetoric to tackle the green touchstones of the left: the idea that the planet has a finite limit to how many humans it can support (it does not), the idea that producing less "stuff" would avoid climate change (he argues the opposite is true), that we need to "save the planet" (the planet would be fine without us - it is humans who are in trouble if nothing changes), that small and local are better (often they are actually worse for the environment in a number of ways - not to mention for worker's rights), that GMOs are bad for people and/or the environment (they're not), that we should grow organically (for some crops, yes, but overall, evidence says worse for environment), and that nuclear power is not eco-friendly (he argues it is in fact the cheapest, most sustainable and lowest impact form of energy that would allow us to keep having the "stuff" he defends).

To be clear, in defending "stuff" Phillips is not defending the greed of the rich (he is a socialist after all), but things that help human life, like flush toilets, cars, industrial agriculture, vaccines, and even stuff we might just enjoy. Unlike the puritanism of the Frankfurt school (Adorno etc.) he's not invested in a kind of left-puritanism. In fact, one of his main points is that the original socialism, the socialism of Marx, wanted us to all have more nice things. The problem, argues Phillips, is not production and consumption, but the ownership of the means of production, the distribution of wealth, and a lack of democratic national and international planning. And how would we do this? Phillips demurs that this is beyond the scope of this book, but he makes reference to seizing the means of production and having a socialist revolution. At the very least, he suggests, the powers that be would need to feel there was credible threat of a revolution/mass unrest before they would act to give the people more of what they wanted (e.g. nuclear power) as many western nations did after WWII: "if you do not give the people reform, they are going to give you revolution" - British conservative MP Quentin Hogg in 1943 (150).

As a leftie who is fed up with anti-science, anti-technology, and general woo-nonsense on the left, Phillips' book was a breath of fresh air. However, while the first couple chapters had me laughing-out loud at Phillips' heavy dose of snark, the snarky tone got old fast. While he concedes she has good points on a few things, and his criticisms of her work are valid, I'm not sure he needed to spend quite so much time ragging on Naomi Kline. We get it Leigh Phillips, you don't like her.

While I'm critiquing, the endnoting in this book was sloppy. The numbers in the text don't always match up with the notes in the back and many many facts are stated without any endnote to back them up. Not good news for a book whose argument is so dependent on science. It's not that I doubt your sources, Leigh, but you still need to tell me where to find them.

Of course my ultimate criticism of this book is that while Phillips encourages us all to be optimistic because the end is not neigh, and humans can be saved from climate change (among other scourges) by growth and technology, his optimism depends on his belief that we can/will indeed have a revolution. And how will this happen? Beyond the scope of the book. Part of the reason the de-growthists like Kline are so appealing is that for all Phillips's mockery, they give us tangible things we can do and feel like we are making a difference. We can buy organic. We can ride a bike instead of driving. We can put a solar panel on our roof. Phillips rejects these but offers nothing else instead. How do we make the revolution happen? If Phillips knows, he's not telling us, beyond vague gestures towards joining a trade union.

Mark says

While I agree with the premise and dearly wanted a crisp presentation of his position, the author could not deliver. His writing is so insufferable it detracts the efforts of those making the same proposal.

The word selection, the abuse of adjectives, and the sentence structure make the author sound like the twin brother of that comic store character in the Simpsons.

98% of this book is not relevant and can be skipped. I skipped to the end when the author wrote, "...any bounded lump of anything can be divided infinitely, even while being finite." The statement is philosophically true, but its use was particularly slimy given the context of the argument. It was the final straw, of many tons of hay, that made me decide to close this book forever.

Joshua Smith says

I really liked the premise that scientific advancement, technology, energy use, manufacturing, population growth, etc. are all good things and should be embraced by progressives. I like the idea of pushing back on the Henry David Thoreau left. However, I found this book to be rambling; it seems more like Phillips had a bone to pick with particular individuals.

Sarah Clement says

I agree with the premise of this book. Austerity ecology isn't helping anyone. Some people can have an entirely white, liberal, Western bias when they talk about solutions to the earth's problems. But this book? It is a massive straw man... a parody or a caricature of what environmentalists believe. With no sense that he is essentially taking the equivalent of a message board troll, his examples he seeks to disprove are Derrick Jensen and Naomi Klein. This is not difficult. Environmentalists, as a whole, are not arguing that poor people are consuming too much. They are suggesting that middle class Westerners consume more than they need, and we can learn to live more modestly...no sacrifice of "progress", however defined, required. And this denies nothing to the world's poor. To claim they want poor people to suffer is a sad tactic that the author fails to back with evidence. It would be like a book arguing that atheists are evil because...Hitler. I was really looking for evidence in favour of the cornucopian view, but the book simply fails to deliver any evidence at all. This book is a rant, and despite the reasonableness of its thesis, it fails to prove it.

Peter Aronson says

This is an exciting, and I think, possibly important book. I do not agree with the author in all matters -- for one thing he is an unapologetic Marxist, and I am not. On the other hand, maybe a touch of Marxism is just the antidote a book on this subject needs to counter the current fad for irrational Free Market idolatry.

The great thing is not only is Phillips optimistic without making light of the challenges we face in the environment and elsewhere, but that he has no patience whatsoever for those who want to "solve" these problems by retreating to some imagined better past. Like it or not, the reasonable only way out of our situation is forward. And those who are happily willing to let all those who depend on modern medicine for life and sanity die? The hell with them -- we can do better than that, and we owe it to our humanity to try.

I wish I was as optimistic as the author about the possibility of democratic, international action on these issues, but the current mess of nation states don't seem inclined that way. I suspect that piecemeal solutions are what is possible at least in the short to medium term.

One minor annoyance with the Kindle edition of this book -- at some point the footnotes got out of sync by one, and then by two, and at the end by three.

Quentin says

A funny, well-written and rich polemic that argues for an optimistic view of human progress and against a fatalistic and unstoppable modernity. Instead of saying that we have to reduce industry, give up consumer abundance, and make ourselves smaller, Leigh Phillips says that the only way out of our current political-ecological conundrums (including global warming) is to draw on the socialist tradition of consciously re-purposing capitalist industry towards progressive ends of improving the lives of all.

Phillips finds advocates of de-growth on the left and the right, and takes particular aim at the "back to the land" movement, which he argues is part of a long tradition of turning away from the potential of human progress and ingenuity to solve grand problems. Phillips argues that we should "take over the machine, not turn it off" and collectively use the frankly astonishing powers of industry, machinery, science, and ability to address problems like CO2 rise, clean energy, soil fertility. And Phillips urges a reclamation of the left's insistence on improvement of human living standards--using science and technology to equitably make things better, rather than assuming that the inevitable outcome of technology is to create more waste and more environmental calamity.

The book is rich and broad, and Phillips knows the scientific literature, particularly on CO2 questions. I really appreciated the call for greater collective action around environmental problems, and his fundamentally optimistic view of human potential.

However, as an anthropologist, I got a bit bent out of shape about his longer historical attempts to argue that humans have always been on a progressive course. His uncritical citation of Pinker's "The Better Angels..." was a big red flag for me, especially since anthropologists have vociferously argued that Pinker cherry-

picked his anthropological data in arguing that humans are less violent than they have been historically. Even leaving Pinker aside, Phillips assumptions that pre-state societies are violent and ignorant is ridiculous for anyone who takes even a cursory glance at the archaeological or ethno-historical records of North America, where Indigenous societies actively manipulated their environments to facilitate abundance (with for example controlled burning, complicated agriculture and horticulture systems, and the cultivation of a rich array of medicinal plants), and did so almost exclusively without inter-group violence or substantial, durable inequality. In other words, these are exactly the kinds of societies that Phillips seeks, not ones to run from.

Still, I appreciated Leigh Phillips arguments for democratically planned future that is technologically rich, abundant in energy, tools, and knowledge, and where the results of such planning are greater equality and justice, as well as an environmentally manageable world.

Bob Duke says

It is good to see the deep Greens get taken to task by someone of the left for a change. It is about time environmental issues were taken out of the hands of the smug middle and upper classes for a change.

Kate says

This book is an incredible defense of democratizing technology, progress, production and industry, and gives leftists the vocabulary to talk about how a truly planned economy would relate to the environment. He's dead right about how mainstream left-wing positions on the environment are little more than austerity, and his critiques of neo-Malthusian thought are excellent. It's a rousing defense of eco-modernism, and gives leftists a way to talk about environmental politics that is actually forward thinking and democratic. On the other hand, it's largely written like a forum post and the tone is so grating that I rolled my eyes at least once per chapter. The high rating is a true testament to the substance of his ideas.

Diana says

Leigh Phillips gives the environmental movement a well-deserved kick up the arse. Coming under attack are Naomi Klein, James Howard Kunstler, Ronald Wright, Derrick Jensen, Lierre Keith, Paul Watson, Paul Kingsnorth, Bill McKibben, John Zerzan, John Bellamy Foster, Chris Hedges, Richard Heinberg, James Lovelock, Lester Brown, Jared Diamond, Slavoj Zizek, Martin Heidegger, Tim Flannery, Rob Hopkins, and they're all guilty of being anti-modern, anti-growth, anti-enlightenment and not understanding the nature of the free market economy.

I've read most of the authors on Phillips's rant list and am a former member of the Transition Movement, so I can definitely feel his pain, and I'm grateful to him for taking it upon himself to confront the whole mess, so that we can see where it's going wrong and why.

Close to the hearts of most greens is their pet theory that there was a time in the past when humans lived in harmonious balance with the planet, and that we need to return to that golden age. Naomi Klein wants us to go back to the 1970s, Paul Kingsnorth fancies the 17th Century, Derrick Jensen says we have to go back to the stone age to live without impact on the land. But this is all fantasy according to Phillips. There's no such

thing as balance, the planet is always in flux, always evolving. Humans have always altered their environments. Stories about Avatar-like early human tribes are just Noble Savage fantasies, not borne out by the evidence. According to some historians, even the Native Americans had settled towns, irrigated fields, and burned forests for growing crops.

Another mantra he examines is the idea that small is beautiful. Supposedly, capitalism is bad because it's big, so the solution is to switch to small scale localised production for everything. But this is wrong on a number of levels. First it can often take less energy to produce food where the conditions are favourable and transport it, rather than use excess energy forcing it to grow in the wrong places. Tomatoes grown in sunny Spain and shipped to the UK produce less CO2 than those grown in greenhouses locally. Second, small capitalism is still capitalism and will still lead to exploitation of land and labour. And third, sometimes big is beautiful too. Big Kit energy projects offer serious solutions to peak fossil fuel. Phillips is pro nuclear and pro GM and wants us to embrace technology because it's probably the only way out.

My time in the Transition movement was frustrating due to my total inability to ever find anyone who was interested in saving the planet, ironic as that may sound. Nobody wanted to talk about it. It was just about how can we make nice soup and maybe get a bit of funding for a new kitchen. (And those were the good times, the rest of it was bickering and bullying by the various control freaks who tried to run the place!) I see now how that was informed by the attitudes of the predominantly middle class members. In my experience they were only interested in diet and lifestyle choices. Well intentioned perhaps, but is that really an excuse for ignorance among privileged, well educated people? Phillips points out that these types are lost in fantasies about an idyllic rustic life, a vision to which they attach their own aggressive self-serving morality.

Phillips wants to see a modern socialist economy and he wants us to see that this will mean abundance for everyone not austerity for the poor. We need economic growth, not a steady state, and the public sector has to play a leading role in this. He references the work of Mariana Mazzucato, author of *The Entrepreneurial State* who has shown that the private sector is timid and conservative when it comes to innovation, and that most technological advance comes from the public sector. The internet, GPS, mobile communications, microchips and touchscreens were all government funded projects.

The answers to climate change are there if we want to look for them. It's not about switching off the lights, it's about switching on our brains and learning about history, economics and technology. Socialism is the way forward, says Leigh, so it's about unionising workforces, nationalising essential services, democratising government, raising standards of living and investing in new industry and infrastructure. As a philosophy it's about rediscovering the enlightenment, and having confidence in ourselves and our ability to invent bold and creative new ways of living.

Jared Knowles says

A bit polemic in tone, but thought provoking. Prompted some new thinking on my part and that's one of the highest compliments you can pay a book. The last chapter was not my favorite, but up to that point there's much insight to be gained. I enjoyed the polemic tone and found it charming, but others may not. It was nice to have a distinctive voice while reading about such important topics.

Charlie Kruse says

I liked this a lot. Phillips succinctly breaks down many of the myths that continue to harp the left in the distinction between progress and capitalism. In fighting capitalism, the moralizing tendencies of some on the left to push back against consumption and blame consumers or working class folk for their habits and lifestyles sometimes seems to stifle genuine solidarity, but Phillips points to a new agenda for the left to navigate the future.

That is to say though, that Phillips has quite the tone. It's sardonic and caustic, and even when he may be correct, the way he says it continues to hamper me giving him full support. But a fine view of how to make this full automated luxury communism dream realized.

Simon Copland says

Was tossing up whether to give this book 2 or 3 stars, but I landed on three.

Lots of really good and challenging ideas in this book. I just wish Leigh wrote them in a better way. At times it comes across as very lecturing and arrogant, but then followed up with an apology (I don't want to criticise the people who I've just spent ten pages tearing to shreds). It just could have been a little less righteous and a little more conciliatory.

More importantly though I think Leigh's own philosophy seems confused. He talks about being a left socialist (yay!), but never describes what that actually means for him. This is particularly ironic as one point he criticises Naomi Klein for not defining capitalism in her book (a good criticism), but at the same time never does so in his own work. In doing so we're left with demands that we fight for 'democracy' without any real description of what that means. I think the book would have been much stronger with a little bit more of that work.

Despite this there were some really good and challenging ideas in this work. I think Leigh presents some stuff, particularly around growth and technology, that many in the left needs to hear. Also really easily written, making it a joy to read.

Ted says

Great smackdown on liberals, libertarians, and conservatives. Ultimately it's repetitive and spends time on subtle ad hominem attacks.

Kallia Papadopoulou says

great

C. Townsend says

Overall Phillips book is light, snappy and easy to read. He is one of those rare authors on the left that you can actually enjoy (so very rare today). He takes to task the gangrenous Luddites and neo-Malthusians the way they need to be dissected and then thoroughly refuted from the left quadrant. Using reality, logic and history he does a fairly good job of it. I compare this book with Zubrin's *The Merchants of Despair* (Though I did prefer Zubrin's book to this one). His style is influenced by his having been a journalist for a long time, so the book reads more like an article in a left of center magazine. If you are curious as to what went wrong on the left since the early 1970's, this book will give you the 411.

This is one of those much-needed works to counter the decay that the left has been going through for the last 50 years. Having caused the stoppage of the future by activism, they now denounce the future (secretly regretting it has been cancelled) and now wish to once again go back to the land as they did in their hippie youth. Nihilism, pessimism and all the rest was an ideological bioagent released by the left back then to stop the West's ponderous growth since it was leaving the communist nations in the dust. The common front did their job too well and now in their dotage, suffering with ideological Alzheimer's, they wonder what happened and wish to return to a golden time of their infancy. This is missed by Phillips with all of his hue and cry about the great slowdown of inventiveness in the West. He keeps himself parallel to this line of thought as contact with it would destroy what's left of his belief system.

Deficits in the Book: Phillips does not leave the ideological plantation, for all of his attacks on the green left. The book is peppered with Marxian neologisms and his analysis of all economics is from that view point. Like many he has a totem fetish reactionary preoccupation against the all "evil" neoclassical economics. After the nth reiteration, it got very tedious. He throws in the old Marxian economic fetishism of value for use, surplus value, et al. It is as if he is not aware that Marxian Economics has been refuted constantly over the last 100 years. The labor theory of value is dead, it's not coming back, and any branch from this dead tree planted by Adam Smith is also dead. It's time "we" on the "left" moved on.

Also, he is a planner, plain in simple. He wants democratic planning, as if he is unaware that was what the USSR claimed to be doing all of those years (he seems entirely ignorant of the calculation and knowledge problems brought up by his enemy neoclassical economics). For all of his denouncements of the deep green left for wanting to take us back into a glorified golden past, Phillips lapses into the same soliloquy, only his past is the range from 1947 to 1972 in the US and the west. So, the same train to the past is the foundation and focus of his thought, only he gets off the train sooner than his analithic brethren. His analysis of this time period is also jaundiced and tweaked and he purposely ignores what most ideologically driven authors do, any statistics that cast doubt on the neo-left narrative.

All and all though it is a great read. If you are on the left do not pass it up. If you are on the right, conservative or libertarian I recommend the book *The End Of Doom*.
