

The Perils of Magical Thinking

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Magical thinking is the belief or conviction that one's actions, words, or thoughts can have a causal impact beyond normal cause and effect.

-- Susan Ramharter¹

Most people are eagerly groping for some medium, some way in which to bridge the gap between their morals and their practices.

-- Saul Alinsky²

Transformational global governance of the sort explored in this volume faces two fundamental threats to social and environmental sustainability. One, of course, is the unraveling of the natural world, which grows warmer, less biologically diverse, and increasingly unable to support human prosperity. The other is the systematic diversion of environmentally concerned publics into activities and ways of seeing that undermine our collective capacity to change governance for the better.

This chapter explores this latter dynamic, making the case that “magical thinking” about the aggregation of small efforts into large-scale social change is a dangerous impediment to transformative global governance.³ Such thinking short-circuits the political potency of growing public concern about climate change and other pressing environmental ills. It also reinforces an ugly nest of cynicism, misanthropy, and faith in crisis that can amplify feelings of individual impotence while creating fertile ground for large-scale technocratic solutions. One likely outcome is a phenomenon called “the trinity of despair,” for which anecdotal and emerging survey evidence exists.⁴

This handbook speaks to *collective* change in the global allocation of power and authority, and so it may seem odd that this chapter focuses on action, and the potential for action, among environmentally concerned *individuals*. This orientation is deeply intentional. For if one lesson can be drawn from three decades of work to foster systems of transformative global governance, it is this: The political changes necessary to the restoration of critical environmental

systems will not be driven by government or corporate elites, at least not initially, and certainly not within the dominant set of norms and expectations of today's consumer society. No matter how persuasive the arguments become for business to take the long view,⁵ corporations are wired to maximize short-term returns and externalize costs onto the environment, often via stubbornly opaque global commodity chains that separate production from consumption.⁶ Corporate sustainability efforts are, by and large, either extended exercises in greenwashing or, as University of California professor and former U.S. secretary of labor Robert Reich observes, little more than good business strategies for maintaining profit streams within larger systems of economic expansion.⁷ The propensity, moreover, for governments to discount the future is well documented; future generations and non-human species don't vote or threaten civic unrest.⁸ To top it all off, intrinsic features of the global order make sustained international cooperation difficult, disproportionately empower "blocking" or "laggard" states oppositional to environmental safeguards, and blunting the impact of scientific knowledge on decision-making.⁹

Absent catastrophic crisis, the strategic mobilization of already concerned individuals becomes perhaps the best way to alter these equations of lethargy. In some instances, sustained public pressure for consumer restraint, social and technological innovations for deep sustainability, and a culture of prudence around tipping points of environmental collapse will force elites to lead. In other settings, this pressure will create political cover for leaders to act in ways they know to be right. Either way, the majorities around the world for whom "the environment" is a salient issue¹⁰ must rediscover, in the words of environmental leader Annie Leonard,¹¹ their "citizen muscle" – their capacity, working together as individuals, to drive structural change. This muscle needn't always be globally coordinated nor focused on a particular issue. Evidence of norm cascades, where issue-specific environmental action in one corner of the world spreads across the globe, speaks to the power of sustained local action in a global society.¹² But this muscle must be flexed and toned, in inclusive and generous ways that engage political life rather than flee from it, if new forms of global governance are to emerge.

The good news is that, in most countries of the world, large minorities of the environmentally concerned sufficient to drive change in global governance already exist.¹³ So what are these deeply committed individuals doing? Why aren't they acting on their deeply held concerns? Or, as the question is often framed in the academic literature, what explains the divide between the beliefs and behavior (the so-called values-action gap) of these eco-warriors in waiting?¹⁴ The remainder of the chapter offers one under-explored explanation: As they grope for ways to bridge the gap between their morals and their practice,¹⁵ these eco-individuals do what most distracted, typically overextended and occasionally stressed-out people do all over the planet – they gravitate toward conscious acts and patterned behaviors that are straightforward, practiced by others, affirmed by credible sources, and provide a sense of personal agency in "this crazy, mixed up world."¹⁶ More often than not, these behaviors center on small acts of "responsible," "conscientious," "green," or "environmental" living, in the hope that individual gestures toward planetary health with sum with those from millions of others to drive meaningful change.

In other words, magical thinking.

It is silly to believe that a small cabal of evildoers shapes the thinking of the environmentally concerned in ways that make inevitable the ongoing degradation of natural systems. But if such a cabal existed, it would insidiously promote notions of magical thinking. Making ready for transformational forms of global governance means supplanting this magical thinking with something more powerful and strategic.

Three sections follow. The first describes the rise of magical thinking, while a second unpacks the trinity of despair and shows how faith in a “small-things” approach to social change erodes critical civic capacities. The chapter concludes with suggestions for moving forward, toward thinking and acting that is less magical and more effective in service of transformative global governance.

The Rise of Magical Thinking

I have an “Earth Day” rubbish bin in my office from the early 1970s. It features colorful drawings of environmental protesters with bell-bottoms, full heads of hair, and women in knee-high boots shaking signs with phrases that resonate with my own recollection of the time: “This is where it’s at: fight pollution,” “Pollution is a bummer,” “Don’t Cop Out – Get Active,” and “Fight the System – Save the Earth.” One young man is waving a large Earth-Day flag. Everyone looks to be marching off to protest. The bins sits near my desk in reminder of a time when citizen engagement and political mobilization was the natural, most obvious way to act on one’s concerns about environmental abuse.

Whenever I bring the rubbish bin into my environmental-studies seminars, my current and recent students – undergraduates from top liberal arts colleges in the United States, and undergraduates at a liberal arts college in Singapore – are alternately amused and flummoxed by the scene it depicts. With few exceptions, students characterize their stylized peers from 1970 as idealistic, naïve, and counterproductive. My pupils wonder aloud if “all that protesting” really made a difference, forgetting (for instance) the important environmental laws that were adopted in the United States in the early 1970s under Richard Nixon, a president not known for his progressive leanings.¹⁷

But, increasingly, more is on their mind than the alleged futility of public protest. Charges of hypocrisy also fly, often with an intensity that suggests deeper anxieties at work. Those protesters undoubtedly drove cars, ate meat, and embraced air travel, say my students. How can these activists be taken seriously when they don’t fully practice their preaching?¹⁸ Such stark alarm about the environmental purity of one’s own lifestyle quickly becomes disabling – how can any of us plead innocent to all acts of environmental impact? – and echoes Paul Loeb’s 1980s research on the “the perfect standard” among politically disempowered college students, in which students asserted their inability to engage controversial issues until

they had *complete* information – an impossibly perfect and utterly immobilizing threshold for action.¹⁹

While this “perfect standard” is familiar, its expression within mainstream environmentalism around consumption and lifestyle choice is something new. It inexorably drives classroom and larger public conversation toward the fundamental requirement of living “environmentally” if one wishes to make a difference without being two-faced – with the “acting” best occurring in the realm of personal consumption. Buy green and live lean in order to influence business decisions and persuade, by example, others to do the same. The alternative, understood as noisy, confrontational protest, is too risky. After all, this thinking goes, a tsunami of public outrage is perhaps the only way to alter dominant institutions and realign values, both necessary to save the planet. Generating widespread support for a sustainable world won’t be helped by protests or sharp statements that make off-putting claims or risk alienating the super-majorities upon which fundamental change is thought to depend.²⁰ It is vastly preferable to walk one’s talk, lead by example, and reward “green” companies with one’s purchases, all the while hoping for the best.

It is understandable that my students and so many like them see the world this way. It would be surprising if they did not. Everyday life is awash with messaging that we “save the world” and our own environmental souls one small act at a time. So awash, in fact, that it is hard to notice until one actually looks.

On a recent trip from Singapore to Hong Kong I sought to tally the number of times and ways I was told that I should address environmental problems like climate change via small acts that would aggregate with the good deeds of others. I gave up after counting 23 separate instances in the first five hours of my trip. The recycling bins in my apartment building implore me to recycle to save the world. My taxi featured a placard explaining that by using a little less water I’d be joining thousands of others to generate real impact. A message on the seat-back screen during my flight flashed “A simple act can save the planet – Please lower your window shade before leaving the aircraft.” And, of course, there were not one but three reminders in my hotel room that I could stop climate change if I reused my towels and acceded to the intermittent change of bed linens. The list goes on in surely familiar ways. This messaging isn’t just ubiquitous – it stands largely unopposed across the everyday landscape. No rival assertions emerge with any consistent force about how one best translates their concern for the planet into meaningful action.

Of course, faith in the spontaneous aggregation of good deeds isn’t new to environmental thinking. The voluntary simplicity movement, which valorizes low-consumption simple living, was an especially effective carrier in the 1970s and early 80s of the notion that we change the world one individual lifestyle choice at a time.²¹ The appropriate technology movement, flourishing during roughly the same period, advanced a similar sensibility. Its “Cuisinart theory of social change” (if everyone owned a Cuisinart we’d all become great home chefs) asserted that fundamental social change could be achieved by individual adoption of small-scale,

environmentally benign technologies. To drive fossil-fuel companies out of business, or to at least bring them to the point of political malleability, bolt a solar collector to your roof, persuade your neighbor to do the same, and wait for the social power of aggregation to assert itself.²²

Both movements were largely swept aside by the rise of neo-liberalism in the early 1980s. As political theorist Langdon Winner poignantly observed with reference to the appropriate technologists, “they were lovely visionaries, naïve about the forces that confronted them.”²³ As important as living a simple life or being mindful of the technological fabric can be, focusing only on these elements ultimately constitutes a flight from power rather than engagement with it.

One might have expected an alternative ideology to emerge within mainstream environmentalism to fill the void, but this was not to be. Instead, three self-reinforcing elements produced a deepening of magical thinking even as its shortcomings were becoming more evident. One was escalating public concern over global environmental ills. The sudden and starkly visual discovery of the ozone hole in 1983 focused and crystalized such apprehension; events culminating in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro gave it full form. But what was one to do with all this worry? A singularly convivial venue for individual action was the marketplace – it was and remains a mythically apolitical venue where the rules are clear, consumers are in control, and businesses can be rewarded or punished, daily and easily, via purchasing decisions.

Another driver was the unprecedented growth of support for mainstream environmental groups like the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and the World Wildlife Fund.²⁴ These groups benefitted from swelling public anxiety about environmental degradation and the perceived lack of government action. But as the membership rolls of environmental organizations grew, unexpected challenges emerged. Most groups were coping with a political backlash against legislative victories in the 1970s and were resisting, with limited success, the rollback of key environmental policies. Although the lobbying work of these environmental organizations was essential to the preservation of key environmental initiatives, it made for poor copy in the newsletters for members. “We managed to keep environmental policy X or program Y from being completely gutted” isn’t the sort of inspirational news that the membership department uses to attract support and demonstrate organizational vitality.

A different path to desirable environmental outcomes was necessary – something that would draw members into hopeful action distant from the toxic political environment. That path emerged in the form of new environmental campaigns, launched in the mid-1980s, that emphasized personal responsibility over collective political action. The argument: If you care about the environment but are frustrated with governmental short-sightedness, corporate malfeasance, and a broken political system, you still can make a difference through the unstoppable aggregation of small acts of ecological living. Lists of “easy ways to save the planet” proliferated, and *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* became a bestseller.²⁵ Some environmental groups surely hoped that increased green consumption would spawn

renewed environmental activism. Others were simply trying to buy time until the political landscape shifted in their favor.

The mid-1980s collapse of corporate profits was the third element in the mix. As companies scrambled to grow markets and market share, “green marketing” burst onto the scene. With increasing sophistication punctuated by moments of recalibration, companies created and promoted an array of so-called ecological products propelled by a story of consumer-driven environmental improvement.²⁶ “Buying green” and “conscientious consumption” took off like few marketing initiatives before or since, for good reason: These strategies simultaneously met the needs of business, environmental groups,²⁷ and a public in desperate search of agency.

These three elements, converging amidst a neo-liberal drift toward the primacy of individual and market, have done great damage to the environmental imagination.²⁸ If a rubbish bin portraying environmental action were produced and marketed today, it would show environmentally minded shoppers in a checkout line, or perhaps concerned environmentalists installing energy- and water-saving devices in their residences. It would be purchased in droves by anxious, conscientious, environmentally informed individuals looking to signal the urgency of climate change and other forms of biospheric assault. The message that this contemporary rubbish bin would send – that we are at our best as agents of change when we modify our lifestyles and shift our consumption, battling an enervating sense of hypocrisy all the while – undermines any transformative governance for sustainability, for reasons laid bare in the next section.

The Trinity of Despair

Even if the idea of saving the planet one small act at a time is naïve, the problem isn’t with the good deeds themselves. Living simply or doing one’s best to consume environmentally friendly products is a pillar of mindful living. These everyday acts keep us present to the urgency of problems like climate change and help people act with grace in the midst of the biological unravelling of the planet.²⁹ It is important that you help your elderly neighbor across the street when you’re both standing on the corner. Doing so cultivates inner decency and community connection. Just don’t think that your good deed will solve the pension crisis.

Not everyone accepts this argument. Many believe that small acts of green living can be inviting on-ramps to the challenging collective work of redistributing power and reforming institutions; persuading one’s neighbor to buy organic food today could turn her into a food activist tomorrow.³⁰ Since we all know how to be consumers, what better way to draw people into environmental activism than to engage them via through small, simple acts of enlightened consumption?

Alas, considerable research around this question yields little empirical evidence that individual acts of environmental stewardship foster meaningful political activity around

environmental issues.³¹ The research literature instead demonstrates complex interrelationships between simple living and green consumption on the one hand, and community environmental activism or collective political struggle on the other. People troubled by biodiversity loss may purchase expensive rainforest-friendly coffee, and view it as an important act – but they will also work hard with others for collective initiatives to protect biodiversity. Again and again, the causal arrows are muddied; buying coffee (to further push this example) doesn't directly produce activism around biodiversity policy, but nor does personal advocacy for good government policy drive one toward the pricey bags of coffee at the supermarket. And in those few studies where the causal arrows can be credibly teased out, conventional forms of green consumption do not appear to activate, on their own, Annie Leonard's citizen muscle.³²

It might be tolerable if green consumption as a primary individual activity was merely non-mobilizing. There arises the vexing possibility, however, that it instead is de-mobilizing. As psychology professor Katherine Lacasse shows in her comprehensive review of the literature, many researchers observe an erosion of pro-environmental behaviors, including citizen mobilization, when consumption choices become the dominant mechanism for living one's concern for the environment. Imagine, for example, a well-intentioned environmentalist recycling their rubbish, grilling their organic vegetables on their sustainably fueled charcoal grill, then putting their feet up on their sustainably sourced wooden stool and congratulating themselves for doing their bit for the planet.³³ For many scholars, this scenario isn't far-fetched – faith in the magical aggregation of environmental good deeds can and does impede more muscular citizen responses.³⁴ Since green consumption and simple living cannot, on their own, meaningfully address our most pressing environmental ills – government policies must also change, and they're not for sale at the check-out counter³⁵ – the prospect of millions of deeply committed but politically complacent eco-consumers is unsettling, especially if one hopes for transformational governance driven by varied manifestations of citizen restiveness.³⁶

And yet, the notion that green living might distract from citizen action remains contested. Some scholars and activists, especially those thinking about voluntary simplicity, worry that a “consumer versus citizen” lens overlooks important complexities of human behavior and social change. They observe that simple-living enthusiasts frequently understand their consumption choices as political acts that are as strategic as more familiar forms of citizen mobilization.³⁷ Essays like this one that suggest that consumeristic environmental behavior based in magical thinking lacks political salience thus appear too simplistic. What about the communicative aspects of simple acts, in which small actions signal deep eco-commitments to others, laying the foundation for shifting social norms? Or the education that occurs when individuals reflect with others about their lifestyle choices? Wouldn't the resulting growth in awareness foster action in more conventionally political ways?³⁸ Isn't, then, the “distraction-from-citizen-engagement” argument misplaced?

As important as these objections are, they overlook a more devastating effect. Rather than merely *distracting* us from our obligations and capacities as citizens, naïve assumptions about the power of aggregation may fundamentally *disable* our ability to act effectively should

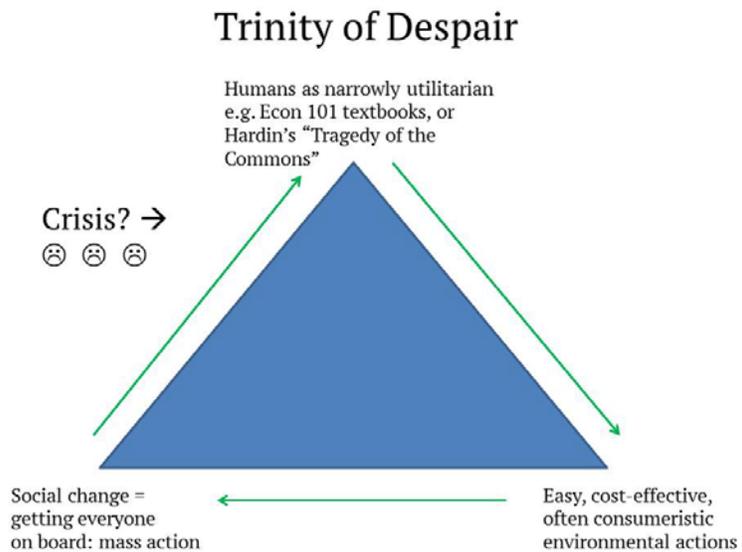
we decide to move beyond our shopping carts and kitchen shelves stocked with organic foods. The forces at work are presented here as “the trinity of despair,”³⁹ represented in the nearby diagram.

For the next several paragraphs, think of the trinity of despair (TOD) as a thought experiment about how magical thinking might incapacitate citizen action.

The TOD begins at the apex of the triangle, with the belief that humans are rational actors with short time-horizons who focus on their own prosperity and security. We are, in short, those *homo economicus* creatures described in economics courses, or environmental science textbooks that commonly analyze environmental degradation through a “tragedy of the commons” lens⁴⁰ that reifies the same *homo*

economicus caricature. When pundits assert that “people will never sacrifice” on behalf of one environmental initiative or another, this view of human nature is on full display. It seems to them to be self-evident: We are selfish and utilitarian creatures. Oddly out of sync with experience – we in fact sacrifice daily, voluntarily and otherwise, for family, the nation, our god, team-mates, our employer, or some future self – this “they’ll never sacrifice” narrative is nevertheless deeply embedded in contemporary conversation about climate change and other forms of environmental decline.⁴¹

If humans are short-sighted and sacrifice averse, then initiatives grounded in easy, cost-effective, “win-win” actions become the logical way to engage individuals around environmental issues (lower right corner of the TOD). There exist three major ways to entice the utilitarian, rationally calculating masses to join in the work of “saving the planet:” (i) encourage them to adopt energy- and water-efficient technologies that generate net financial benefits (e.g. new light bulbs); (ii) promote easy behavior changes that produce tangible personal benefits (e.g. eating more vegetables and less meat for health reasons, or biking to work for the exercise); and (iii) market easy or inexpensive lifestyle changes or consumer products that signal status-enhancing commitment to the environment (e.g. recycling or consciously buying products made of recycled materials), thus conferring social benefits. Each is tailor-made for our rational, sacrifice-allergic actors – and, not surprisingly, these are exactly the kinds of measures promoted in the top “easy ways to save the world” lists and books.⁴²



Conspicuously absent are actions that are logistically complicated, expensive, or intellectually taxing, which is no surprise given the framing assumptions about who we are as a species. The social-change logic behind these “save the world” lists isn’t surprising either, and it goes something like this: If small groups of individuals begin adopting some set of these measures, others will notice and jump on board. As this process builds, even more people will join in, fueled by the dissemination of information about the sorry state of the planet. As majorities climb aboard the bandwagon, the cumulative environmental impact of these small acts will become apparent – and this will lead to further adoption of these behaviors by those initially slow to change. Inspired by evidence of real impact of individual consumer action, more of us will become politically active around environmental issues, and policymakers will feel the pressure. Major corporations will too, since consumers will be voting *en masse* with their purchases for clean and green products. The outcome: A more sustainable and just planet, attained by small and easy changes that grew from insignificance into an intoxicating force for good.

The *sine qua non* of this process is mass participation. The math of magical thinking and naïve aggregation is inescapable: Small, individual actions morph into political potency only if everyone, or nearly everyone, participates. Ubiquitous advertisements for environmental action that say “If *everyone* recycled their phone book, we’d save 10,000 trees a year” or “If *we all* bought LED lights, five coal-fired power plants would close” acknowledge as much. Corporations won’t change their practices unless they see a significant change in buying patterns. Governments won’t alter policy unless most people shift from “ignorant consumer” to “eco-shopper.” My neighbor won’t start composting until all his neighbors do, at which point he’ll awkwardly realize that he’s the odd man out. All of the support structures associated with this process – more environmental education, savvy information campaigns, new labeling systems that communicate the environmental consequences of individual choice – are geared toward this “get everyone on board” goal. Social change won’t happen without it.

This curious notion of social change, revolving as it does around the centrality of super-majority support before change can occur (see lower left corner of the TOD) – isn’t just empirically incorrect. It also lacerates the citizen muscle, in part by obscuring opportunities for mobilization and reform hiding in plain sight. For instance, instead of celebrating that 15 – 20% of Americans who regularly engage in determined “green” behavior (a remarkable level, given the structural incentives in the U.S to be anything but environmentally sensitive), and strategizing about how to turbocharge the political salience of this minority, those ensnared by the TOD obsess about the absent 80 – 85% as evidence of failure, and redouble their efforts to recruit the masses to their cause. In doing so, advocates forget their history lessons about social change. During critical moments of political transformation, majorities are either disengaged or discomfited by the prospect of change. Abolition, women’s suffrage, economic liberalism, gay marriage, the U.S. civil rights movement, the banning of ozone-destroying CFCs, the impact of the so-called alt-right – in each of these instances and others like them, determined and strategic minorities made change happen. Mass acceptance came only later or, at times, not at all.

The “everyone on board” catechism of change also spawns an ineffective politics of guilt. When those within the TOD see that majorities refusing to jump on board, they respond with more information, flashier messaging, and a stronger appeal to individual self-interest. When these measures fail to deliver – and they always fail, since super-majority participation is a fantasy, and appeals to immediate self-interest are paradoxically counterproductive⁴³ – guilt, blame, and fear (a trinity of despair all its own) become the next prods to action. The TOD may be the most powerful explanation for why the environmental movement, which at one time celebrated the human spirit and the potential of the possible, has morphed into something less grand, less inspiring, and ultimately less effective.

And then there is the “despair” piece of the trinity of despair. Individuals entangled by the TOD easily settle on a view of humans as inherently short-sighted and selfish. How else, they ask, can one explain the absence of super-majority adoption of key tenets of green living? The planet, after all, is at stake, and the reforms being asked of people are so small to the point of being almost inconsequential. From here, it is a short hop to the mantra that humans are a corrupt species that value the wrong things and act accordingly – an evolutionary dead-end bent on their own destruction. Change will only come through crisis: deep, broad, devastating, Old Testament sort of stuff. In this way the TOD loops back on itself, reinforcing the dim view of humans that jump-started the cycle.

The TOD is a plausible explanation for much of the cynicism, misanthropy, and faith in crisis common among the environmentally concerned. It conforms to anecdotal evidence shared by environmental-studies students and professors, and many environmental activists. To be sure, the TOD isn’t the only dynamic of disempowerment insinuating contemporary strands of environmentalism, but it is among those most worthy of inspection and opposition because of its likely ubiquity, a consequence of its tight connection to everyday understandings of responsible environmental action.

Empirical investigation of the trinity of despair suggests that its reach and impact may be more pernicious than expected. Exploratory survey work in 2009-10 by environmental-studies researcher Samuel Rigotti identified several indicators of the TOD operating among undergraduate students committed to environmental sustainability, including preoccupation with individual action, an unflattering view of human nature, and a profound faith in crisis.⁴⁴ A three-year research project inspired by Rigotti’s early reconnaissance, completing in 2018, offers more jarring evidence of the TOD in everyday life.⁴⁵ This project surveyed undergraduates studying the environment, with the view that these students would be especially representative of the “environmentally concerned” ripe for political mobilization. More than 1,300 students at 73 randomly selected U.S. colleges and universities were queried.

The picture emerging from these 1,300+ students is disturbing. Debilitating assumptions about human nature and social change, often expressed as natural truths, abound. For instance, “consumers” are the most frequently identified actor capable of generating meaningful social change (with ‘voters,’ ‘business,’ ‘policymakers,’ ‘scientists,’ and others offered as choices

Additionally, super-majorities of the sample, exceeding 80% of all respondents, characterize small and easy environmental measures as the central mechanism for marshalling public support (“green consumption as an on-ramp), blame inherent deficiencies in human nature for our environmental ills (“people only respond to what is immediately best for them”), and identify crisis as the singular driver of important change (“nothing changes without a crisis”).

More than four-fifths of the sample consistently confess to cynicism and despair about the future, and no wonder. When asked to speculate about how many Americans must be deeply and fully supportive of an environmental policy initiative to initiate effective change, *less than one in ten* of these U.S. college students selected “20% or less of the American population.” About half of the respondents instead insisted that a majority of Americans needed to be fully committed to an agenda of sustainability before meaningful change could occur. And many students, more than a quarter of the sample, expressed unshakeable conviction that 70, 80, or even 90% of their fellow citizens had to be convinced of planetary ruin before a new politics of planetary health would emerge.

The notion that a population-wide conversion to ecological thinking is essential to political transformation is deeply disabling. Setting an impossibly high bar for public commitment around an emaciated theory of social change makes the environmentally committed student highly vulnerable to cynicism, misanthropy, despair, and deep feelings of futility. For well-meaning individuals caught up in this way of seeing, the only way to a better world becomes a goldilocks crisis, a crisis not so large as to destroy civilizational foundations but not something so small as to go unnoticed. From this perch, the best one can do in the meantime is to live an ecological lifestyle, hunker down, and hope for the best.

These early studies report on well-informed college students who approach their education with a deep desire to improve the planet. If elements of the trinity of despair are entrenched in this sliver of the environmentally concerned, it seems likely that the TOD is operating even more powerfully among other sub-populations seeking transformative global governance.

Hiding in Plain Sight

Magical thinking and the TOD it spawns makes new forms of global governance almost impossible to attain. If the TOD is more than a thought experiment – if it indeed captures conditions on the ground – then those hoping to transform the allocation of power and authority across the planet will benefit from puncturing the attitudes and assumptions that keep this trinity alive. I count myself among those who hope for new forms of governance, and who are disturbed by withered understandings of social change and human agency inherent in magical thinking. In that spirit I employ “we” and “our” for these concluding paragraphs.

The above analysis suggests, first and foremost, that we must reverse the cooptation of environmental movements – climate change, energy decarbonization, biodiversity, waste reduction, safe food, and the like – by narratives that privilege small and easy. We cannot continue to accept the marketing of magical-thinking solutions to environmental ills. These so-called solutions are more than distractions; they are viruses carrying immobilizing notions of social change and human nature. By trivializing the challenges before us they spread lowered expectations about what our fellow citizens can be called upon to do to help avert environmental catastrophe. Too often, these resulting appeals to short-term self-interest prime the very behaviors and attitudes that make lasting progress to sustainability impossible.⁴⁶

Instead of condoning, implicitly or otherwise, small and easy consumer initiatives for the planet, our task becomes that of creating similarly accessible entry points into meaningful citizen support for transformative governance. There is nothing wrong with the idea of starting people off with small and easy activities. Time behind the wheel with a driving instructor is advisable before planning a career as a race-car driver. But these easy entry points must be congruent with the more difficult tasks ahead, and easy lifestyle changes don't generally cultivate the skills and temperament for more ambitious collaborative social change.⁴⁷ Buying a more efficient lightbulb is a great thing to do, but it can't make you more confident about your role as a citizen, conventionally defined. It makes you more comfortable as a consumer drawn to notions of naïve aggregation.

To acclimate people to the tasks of citizenry we need a “buy a lightbulb and save the world” equivalent for more robust environmental citizenship. Former U.S. President Obama's first campaign for President was on to something in those precincts in Pennsylvania where I was living in 2008. Potential volunteers were invited to observe the evening ritual of staffers making phone calls to urge voters to become involved in the campaign. At one point, observers were invited, in ways that seemed to be spontaneous (but weren't) to listen in on a call, with the permission of the person being called. Likely supporters of Obama were targeted for these calls, resulting in typically pleasant and affirming conversations. Observers were then invited to make a call of their own, with their mentor listening in. Soon the “I thought I was only observing” individuals were diving into a set of phone calls on their own and, with the training wheels off, signing up for more ambitious organizing activities. Start easy then move forward. Congruency is key, within affirming community.

What might these “on-ramps”⁴⁸ to robust and rewarding citizen action look like for individuals who worry deeply about the environment but are instead funneled to simple living and green consumption? Tackling this question at varying levels of scale, from the local to the supranational, must now become the central project for those seeking transformative environmental governance. It isn't immediately apparent what the Obama-campaign equivalent would be for transformative global governance – that is the exciting project ahead. But we will never get to this project, not fully and with force, until we recognize the deep insufficiency of guilt and fear as prods for public involvement, and the inevitable ascendancy of both if we continue to accept “simple acts/get everyone on board” approaches to environmental restoration.

“It isn’t enough,” observed sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues, “to exhort people to participate. . . We must build institutions that make participation possible, rewarding, and challenging.”⁴⁹

For Bellah, institutions are patterned ways of doing things – ways of approaching our lives, individually and collectively, that feel natural and normal. Many of these ways are wonderfully explored elsewhere in this volume, and many more are hiding in plain sight, as are sufficiently large minorities of the overall population necessary to effect fundamental change. But the ability to see and act by those who care deeply about environmental degradation remains hobbled by a preoccupation with naïve aggregation. Turning this disabling preoccupation in more fruitful directions, away from the trinity of despair, must now rise to the top of our agenda.

Endnotes

¹ Ramharter, Susanne, “The Hogwart’s School of Management,” *Journal for Social Era Knowledge*, August 2014.

² Alinsky, Saul David. *Reveille for radicals*. Vintage, 1989.

³ Thanks to Simon Nicholson for this framing of “magical thinking.”

⁴ Maniates, M. (2016). “Make way for hope: a contrarian view,” in *A new earth politics*, Eds. Nicholson, S. and Jinnah, S., MIT Press, pp. 135-154.

⁵ e.g. Hawken, Paul. *Ecology of commerce: how business can save the planet*. HarperBusiness, 1993.

⁶ This ‘distancing’ of production decisions and impacts from the final point of consumption is among the most pernicious drivers of mal-consumption and overconsumption. See, for example, Clapp, J., 2002. The distancing of waste: Overconsumption in a global economy. *Confronting consumption*, pp.155-176.

⁷ Reich, R.B., 2008. *Supercapitalism: The transformation of business, democracy, and everyday life*. Vintage.

⁸ Levin, Kelly, Benjamin Cashore, Steven Bernstein, and Graeme Auld. "Overcoming the tragedy of super wicked problems: constraining our future selves to ameliorate global climate change." *Policy sciences* 45, no. 2 (2012): 123-152.

⁹ Hempel, Lamont C. *Environmental governance: The global challenge*. Island Press, 1996.

¹⁰ e.g. Dunlap, Riley E., and Richard York. "The globalization of environmental concern." *Comparative Environmental Politics: Theory, Practice, and Prospects* (2012): 89-112.

¹¹ Leonard, A., 2010. *The story of stuff: How our obsession with stuff is trashing the planet, our communities, and our health-and a vision for change*. Simon and Schuster.

¹² Clapp, Jennifer, and Linda Swanston. "Doing away with plastic shopping bags: international patterns of norm emergence and policy implementation." *Environmental politics* 18, no. 3 (2009): 315-332.

¹³ See, for example, Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Roser-Renouf, C., Rosenthal, S., Cutler, M., & Kotcher, J., 2017. *Climate change in the American mind: October 2017*. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, available at <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Climate-Change-American-Mind-October-2017.pdf>. This latest iteration (as of this writing) of climate-change views in the United States – the ‘bad boy’ of international climate negotiations – reports that 22% of Americans (with an error of +/- 3% at with 95% confidence) are “deeply worried” about climate change, with another 42% reporting as “somewhat worried.” Historical leaders of the successful social movements in the past – abolition, women’s suffrage, India’s struggle for independence, the U.S. civil rights movement, and efforts to legalize same-sex marriage, to name a few – would have celebrated this level of public commitment and concern.

¹⁴ An example that draws, in part, on the immediately preceding citation is Hornsey, Matthew J., Emily A. Harris, Paul G. Bain, and Kelly S. Fielding. "Meta-analyses of the determinants and outcomes of belief in climate change." *Nature Climate Change* 6, no. 6 (2016): 622.

¹⁵ To invoke Alinsky from the beginning of this chapter

¹⁶ As Rick said to Ilsa in the closing scene to the movie *Casablanca*

¹⁷ My students today are not unlike their parents who may have attended college in the late 1980s. See, for instance, Klein, J., 1990. *Letter to the Next Generation* (Documentary). New Day Films.

¹⁸ Protesters from the 1970s aren’t the only ones subject to this gaze. Attari, Shahzeen Z., David H. Krantz, and Elke U. Weber. "Statements about climate researchers’ carbon footprints affect their credibility and the impact of their advice." *Climatic Change* 138, no. 1-2 (2016): 325-338.

¹⁹ Loeb, Paul Rogat., 1995. *Generation at the crossroads: Apathy and action on the American campus*. Rutgers University Press.

²⁰ In a recently completed multi-year survey of U.S. undergraduates in environmental science and studies, more than 45% of 1,300 respondents claimed that 60% or more of Americans must be fully committed to and mobilized around an environmental issue before meaningful change can occur. Another 17% put the proportion at 20 – 40% of the population. See endnotes 43 and 44, and associated text in the chapter.

²¹ Maniates, Michael. "In search of consumptive resistance: The voluntary simplicity movement." *Confronting consumption* (2002): 199-235. For one example from an abundance of “small n” anthropological studies, see Ballantine, P. W., & Creery, S., 2010. The consumption and disposition behaviour of voluntary simplifiers. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 9(1), 45-56.

²² The “Cuisinart theory of social change” comes from political theorist Langdon Winner. See Winner, L., 1986. Building the better mousetrap. *The Whale and the Reactor: A search for limits in an age of high technology*, 61-84. See, more recently, Meyer, J. M. (2015). *Engaging the Everyday: Environmental Social Criticism and the Resonance Dilemma*. MIT Press.

²³ Winner, *ibid.*

²⁴ Bosso, C. J., 2005. *Environment, Inc: from grassroots to beltway*. University Press of Kansas.

²⁵ The Earthworks Group, 1989. *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*. Bathroom Readers Press.

²⁶ See, for example, Peattie, K., & Crane, A. (2005). Green marketing: legend, myth, farce or prophesy? *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 8(4), 357-370; Peattie, K. (2001). Towards sustainability: the third age of green marketing. *The Marketing Review*, 2(2), 129-146; or Crane, A. (2000). Facing the backlash: green marketing and strategic reorientation in the 1990s. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 8(3), 277-296.

²⁷ Mendleson, N., & Polonsky, M. J. (1995). Using strategic alliances to develop credible green marketing. *Journal of consumer marketing*, 12(2), 4-18.

²⁸ Lukacs, Martin. "Neoliberalism Has Conned Us into Fighting Climate Change as Individuals." *The Guardian* (2017).

²⁹ e.g. Litfin, K. T. (2014). *Ecovillages: Lessons for sustainable community*. John Wiley & Sons.

³⁰ e.g. Lorenzen, J. A. (2014). Convincing people to go green: managing strategic action by minimising political talk. *Environmental Politics*, 23(3), 454-472.

³¹ By “meaningful” I mean sustained engagement with others to alter in conscious and explicit ways prevailing social rules, policies, norms, and/or patterned ways of doing things operating at different scales of human activity, from the local to the global. This characterization is consistent with that found in, for instance, Steinberg, P. F. (2015). *Who Rules the Earth?: How Social Rules Shape Our Planet and Our Lives*. Oxford University Press; or Bellah, R. N., et al. (1992). *The good society*. Vintage. Because I do not consider writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper or speaking occasionally with a friend about environmental issues to constitute “meaningful” political action (though these are certainly laudable activities with potential political effect), I am at odds with the argument that green consumption does, in fact, lead to political activity. This argument is offered by, for example, Willis, M. M., & Schor, J. B. (2012). Does changing a light bulb lead to changing the world? Political action and the conscious consumer. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 160-190.

³² There is a large literature on this point. See, for example, Johnston, J. (2008). The citizen-consumer hybrid: ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market. *Theory and Society*, 37(3), 229-270; or Webb, J. (2012). Climate change and society: the chimera of behaviour change technologies. *Sociology*, 0038038511419196. This raises the intriguing, underexplored question about what kinds of small and easy lifestyle actions, situated in what sorts of contexts, might be politically activating. See, for example, Seyfang, G. (2006). Ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption: Examining local organic food networks. *Journal of rural studies*, 22(4), 383-395. For some ideas about “catalytic” or “wedge” behaviors around green consumption, see Thøgersen, J., & Noblet, C. (2012). Does green consumerism increase the acceptance of wind power? *Energy Policy*, 51, 854-862.

³³ Lacasse, K. (2016). Don't be satisfied, identify! Strengthening positive spillover by connecting pro-environmental behaviors to an “environmentalist” label. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 48, 149-158.

³⁴ See, for example, Leonard, A. (2010). *The story of stuff: How our obsession with stuff is trashing the planet, our communities, and our health—and a vision for change*. Simon and Schuster; Princen, T. (2010). *Treading softly: Paths to ecological order*. MIT Press; or Fridell, G. (2007). Fair-Trade coffee and commodity fetishism: The limits of market-driven social justice. *Historical Materialism*, 15(4), 79-104

³⁵ e.g. Sanne, C. (2002). Willing consumers—or locked-in? Policies for a sustainable consumption. *Ecological economics*, 42(1), 273-287.

³⁶ Simple calculations of individual ecological footprints bear this out. The ecological footprint for U.S. citizens, for instance, remains stubbornly high regardless of the mix of individual consumption choices or changes. Even the most dedicated “eco-consumer” ends up with an ecological footprint three to four times sustainable levels. The reason lies with the “services” component of these footprint calculators, which allocates the environmental damage from government policies and programs to citizens of that country. In many instances this governmental impact, which cannot be influenced through savvy consumer choice, is more than half of an individual’s overall environmental footprint. See, for example, <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/calculators/>

³⁷ e.g. Zamwel, E., Sasson-Levy, O., & Ben-Porat, G. (2014). Voluntary simplifiers as political consumers: Individuals practicing politics through reduced consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1469540514526277.

³⁸ e.g. Schudson, M. (2007). Citizens, consumers, and the good society. *The annals of the American academy of political and social science*, 611(1), 236-249; Middlemiss, L. (2014). Individualised or participatory? Exploring late-modern identity and sustainable development. *Environmental politics*, 23(6), 929-946; and Atkinson, L. (2015). Locating the “politics” in political consumption: A conceptual map of four types of political consumer identities.” *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 2047-2066.

³⁹ As I’ve reported elsewhere (Maniates 2016, op. cit.), the idea of trinity of despair (TOD) emerged after returning to the U.S. in 2005 after international teaching. My time away made me more aware of behaviors among my students back home that I previously taken as “normal.” Since then I have gently queried my environmental studies and global affairs students at three different institutions (Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania; Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio; and Yale-NUS College, in Singapore) about the applicability of the TOD to their own experience. I have also shared the TOD in several guest lectures around the United States, and at workshops at international conferences. A large majority of students report that the TOD accurately describes their experience, or the experience of others with whom they closely interact around environmental concerns. For many, the TOD is an epiphany.

⁴⁰ Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science (New York, NY)*, 162(3859), 1243.

⁴¹ Meyer, J. M. (2010). A democratic politics of sacrifice?, in *The Environmental politics of sacrifice*, op. cit., pp. 13-32.

⁴² For a wonderfully biting take on the proliferation of these lists, see Friedman, Tom. “205 easy ways to save the earth.” *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

⁴³ e.g. Hurst, Megan, Helga Dittmar, Rod Bond, and Tim Kasser. "The relationship between materialistic values and environmental attitudes and behaviors: A meta-analysis." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 36 (2013): 257-269.

⁴⁴ Rigotti, S. (2010). *Environmental problem solving: How do we make change?* Department of Environmental Science, Allegheny College. Available at https://michaelmaniatesblog.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/rigotti_environmentalproblemsolving.pdf

⁴⁵ Chee, S., S. Kaur, and M. Maniates, 2018. “All of the Above?” Confusion and Disempowerment Among Change-Seeking ESS Undergraduate Students; and Maniates, M., “Just Give Us a Good Crisis:” Deconstructing the Incapacitating Faith in Crisis Among ESS Undergraduates, both presented at the national meetings of the Association of Environmental Studies and Science, Washington DC, June.

⁴⁶ See note 43. Also see Crompton, T. and Kasser, T., 2009. *Meeting environmental challenges: The role of human identity* (pp. 1-93). Godalming, UK: WWF-UK; and Kasser, T., 2016. Materialistic values and goals. *Annual review of psychology*, 67, pp.489-514. Many readers will also be familiar with work reported in Cialdini, R.B., 2003. Crafting normative messages to protect the environment. *Current directions in psychological science*, 12(4), pp.105-109; and Goldstein, N.J., Cialdini, R.B. and Griskevicius, V., 2008. A room with a viewpoint: Using social norms to motivate environmental conservation in hotels. *Journal of consumer Research*, 35(3), pp.472-482.

⁴⁷ A point powerfully illustrated by Paul Steinberg and his “Social Rules” project. See <http://www.paulsteinberg.org/the-social-rules-project/>

⁴⁸ Leonard, A. (2013). Moving from Individual Change to Societal Change. In *State of the World 2013* (pp. 244-252). Island Press/Center for Resource Economics.

⁴⁹ Bellah, R. op. cit.