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Beyond magical thinking

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Transformational global governance faces two fundamental challenges. One is the unravelling of the natural world, which grows warmer, less biologically diverse, and increasingly hostile to human flourishing. The other is the funnelling of environmentally concerned publics into cul-de-sacs of political irrelevance. Addressing the first challenge means confronting the second.

This chapter explores the dimensions of such confrontation. It argues that “magical thinking”¹ about the inevitable aggregation of small living-green actions into powerful social change is a fundamental impediment to transformative global governance. Such thinking short-circuits the political potency of growing public concern about climate change and other environmental ills. It also fuels “the trinity of despair,” a mutually reinforcing dynamic of cynicism, misanthropy, and preoccupation with crisis (Maniates 2016). When it comes to individual agency and transformative social change, magical thinking is deeply corrosive.

Given this volume’s emphasis on *collective* change in the global allocation of power and authority, this chapter’s focus on environmentally concerned *individuals* may seem odd. It shouldn’t. If one lesson emerges from decades of struggle for transformative global governance, it is this: institutional change necessary to the restoration of critical environmental systems will not be driven by governments or corporate elites, not initially at least, and not while economic growth remains the yardstick for state performance and corporate success. Strategic, synergistic mobilisation of environmentally committed populations must come first.

Hopeful assessments notwithstanding (e.g. Hawken 1993/2010), dominant economic organisations will not lead the way to transformative governance. Corporations are built to maximise short-term returns and externalise costs, often via stubbornly opaque global commodity chains that separate production from consumption and exploit the environment and poor alike.² Too often, corporate sustainability efforts are exercises in greenwashing or, as Robert Reich (2007) observes, an umbrella for efficiencies in production and distribution rebranded as “green.”

Governments are similarly hobbled. On their own, nation-states systematically discount the future – future generations and non-human species cannot vote or threaten civic unrest (Lawrence, this volume; Levin et al. 2012) – and GDP growth remains the litmus test for policy success and good leadership (Philipsen, this volume). Acting collectively, national

governments are constrained by a global order that impedes sustained international cooperation. “Blocking” or “laggard” states opposed to environmental safeguards enjoy disproportionate power and they use it, often to distort or disregard compelling scientific knowledge, while ambitious international agreements signed in far-flung cities inevitably face the wrath of producer groups and polluting industries at home, to the detriment of policy vitality (Hempel 1996).

Absent catastrophic crisis, the only solution to these equations of lethargy is the strategic mobilisation of environmentally anxious citizens, who exist in sufficient number around the world to force necessary change in global governance.³ In some instances, citizens could join together to compel corporate and state elites to embrace elements of lasting environmental sustainability, or what Sylvia Lorek and Doris Fuchs call “strong sustainable consumption” (Lorek and Fuchs 2013). In other settings, citizen pressure can provide political cover for elites aspiring to lead. Either way, the majorities around the world for whom “the environment” is a salient issue (Dunlap and York 2012) must rediscover, in the words of Annie Leonard (2010), their “citizen muscle” – their capacity, working together as individuals, to drive transformative change.

Such transformation won’t be easy, and it won’t be incremental. But it can happen. Cass Sunstein gets it right when he observes that “large-scale changes” occur in “an astoundingly short time...Stunning surprises are nearly inevitable” (2017, par. 17). Instances of norm cascades, where issue-specific environmental action in one corner of the world spreads across borders, speak to the power of sustained local action in a global society (Clapp and Swanston 2009). Humans are social animals, predisposed to collaboration around goals kept aloft by strong normative claims. Civic action, moreover, is often its own reward: struggling with others of like mind towards grand social reform offers deep intrinsic benefits. And evidence of mounting ecological crises that challenge everyday understandings of prudence and decency is on full display. As Tom Princen (2005) observes in his treatise on sufficiency, the materiality of biogeophysical decline is laying the groundwork for a rapid, unexpected shift in the dominant social organising principles of efficiency, extraction, and externalisation of costs.

Amidst these forces of possibility and transformational change, it is only fair to ask: what are the vast numbers of the environmentally concerned doing? Why aren’t they flexing their citizen muscles?

The following sections offer one explanation. As these nascent eco-activists wrestle with the gap between their morals and their practices, they do what most overextended, frequently distracted, occasionally stressed-out people do – they gravitate to established behaviours that are straightforward, affirmed by credible sources, and promise meaningful agency. In practice, this means, for many, an embrace of small acts of “responsible,” “conscientious,” “green,” or “environmental” living, with the expectation that these small gestures will sum with millions of others around the planet to produce deep institutional change. In other words, magical thinking.

It is silly to believe that a cabal of evildoers is working overtime to disempower environmentally concerned publics. But if such a cabal existed, it would quietly promote notions of magical thinking, which took root in the 1980s without much notice, as the next section describes.

The rise of magical thinking

I have an “Earth Day” rubbish bin from the early 1970s. It features colourful drawings of environmental protesters with bell-bottoms, long 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 bin sits near my desk in reminder of a time when citizen engagement and political mobilisation were natural expressions of anxiety about environmental abuse.

Whenever I bring the bin into my environmental-studies seminars, my students are alternately amused and flummoxed by the scene it depicts. They typically view their 1970s-counterparts as idealistic, naïve, even counterproductive. My pupils wonder aloud if “all that protesting” really made a difference, forgetting the major environmental laws that were adopted in the United States in the early 1970s under Richard Nixon, a president not known for his progressive leanings, and that fostered similar reforms around the world.⁴

But it is not just the seeming futility of public protest that troubles my students, at least not lately. Charges of hypocrisy also fly with an intensity that suggests deeper anxieties at work. Those protesters, say some students, undoubtedly drove cars, ate meat, and flew. Why should they command respect given the chasm between their words and their deeds?⁵ Such preoccupation with environmental hypocrisy becomes disabling – how can any of us plead innocent to all acts of environmental impact, living as we do in a globalised, consumeristic society? There are echoes here of Paul Loeb’s (1985) chronicle of “the perfect standard,” which infected politically disempowered college students of the 1980s who frequently asserted their inability to engage controversial issues until they had *complete* information – an utterly immobilising threshold for action.

While this “perfect standard” is familiar, its insinuation into mainstream environmentalism is recent, and dangerous. It seems connected to the burgeoning norm that “living environmentally” is among the best mechanisms, both politically and ethically, for addressing environmental ills. Buy green and live lean to influence business decisions and persuade, by lived example, others to do the same. Avoid confrontational protest and work within the system. After all, in this view, only a tsunami of public outrage will alter dominant institutions and realign personal values, both necessary to save the planet. And you don’t get everyone on board with protests by individuals who themselves are despoiling the planet. That will only alienate the super-majorities upon which fundamental change is thought to depend. Far better to walk one’s talk, lead by example, and reward “green” companies with consumer loyalty, all while hoping for the best.

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

On a recent business trip I tried tallying the many ways I was asked to address environmental problems via small acts meant to aggregate with the good deeds of others. I gave up after 17 instances in the first five hours of my trip. The recycling bins in my condominium implored 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 create real impact. 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 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 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 valorises low-consumption living, was a potent agent of this message in the 1970s and early '80s (e.g. Maniates 2002; Ballantine and Creery 2010). The appropriate technology movement, flourishing at the same time, advanced a similar sensibility. Its "Cuisinart theory of social change" (if everyone owned a Cuisinart we'd all become great home chefs) asserted that transformative institutional change could be achieved through individual embrace of small-scale, environmentally friendly 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 neighbour to do the same, and wait for the social power of aggregation to emerge.⁶

Both movements were swept aside in the early 1980s by engines of neo-liberalism. Writing about appropriate technologists, Langdon Winner was exactly right when he noted that "they were lovely visionaries, naïve about the forces that confronted them" (1986, 80). As important as living a simple life or thinking about technological choice can be, focusing only on these elements ultimately constitutes a flight from power rather than engagement with it.

One might have expected an alternate ideology to emerge 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 evident. One was escalating public concern over global environmental ills. The sudden and starkly visual discovery of the ozone hole in 1983 crystallised such apprehension; events culminating in the 1992 Earth Summit gave it full form. But what was one to do with all this worry?

The primary answer: join environmental lobby groups. The 1980s saw a surge in support for major environmental groups like the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and the World Wildlife Fund (Bosso 2005). But this windfall created its own headaches. As these organisations expanded their staff and programs, they fretted about how to engage and retain their new members. Launching another political-action campaign wouldn't be enough. The politics of the day were hostile to new environmental initiatives – this was the time of Reagan and Thatcher, and the best that most lobby groups could do was resist the rollback of cherished environmental policies. A new angle of engagement was necessary, one distant from the toxic politics of environmental policymaking.

Through trial and error, environmental groups hit upon a strategy, launched in the mid-1980s, of celebrating personal responsibility over collective political action. The new story of change coming from key environmental organisations went something like this: "If you care about the environment but are frustrated with governmental short-sightedness and corporate malfeasance, don't despair – you still can make a difference through small acts of ecological living, and we'll show you how." Soon thereafter, lists of simple ways to save the planet proliferated, and books like *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* (1989) became bestsellers. Almost overnight, a contentious politics of environmental protection became a tidy, feel-good process of smart shopping and doing with less.

This environmental-group strategy shift was the second of three progenitors of magical thinking. The global recession in the early 1980s, and the concomitant collapse of corporate profits, was the beginning of a third. As the economy began to recover in 1983, major corporations, scrambling to restore their bottom line, began experimenting with "green marketing" earlier shunned as too niche. They were startled by the success of these initial attempts to grow consumption. For the rest of the decade, with increasing sophistication punctuated by occasional overreach, business rolled out an array of so-called planet-friendly products, each wrapped in a story of consumer power to effect political change (Crane 2000; Peattie 2001; Peattie and Crane 2005). "Buying green" and "conscientious consumption"

took off like few marketing initiatives before or since, simultaneously meeting the needs of business, environmental groups, and a public in desperate search of agency (e.g. Mendleson and Polonsky 1995).

These three elements, converging amidst a neo-liberal celebration of markets and individual choice, have done great damage to the environmental imagination (Lukacs 2017). Indeed, if a rubbish bin portraying environmental activism were produced 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 people of conscience looking to display their eco-credentials. The message of this contemporary bin – that we are at our best as agents of change when we modify our lifestyles and consume differently, battling an enervating sense of hypocrisy all the while – undermines any hope for transformative governance, for reasons laid bare in the next section.

Not just distracting or delaying, but demobilising: the trinity of despair (TOD)

Even if unseemly forces are fostering a deepening faith in small acts of eco-living, that doesn't necessarily make these acts worthless. Living simply and striving to purchase environmentally friendly products are pillars of mindful living. As Karen Litfin (2014) powerfully observes, these choices can become daily personal reminders of the urgency of environmental decline, helping us act with grace in the midst of the biological unravelling of the planet. The problem is that, alone, such behaviours are mismatched to the imperative of transformative change in social structures. It is important to walk an elderly neighbour across the street when you're both standing on the corner. Doing so cultivates inner decency and community connection. Just don't assume that your good deed will solve the pension crisis, no matter how many people follow your example.

For some, assertions about the political impotence of eco-living are troubling. Couldn't shifts in everyday behaviour become on-ramps to the collective citizen work of redistributing power and reforming institutions? Wouldn't persuading a neighbour to buy organic food today prime her to become a food activist tomorrow? Since we all know how to be consumers, couldn't people be drawn into environmental activism through accessible, "first-step" acts of enlightened consumption (e.g. Lorenzen 2014)?

Alas, there is scant empirical evidence that individual acts of environmental stewardship lead people to meaningful political action.⁷ The two frequently coexist: citizen activists troubled by biodiversity loss may purchase rainforest-friendly coffee, and owners of energy-efficient appliances might participate in climate-action rallies. But any straight-line causality looks to run in one direction. Environmental citizen activists often embrace elements of green living (though perhaps not enough to satisfy their critics), while conventional forms of green consumption fail to activate Annie Leonard's citizen muscle (e.g. Johnston 2008; Webb 2012). Intuitively, this makes a certain kind of sense: the skills and rewards associated with conscientious consumption are worlds apart from those associated with engaged citizenship.

More may be at work than mere disconnect, however; green living may actually undermine citizen action. When individuals enact their environmental concerns through small lifestyle changes and concerted green consumption, researchers observe a weakening of pro-environmental behaviours, including citizen mobilisation (e.g. Lacasse 2016). Imagine a well-intentioned environmentalist recycling their rubbish, grilling their organic vegetables on their eco-friendly charcoal grill, then putting their feet up on their sustainably sourced wooden ottoman and congratulating themselves for a job well done. For many scholars (e.g. Fridell 2007;

Princen 2010) this scenario isn't far-fetched: it is a daily fact that impedes more muscular citizen responses to environmental decline. Since green consumption and simple living cannot, on their own, meaningfully address our most pressing environmental ills – public policy must also change, and it's not for sale at the check-out counter (Sanne 2002) – the prospect of millions of deeply committed but politically complacent eco-consumers is unnerving, especially if citizen restiveness is a critical engine of transformational governance

Faced with these research findings, advocates of aggregation urge patience (e.g. Schudson 2007; Middlemiss 2014; Zamwel, Sasson-Levy, and Ben-Porat 2014; Atkinson 2015). The small-and-easy path to social change is a politics of transformative governance, they insist, if only we'd give it more time. Three lines of argument emerge. One centres on social norms, where consumption choices that visibly challenge the dominant culture are read as fostering new norms of restraint and sufficiency, making subsequent political change easier and more enduring. Another suggests that personal struggle with lifestyle choices slowly cultivates citizen capacities necessary to later political struggle. A third defence insists that market pressure from conscientious consumers heightens big business's sensitivity to political pressure for transformational change, leading to big payoffs when citizens eventually mobilise.

Each argument has merit, but all overlook a devastating effect of magical thinking. Rather than distracting or delaying individuals from their obligations and capacities as citizens, faith in spontaneous aggregation can transform the environmentally concerned into potent agents of cynicism and citizen demobilisation. The forces at work cohere as “the trinity of despair” (see Figure 21.1)

The TOD begins with the belief that humans are short-sighted creatures who focus narrowly on their own prosperity and security. We are those *homo economicus* creatures described in economics courses, or in environmental science textbooks that view environmental degradation through a “tragedy of the commons” lens (Hardin 1968) that reifies the same *homo economicus* caricature. Pundits asserting that “people will never sacrifice” for environmental sustainability reflect this monochromatic view of human nature. In fact, while humans can be narrowly selfish, they can also be magnanimous and altruistic; we live within community where loyalties, passions, group association, and stories of belonging and allegiance frequently privilege the better angels of our nature (Stone 2012). These promising complexities are ignored, however, in conversation about environmental decline where “human nature” receives the blame (Maniates and Meyer 2010).

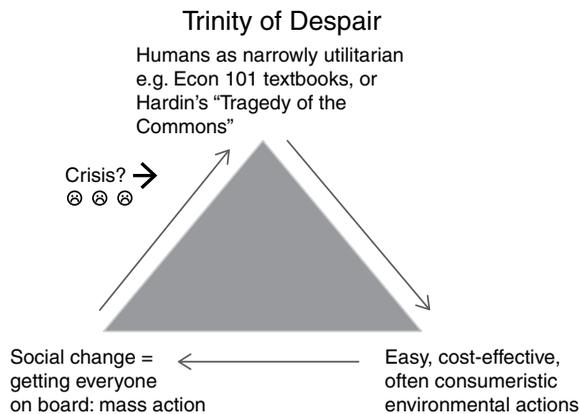


Figure 21.1 Trinity of despair

If we are short-sighted and sacrifice averse, then attempts to engage us in struggles for environmental sustainability and social justice must cater to self-interest, per the strategies promoted in top “easy ways to save the world” lists and “guides to sustainable living” books.⁸ Familiar measures include adoption of eco-efficient technologies that produce economic savings (e.g. new light bulbs), simple behaviour changes that confer personal benefits (e.g. eating less meat for health reasons), and cost-effective lifestyle changes or consumer products that signal a commitment to the environment, thereby earning the admiration of others. Each is tailor-made for rational, sacrifice-allergic actors, and relentlessly promoted by corporate marketers and environmental groups.

The social-change narrative that connects these practices is by now obvious, but is worth emphasising here and goes something like this: if small groups of individuals adopt some of the above measures, others will notice and join in. This social mimicking scales as eco-behaviours slowly become normal, and as alarming information about environmental problems spreads. As more people climb aboard the bandwagon, the cumulative environmental benefits of these small acts grow apparent, prompting laggards and late-adopters to hop aboard for fear of missing out or being ostracised. Inspired by these changes, some will become politically active, and policymakers will feel the pressure. Major corporations will feel pressure too, since consumers are now clamouring *en masse* for clean and green products. The outcome is a more sustainable and just planet achieved not by a counterproductive politics of confrontation (recall the concerns of my students), but rather by seemingly innocuous individual decisions that became an unstoppable force for good.

The linchpin of this story is mass participation. Personal acts of green living morph into political potency only if nearly everyone participates, since each act alone is incommensurate to looming planetary threats. Ubiquitous advertisements for environmental action acknowledge as much: “If *everyone* recycled their newspapers, we’d save 10,000 trees a year” or “If *we all* bought LED lights, five coal-fired power plants would close.” This story says that corporations won’t change their ways until they see massive change in buying patterns. Governments won’t alter policy unless most people shift from “uncaring consumer” to “eco-shopper.” My neighbour won’t start composting until all his neighbours do, at which point he’ll awkwardly realise that he’s the odd man out. All the gears of this process – more environmental education, savvy information campaigns, labels and ratings that communicate the environmental consequences of individual choice, eco-consumption by environmentalists – centre on the goal of mass voluntary participation. Social change won’t happen without it.

It’s seductive, this narrative of institutional transformation. But it is wrong, and it is debilitating. It is wrong when it imagines that past environmental successes – dolphin-safe tuna; bans on leaded petrol, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs); a solar-electric revolution; and more – arose from the mass mobilisation of individual consumers, and that future successes must too. And it is debilitating by obscuring potent possibilities for citizen mobilisation and social change, reinforcing the fiction that citizen action is too messy or loud to pursue. Instead of celebrating, for example, the roughly 20% of Americans who say they act on their environmental concerns “all of the time” (Pew Research Center 2016), and strategising about how to turbocharge the political salience of this minority, those seduced by this story obsess over the absent 80% as evidence of environmentalism’s failure, and work harder to bring the wayward onboard. In doing so, advocates forget their history lessons. During critical moments of political transformation, majorities are disengaged, or alarmed by the prospect of change. Abolition, women’s suffrage, the New Deal, the rise of economic liberalism and right-wing macroeconomics, gay marriage, the US 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 comes later or, at times, not at all.

In the end, this “all aboard” catechism breeds cynicism and misanthropy. When advocates of small and easy grasp that large majorities aren’t being drawn into a whirlwind of behaviour change, as their story predicts, they logically double-down with flashier messaging, further appeals to self-interest, and more information about the virtues of “being green.” When these strategies falter – and they always falter, since super-majority participation is a fantasy, and appeals to immediate self-interest are paradoxically counterproductive (e.g. Hurst et al. 2013) – guilt, blame, and fear (a TOD all its own) become the favoured prods to action. But these fail too, since enduring political movements thrive by appealing to the best in us, rather than resorting to guilt and shame.

Deceived by cartoonish notions of social change and human nature, but not yet realising their error, those ensnared by the TOD are left with one option: return to blaming humans and their selfish, self-destructive nature, and wait for crisis – deep, broad, Old Testament sort of stuff – to force social change. Once optimistic and engaged, these individuals morph into disappointed and misanthropic observers of global environmental collapse, only dimly aware that their starting assumptions about environmental action and social change, methodically reinforced by marketers and others, were their undoing. Their fear and anger become infectious, pushing transformational governance further out of reach.

Magical thinking isn’t so magical after all.

Escape

In theory, magical thinking and the TOD it spawns undermine new forms of global governance. If the TOD is more than a thought experiment – if it truly captures conditions on the ground – then transforming the distribution of power and authority across the planet demands puncturing the attitudes and assumptions that give this trinity life.

Two questions arise. Is the TOD, fuelled by magical thinking, more than an instructive heuristic? If so, how might the TOD best be opposed in service of transformational governance? Tentative answers to the first question reveal useful insights into the second.

On this first question, abundant anecdotal evidence points to the realities of the TOD. In the classroom, students speak with confidence about the power of small choices and big crises. Worldwide, faith in naïve aggregation appears to be rising (with a backlash brewing against plastic straws at the time of this writing). And far too many environmental events still end with audience commentary about public ignorance of environmental issues, the necessity of education, and the urgency of making environmental action convenient and economic in order to drive rapid transformation of individual and household behaviour. In this respect, Elizabeth Shove’s (2010) concerns about the discredited “ABC” path to environmental sustainability, where altering environmental attitudes is mistakenly thought to change individual behaviours, which then supposedly yield powerful change in consumption patterns and public policy, are on full display. Again and again, human nature, or at the very least ignorance and “bad values,” is the problem. The solution lies in fashioning digestible bits of enticing environmental action that, in ways never fully interrogated, will spread to save the world.

Research on the TOD reinforces these anecdotal impressions. In 2010, Allegheny College researcher Samuel Rigotti’s analysis of a non-randomised sample of 400+ undergraduate environmental-studies students uncovered several TOD-elements in play, including preoccupation with individual consumption, a cynical view of human nature, and a profound faith in crisis among respondents (Rigotti 2010). A three-year research project completed in 2018 offers

even deeper evidence of the TOD in everyday life (Chee, Kaur, and Maniates 2018; Maniates 2018). Like Rigotti's earlier work, this project focused on students of the environment as especially representative of individuals primed for citizen action. More than 1,200 undergraduates at 73 randomly selected US colleges and universities completed a 31-item questionnaire, usually in association with an environmentally focused course in which they were enrolled.

Although a complete reporting of research results is forthcoming (Maniates, forthcoming), some conclusions can be confidently reported here. The general picture from the study is distinctly neo-liberal and individualistic; debilitating assumptions about human nature and social change, typically expressed as natural truths, abound. For instance, "consumers" are the most frequently identified actor capable of generating meaningful social change, rising above other choices with statistical significance. Super-majorities of the sample, exceeding 80% of all respondents, characterise 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" and "humans are short-sighted when it comes to environmental problems").

These views, moreover, become entangled with an "everyone on board" view of social change that confuses the cultural benefits of environmental awareness with the fundamentals of political transformation. When asked to speculate about levels of public commitment necessary to spur change in environmental policy, more than half the sample insisted that citizen majorities must deeply engage with environmental issues before policy change could occur. Strikingly, more than a quarter of the sample indicated that social change is impossible absent the enduring commitment of 70%, 80%, or even 90% of their fellow citizens. Less than one respondent in ten recognised that persistently strategic minorities typically drive social change.

This multi-year study, the most comprehensive of its kind, assesses the beliefs and attitudes of young people who, by virtue of their education, are exposed to diverse accounts of the cause of and cure for environmental ills. That so many in the sample subscribe to magical thinking and the disabling understandings of social change that follow was unexpected. The effects of the ubiquitous "save the world one small consumption choice at a time" narrative appear overwhelming.

But perhaps not, for at least three reasons. One is that a majority of respondents express discontent with the limitations of green consumption as a primary vehicle for change, even as they extoll its virtues. They embrace the notion that voting with their purchases makes a difference while acknowledging the power of economic actors to edit consumer choice and shape consumption preferences. There is a dissonance here that awaits cultivation, not just among undergraduates but also among the environmentally committed at large.

Another reason is what Yale-NUS College researchers Stephanie Chee and Sonia Kaur call "the all-of-the-above problem" (Chee, Kaur, and Maniates 2018). In their analysis of the 1,200+-response data set, Chee and Kaur note that students reassess their views about individual agency and social change as they move through the survey. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative responses, they emphasise that respondents seemed unaccustomed to examining their notions of social change, and often welcomed the opportunity for reflection. There is, say Chee and Kaur, a palpable uncertainty among undergraduates about how to be powerful in the world, an openness to new ways of thinking about social change, and a yearning for alternatives beyond the familiar guideposts to action. Perhaps the magical-thinking narrative is less powerful than it appears.

A final reason: outliers. In both studies – Rigotti’s and the more recent inquiry – arguably the most interesting population is the 10–15% who are sceptical of magical thinking, who understand that mobilised minorities can make a difference, and who see great possibility for future social change. If theorists of social norming are correct, this minority is likely hiding in the shadows, waiting until their understandings of action and change become less oppositional to the prevailing views of their peers. And, as Cass Sunstein (2017) notes, once it becomes more acceptable to think and act in ways consistent with this minority, an uptick of interest and action – a so-called norm cascade – around strategic activism and community mobilisation is not just possible, but likely.

In a world where the problem is less a lack of environmental concern among the public than how this concern is enacted, the implications for proponents of transformative governance become clear. The top priority must be to reverse the cooptation of environmental movements by narratives that privilege magical thinking. Advocates of transformational governance often embrace this narrative, thinking that it aids their cause. This practice must end, and the marketing of magical-thinking solutions must be systematically opposed, for they do more than distract. They are viruses of immobilising notions of social change and human nature. By trivialising the challenges before us they spread diminished expectations about what our fellow citizens can be called upon to do to avert environmental catastrophe. Too often, resulting appeals to immediate self-interest prime the very behaviours that make lasting progress to sustainability impossible (Crompton and Kasser 2009; Hurst et al. 2013; Kasser 2016).

Another imperative is to move from arguments about the need for transformative governance to stories about the potency of everyday acts of ecological citizenship. To this end, a narrative of painless aggregation around consumption choices must be supplanted by stories of threshold and feedback, where diligent struggle for social change suddenly, and often unexpectedly, succeeds. These stories exist, stories of norm cascades and punctuated-equilibria and policy windows, around topics as diverse as smoking in public, plastic bags, seatbelt use, gay marriage, and #MeToo. They offer theoretical lessons and empirical proof of the joys of working with others to slowly drive governance systems towards thresholds of abrupt policy change. They illustrate too the importance of optimistic persistence in the face of uncertainty around how close those thresholds might be.

From here, it is a short hop to outlining everyday acts of ecological citizenship that are effective and empowering, and that put green consumption in its proper place. For example, rather than buying fair-trade/organic coffee at the market, hoping that someone in the corporate office notices, why not gather a few friends to speak directly to the manager about stocking more socially responsible products on the best shelf space, and relegating less enlightened products to the nooks and crannies of the store? Joining with others to reconfigure the architecture of consumer choice, if only in small ways, is a more promising on-ramp to active citizenry than cajoling a neighbour to buy green, and more effective too. By making these paths of individual action more natural and normal, advocates of transformative governance embolden the minorities already thinking like environmental citizens while creating space for others struggling with dissonance around green consumption.

Most important is the need to revive a sense of adventure and joy around the daunting task of birthing new forms of transformative governance. The late sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues had it right when they wrote that “it isn’t enough to exhort people to participate. . . We must build institutions that make participation possible, rewarding, and challenging” (Bellah et al. 1992, 15). The sad fact is that contemporary environmentalism has become a movement of guilt and shame, where individual consumption choices become the measure of one’s commitment to social justice and environmental sustainability. That

nothing challenging or rewarding lies down that path is further argument for cultivating new models of individual action that tie citizenship to consumption, and focus on small-wins of institutional change (e.g. challenging the architecture of consumer choice at the local market) that make rewarding activism the norm rather than the exception.

For Bellah, institutions are patterned ways of doing things – ways of living, individually and collectively, that feel natural and normal and that, at their inception at least, met a need or offered a solution. Magical thinking and the forces around it are one such institution. They for a time met a need, served a purpose, and solved a problem, and for some interests they still do. But as the false promise of naïve aggregation increasingly hobbles those who care deeply about environmental degradation, and upon whom the promise of transformative governance rests, it is time for a change. Challenging the forces swirling about the TOD must now rise to the top of the governance agenda.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Simon Nicholson for “magical thinking.”
- 2 As Jennifer Clapp (2002) notes, the distancing of production from the end use is among the most pernicious drivers of environmental decline.
- 3 Reports from the Yale Program on Climate Communication (e.g. Leiserowitz et al. 2017) are especially illustrative. This latest reporting (as of this writing) of climate-change views in the United States reports that 22% of Americans (with an error of $\pm 3\%$ with 95% confidence) are “deeply worried” about climate change, with another 42% reporting as “somewhat worried.” Leaders of past social movements – abolition, women’s suffrage, India’s struggle for independence, the US civil rights movement, and efforts to legalise same-sex marriage, to name a few – would celebrate such levels of public support.
- 4 My students today are not unlike their parents who may have attended college in the late 1980s, as filmmaker James Klein (1990) effectively demonstrates.
- 5 Protesters from the 1970s aren’t the only ones subject to this gaze; climate scientists are on the hook too, it seems (Attari, Krantz, and Weber 2016).
- 6 The “Cuisinart theory of social change” is Langdon Winner’s (1986) phrase. Meyer (2015) offers a contemporary treatment of the same phenomenon.
- 7 “Meaningful” means sustained engagement with others to alter social rules, policies, norms, and/or patterned ways of doing things, as per Bellah et al. (1992) and, more recently, Steinberg (2015).
- 8 For a biting take on the proliferation of these lists, see Tom Friedman’s (2008) “205 Easy Ways to Save the Earth.”

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