

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



**GREENS: THE NEW
NEO-COLONIALISTS**

Austin Williams

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What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

GREENS: THE NEW NEO-COLONIALISTS

The UK is leading the way in environmental policies - described by the prime minister Boris Johnson as the 'lodestar by which we will guide our country towards a cleaner and greener future'². In his spring budget, the UK chancellor of the exchequer announced a 'Green Industrial Revolution'. On the international stage, the Conference of the Parties summit (COP26) in Glasgow is scheduled to speed up action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Within 24 hours of taking office, US President Joe Biden re-joined the Paris Accords (by executive mandate) to demonstrate that the West is taking environmental leadership seriously - and that others will have to get with the programme.

From Davos to the CBI, from Bill Gates to Harry and Meghan, environmental politics has captured the moral high ground. This Damascene conversion of business leaders and political elites to the cause of Mother Earth (as the Paris Agreement refers to it) is not a conspiracy or a con, but a conscious strategy to reboot the economy and to give a renewed sense of purpose (and profit) to a beleaguered establishment. Whether it is successful or not is yet to be seen, but

the logic of Green politics ensures that freedom and democracy will not be high on the agenda.

Starry-eyed aspirations

In February 2021, the World Economic Forum (WEF) tweeted about the Covid-19 pandemic, claiming that lockdowns were improving cities around the world. It boasted that removing pesky people from the streets and locking them indoors had reduced the blight of noise pollution. After an outcry at WEF's insensitivity to those whose livelihoods had been destroyed by lockdown, it withdrew the comment from social media. Elsewhere, the condescension continued unnoticed. 'A glimmer of hope' is how the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) described a seven per cent fall in emissions as economic activity and travel around the globe ground to a near halt.

The medical journal, *The Lancet*, argued that the 'second Great Depression' caused by 'this terrible pandemic and its consequences [is] a unique opportunity to... heal the planet'.ⁱⁱ Celebrity professor Brian Cox was delighted that 'people in India and Pakistan were seeing the Himalayas for the first time'ⁱⁱⁱ as a result of the industrial shutdown where

approximately 140million Indians and 18million Pakistanis lost their jobs over 12 months.

Cox's tone-deaf approach flew in the face of Oscar Wilde's aphorism: 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.' Indeed, too many starry-eyed aspirations for economic betterment in the developing world have been shattered as a result of the response to Covid-19. The sad fact is that the coming environmental era will double-down on their misfortune as restrictions on travel, production, energy-use and manufacturing become the norm. But the misanthropic lack of concern for the poor and disenfranchised existed in the environmental discourse long before the pandemic.

The grandfather of modern environmental thinking, James Lovelock, complained that the world is suffering a 'fever brought on by a plague of people'.^{iv} Predating the pandemic by 10 years, he was talking about overpopulation - the staple of Green miserablism. Several decades earlier, the first issue of *The Ecologist*, the leading environmental magazine spearheaded by Edward Goldsmith (who advocated that economic development was a destructive force for developing countries) proclaimed that man is 'a parasite... a disease which is still spreading exponentially'.^v In this iteration of Green thinking, clearing away the disease - that is, worthless humanity

- would help the worthy see the future more clearly. Very often the people to be cleared away are those who don't - in the eyes of environmentalists - deserve to survive. Eco-gammons undeserving of vegan salvation, if you like.

The unapologetic, insulting language used to describe fellow human beings ('virus', 'cancers', 'slime mould', 'parasites') reflects a contempt for people, their aspirations and their social and economic development. Such beliefs have infused Green thinking for many years.

Green-washed colonialism

In fact, to understand today's Green hostility to development, we have to look further back into history. In his 1798 book *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, the Reverend Thomas Malthus put forward a simple calculation that since, in his view, human population increased exponentially while crop yields could only increase arithmetically, there would be a time when the population would outstrip the resources available. At this crisis point, there would not be enough food to feed the nation.

Like many people today, Malthus feared for the future and was nostalgic for a stable and harmonious society. His solution included a policy of moral rectitude whereby marriage was restricted, thus reducing the growth in family size, which in turn slowed down the inevitable crisis in food supply. While the principle of Malthusian restraint has developed into the credo of state-sanctioned population control, endorsed by leading figures like David Attenborough, Prince Charles and the Chinese Communist Party, Malthus's perspective was actually driven by the social conditions of the day. He was concerned that new-fangled industrialisation would simply produce 'fancied riches' that would promote ever more consumption and consequently impose pressure on the productive forces, which would not be able keep up.

However, Malthus still had some belief in the possibility of human beings changing the future. Even this merest hint of a progressive spark in human potential is absent today, where fatalism has become the mainstay of Green thinking. Even 'resilience' - a word traditionally associated with human resolve - has been transformed into a condition in which nature imposes its will and humanity can only hope to survive in a chastened state. The former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, Judith Rodin, writes that 'crisis is the new normal', exploring how resilience is a

permanent state of risk management: a mechanism for making wariness of nature's dark forces into a permanent state of being.^{vi} Similarly, neo-Malthusian Paul Ehrlich, who is regularly cited positively by Extinction Rebellion, advocates 'natural die-back' because 'our only choices are a lower birth rate or a bigger death rate'.^{vii} Humanity has no influence over these Gaia-ordained scenarios.

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Malthusianism has subsequently become a byword for a range of biologically or naturally determined reactionary policies, from population control to social Darwinism. For most of the twentieth century, these policies didn't really apply to the developed world; instead, it was the under-developed countries that were affected. For them, this period was determined by restricted resources enforced by Western economic sanctions, posed as harsh medicine in order to save poorer countries from themselves.

Postwar discussions about population reduction in the developing world were far too reminiscent of the legacy of empire and its history of eugenics to be explicitly justified. But the shame associated with neo-

colonial racial characterisation started to fall away during the 1960s and 1970s, on the basis that population expansion was thought of as a developing-world threat. The oil crisis, for example, accentuated the fear of resource depletion alongside population increase. For decades, the over-population/over-consumption argument in developing countries was implemented under the guise of aid: assisting women's reproductive rights (fewer babies), or a celebration of 'appropriate' low-tech, labour-intensive development (minimal consumption). It was imposed by institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF and enforced with economic penalties that kept many countries in the Global South in penury.

A shift occurred towards the end of the twentieth century, when intervention in the affairs of developing nations was reposed in a more morally legitimate way. Now aid would be given in order to protect the environment, and 'good governance' became the buzzword alongside 'responsible' or 'sustainable' development. Through a variety of Green guises, sustainability and social justice has become a vehicle for Western intervention into sovereign states. The UN's Millennium Development Goal 11, for example, insists that 'a planet irredeemably spoilt by human activities... should be exercised multilaterally (and) the United Nations must play a central role'.^{viii}

The move against development

Author Michael Shellenberger writes: ‘Emissions are a by-product of energy consumption, which has been necessary for people to lift themselves, their families, and their societies out of poverty, and achieve human dignity.’^{ix} Across the world, around 790million people do not have basic electricity, nearly three billion lack access to clean cooking fuels, and yet the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 insist that people maintain their lifestyles in harmony with nature, while removing their access to efficient fuel. Instead of raising their living standards, interventions are aimed at slowing or sidestepping development in order to protect the environment.

Development is now beyond the pale. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs is promoting the Green agenda on the basis that nations must move beyond GDP as a measure of wealth and instead use the concept of ‘natural capital’ to benchmark their developmental status. As such, the amount of forests, coastline, unspoiled landscape, wildlife or ecosystems that a country has must be factored in a nation’s economic accounts. In this way, peasant economies can be world-beating. The UN even says that protecting nature can act as ‘a buffer between humans and pathogens’.^x Who needs riches

and products - or vaccines - when you can have a landscape unhindered by energy-intensive modern industry?

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A Green GDP monetises biodiversity, for example, and thus literally encourages developing countries not to develop. Bill Gates' latest book, *How To Avoid A Climate Disaster* is explicit in advocating 'paying countries to maintain their forests'. It sounds like a win-win for non-industrial societies, but it's merely a bribe so that they stand still in order to save the planet. Classic criteria for measuring economic development are being turned upside-down, with natural capital now residing in undeveloped countries where people are being 'encouraged' to increase forest cover, reduce their ambition to develop and even remove agricultural land from production. The West mandates that the developing world stays poor. This is neo-colonialism writ large.

Greens against democracy

While development is off the Green agenda for the developing world, the evolution of Green thinking has metamorphosed into a narcissistic conversation about how to reduce consumption in developed countries in order to show the developing world that we care. Reducing the consumption of those who consume a lot has the ring of socialist egalitarianism, but the focus on the sanctity of nature rather than the improvement of humanity is, by definition, a denial of development.

The Maldives - a beautiful archipelago of 1,200 coral islands set in the Arabian Sea - is a case in point. It has the flattest terrain of any country on earth and lies just 800mm above sea-level. It is clearly at risk of flooding as sea-levels rise. As a result, it has been the poster child of climate-change activism since the UN Earth Summit in 1992. It was a metaphor for the climate crisis: a paradise that would be lost due to Western excesses. It became a single-issue country and eco-dollars poured in. To deny the plight of the island was tantamount to climate-change heresy.

Because of this focus, scant regard was paid to what was happening on the island itself, with the rise of violent criminality, murders of political activists,

attacks on journalists, drug smuggling, Islamist militancy, terrorism, capital punishment for children and corruption at the heart of government. In December 2019, the government closed down the country's leading human-rights organisation and investigated its members for blasphemy. If the environment becomes your primary focus, it is hardly surprising that human misery is of secondary importance. Even environmental stories can become unwelcome if they distort the narrative. For example, recent research shows that sedimentary accretions are raising the level of the Maldives, but this has almost gone unnoticed. It seems that the Maldives are not sinking, after all.^{xi}

Unsurprisingly, the environmental narrative is not open for discussion. 'The science is clear', says the executive director of UNEP: 'The health and prosperity of humanity are directly tied to the state of our environment.'^{xii} Posed as a salvation for humanity, the protection of the environment comes first. There is no discussion - the debate is over.

Once the urgency of that equation is imposed, heavy-handed responses can be legitimated in order to protect the planet. For example, the 'Stop Ecocide' campaign aims to make damaging the ecosystem an international crime on a par with genocide. On a national scale, penalties for non-eco-compliance are

demanded by transnational organisations like Oxfam and Greenpeace, who successfully sued the French government for failing to reduce the country's emissions. Even Pope Francis has condemned those who 'sin against ecology'. By elevating the protection of the environment into a catechism, legal duty, supranational mandate or a scientific fact, there is no room for argument. Businesses, legislatures and governments have been panicked into (but also delighted by) the possibility of implementing policies that require no democratic accountability.

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Democratic accountability is not even acknowledged. The climate-action group Extinction Rebellion has scientifically researched that it needs the involvement of just 3.5 per cent of the population to succeed - this is the mass of people that researchers say is required to pressure governments to change tack and shift from business-as-usual to carbon-neutrality. Votes, elections, referenda, representation, plebiscites - all are an inconvenience. It is far better to reject democracy in favour of reciting the mantra that we are living in a 'climate emergency' (as 75 per cent of all councils in the UK have done).

Who decides our future?

While the UK government is committed to ‘net zero’ emissions by 2050, Extinction Rebellion has decided that the date should be 2025. They say that if we fail to hit that target, ‘millions will die’. There is a growing sense that such environmental alarmism provides a lens through which key decisions can evade scrutiny.

Universities and schools in the UK are required to reimagine their syllabuses through the prism of sustainability, and in so doing, they forsake the concept of academic freedom. Inculcating ‘climate literacy’ as the only way of seeing the world implies that those who disagree with embedding Green politics within academic discourse are illiterate. Academic institutions are now places of single-minded environmental dissemination, instead of open inquiry. The same goes for the mainstream media. For example, Sky is the principal partner for COP26, having ditched unattached journalism for a PR role. All of Sky’s editorial and commissioning teams have been instructed to ‘actively champion sustainability on screen and off’.^{xiii}

The inane simplicity at the heart of the environmental mantra - that grown-ups have ruined the planet - has empowered youngsters to dictate the terms of debate.

From Boris to Biden to Barnier, adults who should know better, but with nothing better to offer, have joined the juvenile bandwagon. As the new youth wing of Green activism tries to engage with the broader political universe, so it becomes clear that they themselves are somewhat separate and distinct from it. Kuba Shand-Baptiste, writing in the *Independent*, speaks of colonialism and racism causing environmental harm rather than recognising that it is the rise of environmentalism that is legitimising new colonial-style interventions by mainstream institutions. For those bodies, social, economic and material development are unacceptable. Oblivious, Shand-Baptiste insists that ‘environmental issues are human issues; are class issues’.^{xiv}

What she didn’t mean is that environmental issues are predominantly middle-class concerns. The *gilets jaunes* in France recognised that environmental legislation was ‘a thing that is done to working people, rather than with them’.^{xv} For Extinction Rebellion, environmental issues are human issues only in as much as humans are deemed to be an invasive and destructive species that ‘threaten the future of life on earth’.^{xvi} It might be more honest to say: ‘environmental issues are anti-human issues’.

For instance, concerns about colonial attitudes to the developing world might be better addressed to the

Green policy wonks in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) whose recommendations for environmentally sensitive employment in under-developed regions of the world include labour-intensive, small-scale decentralised power grids and composting plants,^{xvii} while the UK's International Development Committee praises Malawi's 'direct dependence on natural resources'. Holding down people's aspirations for economic, social and national autonomy is the hallmark of modern day, sustainable, neo-colonialism.

Any idea that Green politics is a fight for equality is laughable. The UN promotes 'gendered environmentalism' whereby it gives preferential funding to women who 'lead sustainable practices in the household'. Another ILO project supports women's work in an 'ecologically innovative model of waste recovery' where female waste collectors sift through bins to separate garbage.^{xviii} If this is a win for women, I don't know what failure looks like. Sadly, it is a classic example of the kind of miserable, labour-intensive, dirty, unproductive work that the Green revolution celebrates for the under-developed world.

Greens are happy to reinterpret the Malthusian orthodoxy to claim that if people ask for more, the planet will die. It is dangerous nonsense. Instead, we must argue for the freedom to enable people to rise

above their subservient relationship with the environment, thus being able to increase their quality of life. As humanists, we need to reformulate the idea that all meaningful production requires the appropriation of nature. And that is a good thing.

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