

The Pernicious Principles of Bjorn Lomborg

Lorna Salzman

Bjorn Lomborg, a founder of something called the Copenhagen Consensus Center, has been widely discredited by scientists here and abroad for his views on climate change and the environment. He deserves repudiation not for holding opinions but for the things that he has omitted from his analysis of which problems should be given priority in the list of Millennium Development Goals for improving human welfare.

What is striking about Lomborg, however, is that his selection of global problems, his criteria for judging their importance, and his proposed solution represent three entirely different and often clashing ideological realms: post-modernism, free market neo-cons, and the Marxist Left. How does one define these and how does Lomborg fit in?

Post-modernism: a denial of science and of “ultimate” truth, and of science’s validity in assessing scientific claims about environmental issues or other societal concerns.

Neo-con/free-marketeers: domination of the human economic system by free trade, the free market and de-regulation. (The obsession of the Left with “equality” and its belief in “economism,” i.e., of economics being the leading determinant of human relations, is the mirror image.)

Neo-Marxist Left: a deliberate selection of those issues directly affecting humanity while ignoring the threats to nonhuman species and planetary ecosystems.

Lomborg, a political analyst with no scientific credentials and whose work has been rejected by the leading Danish scientific institute,

relies primarily on economists. It is not apparent that he has familiarized himself with credible, peer-reviewed climate research. He manifests the same bias that afflicts most economists: reducing the parameters of debate to economics and assigning monetary values to things whose value cannot be impartially determined. Lomborg’s solution is the classic one of economists, a kind of “last refuge of scoundrels” that fits in with their world view: the cost/benefit ratio. Like many other human systems, it is purely arbitrary.

This methodology cannot escape personal bias and, in Lomborg’s case, it stacks the deck in favour of what he considers the most important solution: free trade. In the end, prioritizing problems using (relative) monetary value is strikingly similar to the position of some environmentalists that we need to place a dollar value on nature’s systems and functions in order to prove their worth. Once you do that you have lost the argument by conceding the primacy of your adversary’s criteria.

Readers will immediately recognize the chief flaw in Lomborg’s analysis: that it reflects not only personal bias but an arbitrary measurement system and criteria that conform to a pre-existing ideology, namely free markets and capitalism. Needless to say, the whole physical world of science – nature, evolution, biology and human behaviour, not to mention the loss of biodiversity – plays no role in his analysis. (This is mirrored on the Left with its emphasis on social justice and inequality, where social justice would be the determinant of environmental policy.)

It is important to clarify the relevance of the word “arbitrary.” Every human choice is arbitrary, in the sense that it is disputable and has alternatives. Ideologies clash in order to establish the dominance of their particular world view. The use of arbitration involves the resolution of two arbitrary views through some kind of compromise or reward (which is entirely irrelevant to scientific hypotheses, whose validity is determined by their success or failure to make correct predictions based on assumptions).

But are there criteria that are NON-arbitrary? I know of only two: the laws of physics and the process of evolution. In the case of environmental and ecological disputes, it is evolution, from which the discipline of ecology emerges, that should ideally set the parameters for making policy choices (or ethical and moral ones). This is the only way that bias and ideology can be shut out.

Lomborg’s list of priorities, like those of the extreme Left, places human welfare as the highest value. Nonhuman species, ecosystems and their services are absent. Preserving humanity and human society become – or rather, REMAIN – the sole concerns of those who claim to seek social justice and progress...or economic growth and profit.

Strangely, the free-marketeers and the Left become allies, though they differ in their priorities and in how they would impose their views. The free-marketeers already have their tools in place: global treaties and international financial institutions. The Left’s anticipated rulers would be the (self-identified) oppressed groups all over the world (or at least those who believe in socialism).

Thus, the precept of “economism” – regarding economics as the determinant of the rest of societal relations – dominates both Left and Right ideologies. The whole thrust of the Left and its social justice progeny has had a purely human-centred focus, which in turn changes environmental campaigns into campaigns for social justice, an irresistible attraction for liberals. Thus, the scientific underpinnings of the climate debate are effectively dismissed, as indeed they are by the right. Climate change becomes “cli-

mate justice,” science is dismissed as unsettled and arbitrary...as it is by Lomborg as well.

What Lomborg and Jordan Peterson, Canadian clinical psychologist and admirer of Lomborg, have yet to consider is that it is precisely this human orientation which has allowed the commodification of Nature and led to the global ecological crisis: an unsustainable exploitation of Nature reliant on ever-expanding material growth and consumption out of which all our environmental problems have arisen.

It should be noted that the humanities and social sciences have substantially contributed to this by separating the study of human behaviour from the study of other life forms and most egregiously excluding evolution. In this view, humans are exempt from the laws of Nature that govern other species. This view persists today in the perpetual, tiresome debate over Nature vs. Nurture. It has its origins in the cultural anthropologists and determinists who have long resisted incorporating evolution into their curricula. To counteract this we now have evolutionary psychology that does not shy away from acknowledging the biological roots of human behavior.

Those on the Right accuse those who question economic growth of being leftists or Marxists intent on overthrowing capitalism. It is quite vexing to see Peterson essentially accuse environmental activists of being a watermelon: “green on the outside, red on the inside.” There is no basis for this accusation. It is true of the regressive Left, which remains hostile to environmentalism and views environmental concerns with a Marxist perspective by redefining the climate change problem as an economic and political one at its core. But they are a tiny minority of the environmental community. Most of the environmental activists, scholars and colleagues I have encountered throughout my professional life are in fact unsympathetic to leftist or Marxist views.

A video discussion between Lomborg and Jordan Peterson exemplifies this anti-ecological fixation on human welfare, with no regard to other species and ecosystems, that is, to the

over-arching crisis of biodiversity loss, which many scientists believe to be the most serious global crisis facing us. Lomborg's strictly materialistic view of the crisis only holds if one erases science and Nature from the canvas, and if one ignores evolution, one of the two non-arbitrary criteria for judging the importance of environmental issues.

Why should the preservation of biodiversity be the most important choice? Why should evolution be the criterion for human moral choices and policymaking? Since the Big Bang and the appearance of life on our planet, the process of evolution has resulted in increasing complexity and speciation. Genetic diversity and behavioural diversity are what allow natural selection to operate.

But diversity is also the *result* of evolution as well as its prerequisite. The vector in evolution is DNA, carried in the human genome and that of all other life forms (with the exception of RNA viruses, whose genetic material is DNA's "messenger"). This links us to the first primitive life forms as well as to all other living creatures. If there is anything like a holy scripture or doctrine that deserves respect, worship and preservation, it is the evolutionary process. And the destruction of its product, biodiversity, could aptly be called blasphemy, the vilification of things considered sacred.

Lomborg does not deal in such esoteric scientific concepts. His goal is "getting the biggest bang for the buck," i.e., selecting and prioritizing the problems where one can get the best results for the money spent – as opposed to spending money on what is considered (whether by scientists, government or the public) to be the greatest threat. For him, climate science is unsettled, and disputable...a postmodern view if ever there was one.

This is far from the case, however; both the overwhelming scientific consensus on the future impact of climate change as well as the concrete data, in which the negative trends move relentlessly in a dire direction, provide as secure a foundation for action as the trust that the sun will rise each morning. This casual dismissal of the scientific underpinnings of ecological prob-

lems mirrors the Left's transliteration of climate change into "climate justice." It rests on dangerous ground because it opens a path to all manner of arbitrary and authoritarian thought, from Left and Right.

In any event, this approach clearly benefits those who challenge the gravity of climate change, and whose opinions and remedies, not to mention political and economic affinities, then appear more persuasive. Exclusion of the natural world, ecology and biodiversity is revealed as ideological and arbitrary. As a critic of ideology and an evolutionist, Peterson should logically be rejecting Lomborg entirely.

In his video discussion with Lomborg, Peterson attributes much of the alarm over climate change to the leftist goal of abolishing capitalism. This is a surpassingly superficial analysis for Peterson but understandable given that the Left and the social justice movement are indeed co-opting environmentalism by redefining the crisis as "climate justice," thus writing off (as Lomborg does) the demonstrable scientific basis for concern. It is regrettable that Peterson has fallen for this leftist ploy and that he does not trust the extensive research in biology and ecology enough to realize that most environmental activists' concerns are substantiated by science in all respects.

Here are a few questions for both Lomborg and Peterson. Why should the cost-benefit ratio be the sole means of making policy judgments? Why should human welfare be the primary aim? Why not ask a different question: why should the preservation of planetary health and integrity, and of the evolutionary process, not be the criteria?

A view from "the eye of God" would give a different answer. That view would not see human beings as the most important species. Nor could it ignore the fact that humans have created palpable ecological crises that cause both human suffering and the extinction of other species, and which Lomborg, Peterson, and even Steven Pinker in his rosy depiction of human progress, ignore.

If, as some might claim, the view of God rules, from "the eye of God" there is no evi-

dence for believing that humans are at the pinnacle of life forms. But both a believer and an atheist could rationally argue that God/Nature created DNA, life and the evolutionary process, and that preserving *these* was his/her intent and therefore, from a moral viewpoint, the most important purpose of humanity.

If there is any such thing as a sacred belief or doctrine, it would have to be based on the seeming “miracle” of life on Earth and the fact of the single origin of all life forms. The evolution of complexity, the function of DNA and RNA, and the interconnectedness of all life are arguably the most precious gifts we inherit. But the loss of biodiversity threatens this profound and explanatory truth.

Instead, Lomborg makes a positive economic outcome the highest goal, while ignoring the demonstrably negative effects of human-centred economics. In the end these are value judgments and they are not strengthened by statistics on how many lives could be saved if we spent more money on health and medical care than on curbing climate change (which is his main argument, with free trade as the mechanism).

Another oversight is the social impact of resource extraction and industry on indigenous peoples and lands, which has led to massive human rights violations and a loss of cultural diversity globally. In this respect, free trade has little to boast about and its flaws are now obvious, including its adverse environmental *and* social impact, destroying both ecosystems and the societies of indigenous people.

The loss of indigenous societies, languages and cultures is the human equivalent of extinguishing populations or species of nonhuman life forms. It is a loss of cultural diversity, that popular buzzword of the Left today. But the Left has no interest in the oppression of indigenous peoples because these societies are outside the ken of leftist ideology and their exploitation cannot be attributed to the US. Instead they celebrate the new Latin American authoritarians like Maduro and Morales, just as they celebrated Castro, Correa, and Chavez.

One of the clearest demonstrations of the link between ecology and social justice, and

the most ignored, is that it is indigenous societies reliant on intact ecosystems who are the last protectors of biodiversity in the world. The loss of an indigenous culture means the loss of a defence against the globalized “free trade” that Lomborg thinks is the salvation of humanity. Cultural diversity represents the equivalent of biological diversity, both of which are crucial to both civilization and survival.

Peterson, anxious to not appear ideological, stresses the need to be agnostic about how we rank the greatest threats. This is, again, arbitrary because it means being agnostic about science. One does not have to believe in “scientism” (that science is the answer to all problems) in order to believe in its efficacy and relevance in making policy choices.

In one respect Lomborg is correct: uncurbed climate change will not destroy humanity or human civilization. It will cause human suffering and economic dislocation if not collapse, probably varying from region to region. But even if human civilization ended, there would be non-human life forms persisting and evolution would continue without us.

In sum, biodiversity is a prerequisite for evolution as well as its product. To reduce it is dangerous *and* blasphemous. That neither Lomborg nor Peterson has given critical thought to the dismantling of natural systems and species extinction is truly disturbing and, in the case of Peterson, inexplicable. Lomborg’s analysis and prescriptions are in the end pernicious and alien to the values and ethics that are needed to save both humanity and the planet. The economics-based ideologies of both Left and Right are intent on forcing us to choose between them. Economics remains the “dismal science.”•

Lorna Salzman worked as regional representative of Friends of the Earth in the 1970s and 1980s. After her tenure at the NYC Dept. of Environmental Protection as a natural resource specialist, she co-founded the NY State Green Party and sought the US Green Party presidential nomination in 2004. She is the author of Politics as if Evolution Mattered, which addresses the intersection of evolutionary thought and human society. www.lornasalzman.com