Our Crushing Dilemmas

How do environmentalists fight without losing what we're fighting for?

George Monbiot

5th May 2011

In my column earlier this week, I discussed the crisis the environment movement is now confronting. I'm using this essay to expand on the problems I mentioned there, and in particular to consider the most interesting of the responses to the crisis proposed so far, by Paul Kingsnorth. Let me begin by spelling out, at greater length, the dilemmas we face.

1. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions means increasing electricity production. It is hard to see a way around this. Because low-carbon electricity is the best means of replacing the fossil fuels used for heating and transport, electricity generation will rise, even if we manage to engineer a massive reduction in overall energy consumption. The Zero Carbon Britain report published by the Centre for Alternative Technology envisages a 55% cut in overall energy demand by 2030 – and a near-doubling of electricity production.

2. Low carbon electricity means, to most greens, renewables. They were never well-loved, but now, in the places in which major deployment is taking place, they are provoking something approaching a full-scale revolt. Here in mid-Wales, for example, and in the Highlands of Scotland, public anger towards wind farms and the power lines and hubs required to serve them is coming to dominate local politics. While there are plenty of stupid myths circulating about the inability of wind turbines to produce electricity and about the greenhouse gases released in constructing them, in other respects the opposition to them is not irrational. People love their landscapes, and so they should.

Those of us who support renewables find ourselves in a difficult position: demanding the industrialisation of the countryside, supporting new power stations, new power lines and (for the electricity storage required) new reservoirs. Even offshore power, whose landscape impacts are much smaller, means more grid connections and more storage.

3. The only viable low-carbon alternative we have at the moment is nuclear power. This has the advantage of being confined to compact industrial sites, rather than sprawling over the countryside, and of requiring fewer new grid connections (especially if new plants are built next to the old ones). It has the following disadvantages:

a. The current generation of power stations require uranium mining, which destroys habitats and pollutes land and water. Though its global impacts are much smaller than the global impacts of coal, the damage it causes cannot be overlooked.

b. The waste it produces must be stored for long enough to be rendered safe. It is not technically difficult to do this, with vitrification, encasement and deep burial, but governments keep delaying their decisions as a result of public opposition.

Both these issues (as well as concerns about proliferation and security) could be addressed through the replacement of conventional nuclear power with thorium or integral fast reactors but, partly as a result of public resistance to atomic energy, neither technology has yet been developed. (I'll explore the potential of both approaches in a later column).

c. Nuclear power divides our movements. Some of the most effective environmental organisations – Greenpeace for example – could not drop their opposition without falling apart.

4. Whichever low-carbon technology we embrace, we help to provide the means by which the industrial economy can keep expanding, even if it does so without a major release of greenhouse gases. This threatens to exacerbate all the other issues that concern us. To prevent this from happening, the replacement of fossil fuels should be accompanied by a transition to a steady-state economy. Herman Daly and Tim Jackson have shown us how this can be done technically. How it can be done politically is, at present, quite another matter.

5. Those who, on the other hand, advocate a return to a land-based economy and the abandonment of industrial society find themselves in conflict with the desires of most of humanity, in both rich and poor nations. They have produced no convincing account of how people could be persuaded to turn their backs on manufactured products, advanced infrastructure and public services.

6. Our reliance on the mineral crunch, which was supposed to have brought the economic engine of destruction to a grinding halt, appears to have been misplaced. The collapse of accessible mineral reserves has not occurred, and shows little sign of occurring within our lifetimes. Capitalism has proved adept at finding new reserves or (in the case of fossil fuels) substitutes for those that are depleting. This takes place at a massive cost to the environment, as exploitation intrudes into an ever wider range of habitats and involves ever more destructive processes. New mineral reserves allow us to continue waging war against biodiversity, habitats, soil, fresh water supplies and the climate.

7. We have no idea what to do next.

8. Partly as a result, we have started tearing each other apart. This is an understandable but unnecessary reaction. Those seeking to protect the landscape are not our enemies; nor are those advocating that renewables should replace fossil fuel; nor are those promoting nuclear power as the answer; nor are those opposing nuclear power. We are all struggling with the same problem, all bumping up against atmospheric chemistry and physical constraints.

The enmity arises when people go into denial. Denial is everywhere. Those opposing windfarms find it convenient to deny that climate change is happening, or that turbines produce much electricity. Those promoting windfarms downplay the landscape impacts. Enthusiasts for nuclear power ignore the impacts of uranium mining. Opponents of nuclear power dismiss the solid science on the impacts of radiation and embrace wildly-inflated junk numbers instead. Primitivists decry all manufacturing industry, but fail to explain how their medicines and spectacles, scythes and billhooks will be produced. Localists rely on technologies – such as microwind and high-latitude solar power – that cannot deliver. Technocratic greens refuse to see that if economic growth is not addressed, a series of escalating catastrophes is inevitable. Romantic greens insist that

the problem can be solved without even engaging in these dilemmas, yet fail to explain how else it can be done.

We're all responding to the same impulses, but we're all being tripped up by denial. Denial, and a failure to see the whole picture, are our enemies. Or perhaps, as doctors say about alcohol, our false friends.

I'm by no means the first to recognise that environmentalism is stuck. Paul Kingsnorth co-founded the Dark Mountain project as a means of exploring this problem. His latest essay The Quants and the Poets is a compelling and beautifully-written account of the way in which "the green movement has torpedoed itself with numbers" and is now trying to save the world "one emission at a time." Trying to accommodate a narrative of other people's making, greens "feel obliged to act like speak-your-weight machines just to be heard." This approach, he argues, "has left environmentalism in a position where its advocates now find themselves unable to do anything but argue about which machines they would prefer to use to power an ever-growing industrial economy."

He explains his prescription as follows:

> "What is missing here is stories, and an understanding of the importance of stories in getting to the bottom of what is really going on. Because at root, this whole squabble between worldviews is not about numbers at all – it is about narratives. ... How to reassert the importance of stories, then, is perhaps a key question now. Green poets might perhaps start by observing that worlds are not 'saved' by the same stories that are killing them. They might want to observe that saving worlds is an impossible business in the first place, and that attempting to do so is likely to lead to some very dark places. Or they might try and explore what it is about how we see ourselves which reduces us to this, time and time again – arguing about machines rather than wondering what those machines give us and what they take away."

In his magnificent book Landscape and Memory, Simon Schama argues in support of a poetic narrative of the kind Kingsnorth promotes.

> Of one thing at least I am certain: that not to take myth seriously in the life of an ostensibly "disenchanted" culture like our own is actually to impoverish our understanding of our shared world."

I'm sure that's right, as is Schama's warning that, in embracing narratives, we do not become morally blinded by their poetic power. (He was thinking, in particular, about the old German stories of the redemptive power of the Urwald – the ancient Hercynian forest – and the national myth of the German forest character, arising from Arminius's victory over the Romans in the forbidding Teutoburger Wald. Poetic narratives, even initially harmless ones, have a nasty habit of backfiring spectacularly.)

But here too there is a problem. Green narratives have collapsed precisely because they were unable to withstand the steely quantification demanded by an attempt to get to grips with problems like climate change. Or they have been struck down by circumstance: such as the inconvenient non-appearance of the commodities crunch they predicted. If a new poetic narrative is no better able to answer questions such as how a steady-state economy can be achieved, how low-carbon electricity will be produced, how the Common Fisheries Policy can be reformed or how, in a land-based economy, bricks and glass will be made, it too will collapse. In fact, it will never get off the ground as these questions, once formulated, won't go away.

Perhaps we are less tolerant of myth than we used to be. Perhaps we should be. Is creating new, opposing myths the best way of confronting the founding myths of neoliberal capitalism? I don't think so. Is it not better to fight them with withering analysis, quantification and exposure? But can we do this without becoming insensible to beauty, and to the impulse – a love for the world and its people, its places and its living creatures – which turned us green in the first place? I don't know. I do know that it's a discussion in which we have to engage.

George Monbiot
Our Crushing Dilemmas
How do environmentalists fight without losing what we're fighting for?
5th May 2011

Published on the Guardian's website on 5th May 2011

www.thetedkarchive.com