

The future: Compassion, complacency, or contempt?

A response to John Foster

[By Rupert Read]

John Foster's voice is one the world badly needs to hear. He ruptures the complacent assumptions of the legion advocates of narratives of 'progress', 'growth' and 'sustainable development'. His resolute willingness to face climate-reality head-on is, against the backdrop of such complacency, heartening. I have to state that point explicitly; because such resolution is still *vanishingly* rare.

By my lights, *the vast majority of us are in climate-denial*. I.e. Not just 'climate-sceptics'; not by a long chalk. Hardly *any* of us are willing, or perhaps able, to look in the eye what we are doing to ourselves, to our home, to our children and theirs.

And now I have to be brutally honest: this equates to *de facto* contempt for our descendants. If we bequeath to them a climate-ruined planet, what do you think they will feel for us? This thought already ought to wake us up.

What we have already to accept without reservation — and this is the starting-point of the new project of the thinktank which I chair, Green House (co-founded by Brian Heatley, also a contributor to this special issue), 'Facing up to climate-reality' — is that extremely substantial — unheard-of, appalling, partly-irreversible — damage is going to be done to 'Gaia' and to humanity by human-triggered climate-change. As my piece in this issue bluntly puts it: we are committed for the remainder of the lifetimes of many of us to a rising level of climate-disasters. That is the *sine qua non* now of recognising climate-reality: that we are *committed* to a net-worsening situation for decades to come, and that the chances even of preventing runaway climate change may be low. This is bad enough, and ought to be enough to 'satisfy' Foster.

But it would be an act of reckless uncaring to claim to know that the chances of stopping runaway climate change are as-good-as-zero. And to give the impression that we know the future in any such way risks encouraging an *apathetic* complacency.

Foster alleges that there is no *possibility* that we might yet transform ourselves to stop catastrophic climate change: but this is in profound tension with his claim [OLG, p.5] that "massively complex feedbacks and systemic sensitivities render human impacts on the biosphere into the medium-term future effectively indeterminable". You can't have it both ways. As it happens, I think that the latter claim of his may well even be somewhat overstated. But what is certainly true is: we do not know the future nearly as well as (extremely-widespread) techno-scientific hubris takes it that we do. This is the reason for our great need at this time for the Precautionary Principle.¹

It is also a valid reason for not accepting the level of despair enjoined by Foster about the possibility of a transformation that would be enough.

¹ See e.g. my paper co-authored with Nassim Taleb et al, "The Precautionary Principle", *NYU Extreme Risk Initiative Working Paper*, (2014). Available at: <http://www.fooledbyrandomness.com/pp2.pdf> .

Loss of control: yes, that is now our fate, to a large extent. We need to accept loss of a fantasised control over the planetary system, and over our own destiny. But that means we also do not get to be as confident as Foster is about how bad our future will be. We do not know, as he claims we do, that our chances of escaping climate-nemesis are negligible.

Letting go of certainty: yes. What that means is that we badly need to embrace a precautionary ethic. For such an ethic is a way of living in a world that we will never fully understand, let alone control. A way of living that *'builds down'* our impacts until we might eventually no longer threaten our own future.

In sum: Foster's *knowingness about the inevitable failure of all existing projects over-reaches*. We cannot know the future. Precaution warns us to guard against threats that may be far worse than we know; BUT it also warns us not to be too 'certain' in any doom-mongering.

Marx famously remarked that human beings only set themselves such problems as they can solve. We don't quite know this, either. The 'wicked' problem that is global over-heat is going to be fiendishly difficult to solve; it may in practice be insoluble. And it certainly has tragic dimensions, some of them already irredeemable. But to claim to know categorically that it is insoluble is to make the same mistake as any Pollyanna-ish advocates of endless human progress: it is to claim to know that there is nothing new under the (now harsher) Sun. As Arendt stresses, there is *always* the possibility of something new coming into the world. Foster ought not to be too 'knowing', lest he fall back into the camp of those who he has brilliantly critiqued. No-one really ever knows much at all of what is going to happen, in the human future. This is a constitutive point (It is the reason too why all precognition / time-travel narratives, the latest of which to hit our big screens is *Arrival*, are, literally, nonsense).

Who for instance could have anticipated, before it happened, that the biggest block-buster in history would be a Gaia-centric eco-warrior epic featuring American marines and corporations as the would-be ecocidal *enemy*, a film so potentially incendiary that the Chinese government basically banned it from being viewed by their entire (restive) rural population? The thrilling consciousness-raising power of *Avatar* is one (not-so-)small indicator of what is possible for us. Imagine if, when its sequels appear, we were, together, ready to take advantage of that: to seek to use *Avatar* to help facilitate a *transformation of consciousness*...

Climate-disasters may yet facilitate a transformation of our consciousness. And, with the will, it would even now not be too difficult to change to a climate-sane path. The main things we'd have to do, at the level of on-the-ground policy-change, include: change from a path of ecosystem destruction to one of massive ecosystem-restoration (including large-scale rewilding); eliminate most intensive industrial animal-husbandry; change our agricultural methods to more labour-intensive permacultural / agro-ecological methods; switch wherever feasible from building with cement and bricks to building with high-quality (and well-insulated) wood, in long-term programmes of *de facto* sequestration of carbon; radically relocalise our food systems and indeed our economic systems in general; as well as of course rapidly dropping fossil fuels in favour of (genuine) renewables (chiefly: wind, water and sun), and engaging in huge 'Green New Deal' -style programmes of demand-reduction and energy-efficiency. Challenging indeed; but *all* of this could be done *within a few years*, if we willed it. The prospect undoubtedly seems remote; as does any revolution, before it happens.

Foster talks [OLG, p.15] about the utter outdatedness at the present time of any and all “unchallenged attachment to .. Enlightenment values”. Quite right. But what about a radically challenging transformation of Enlightenment values? That’s what I am in favour of - following Wittgenstein (and Foucault; and Illich and Gorz). Taking these values far closer to communitarian, ecologicistic, truly conservative values. We ought to be conservative, in the (true) sense of seeking to conserve what we have, of respecting our elders and forebears, and of not too-hastily abandoning venerable and knowledge-rich traditions. This means abandoning neoliberalism, and indeed many features of the political philosophy of liberalism. Accepting anything like this requires a revolution in the cosy assumptions of virtue-signalling chattering-classes: the valorisation of the high-tech, the gigantic and the global needs to give way for something which will actually fit with (for example) what living communities struggling to deal with and ‘grow’ through climate-disasters need.

I find it slightly disappointing that Foster is not more excited about the values of community-solidarity, or about the prospects of localisation: including ‘disaster-relocalisation’, which we could envisage as a healthy alternative to ‘Shock-Doctrine’-style responses to the coming slew of climate-caused disasters.² This *isn’t* just a repackaging of the progressive package; it is a *transformation* of whatever is still living in that package, and a working in of stuff outside it (especially, of stuff that came *before* it; including, vitally, learning from the world’s remaining indigenous peoples).

Still, I am glad to see Foster speaking in terms of the prospects of climate-change-triggered ‘transformative experience’ enveloping much of humanity. That is exactly what my climate disasters paper is about. I think that Foster equivocates on whether or not people/communities in (climate-)disasters can undergo just such experiences.

Finally; in his “Critical response to Rupert Read”, Foster seeks to undermine my argument that caring for one’s children mandates caring for the distant future because caring for one’s children IS caring simultaneously for their children. He argues that the degree to which one cares about one’s grandchildren is less than about one’s children, and that this deterioration iterates.

I think that this is mistaken.

I would first anecdotally remark that many grandparents like their grandchildren *more* than their children. The intense relationship with one’s children eases into a more even benignity, with regard to grandchildren. It is not coincidental that the classic image in Buddhism of mindful regard for one’s thoughts is that of a benign *grandmother* watching her grandkids playing, not of a mother. But if those grandkids were threatened, Grandma would likely get tigerish. Well: they *are* so threatened.

Secondly, Foster’s argument may derive a ring of plausibility from the elementary truth that, at average levels of replacement (ie. if the average parent has two kids), then one has twice as many grandkids as kids, four times as many great-grandkids, and so on. Thus it is unsurprising if one’s affection is less intense for one’s grandkids considered as individuals, for it is more diffused. But my suggestion is that it remains at the same level if

² See e.g. the report “Post-growth localisation” (2016), by myself and Helena Norberg-Hodge, co-published by Green House and Local Futures (Weymouth: United Kingdom; Totnes: United Kingdom), available at: http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/uploads/4/8/3/2/48324387/post-growth-localisation_pamphlet.pdf . See also our article in the Ecologist “After Brexit and Trump: don’t demonise; localise!” (22 Nov 2016), available at: http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/2988362/after_brexit_and_trump_dont_demonise_localise.html .

'summed' across each generation - on pain of otherwise one actually not caring even for one's kids.

Thirdly, I have argued elsewhere ³ that my argument does not result in the utterly absurd conclusion that, for the sake of our very distant descendants, we have to act now to try to stop the Sun becoming a red giant, or to stop the Universe's heat-death. Rather, my argument is that our care for our kids iterates into just as strong a care for their descendants *only so long as we can reasonably foresee and act on what needs to be done to protect them*. But, in the present case, it is pretty easy to see what that means. It means *doing our all* to head off the threat of runaway climate change in its full Damoclean awfulness, as indicated above. Failing to head off that threat is like discounting the future, or worse: it *is* equivalent to believing that future generations, after the next few, basically do not matter.

I am under no illusions that my argument concerning how caring for one's kids translates into caring for the whole human (and thus the whole biospheric) future will be enough alone to head off climate-catastrophe! Indeed, I think it on balance — tragically — highly unlikely that we *will* head it off. But we might. And, the more this argument gets known, the more that people come to think and feel long-term - compassionately -, the more that slight chance *increases*.

And, in the darkness of this time, that is an encouraging thought.

³ See especially n.22 of my report on "Guardians of the Future" (2012), published by Green House (Weymouth: United Kingdom), available at:
http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/uploads/4/8/3/2/48324387/guardians_inside_final.pdf

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