The Pleasures and Challenges of Degrowth: A Conversation with Kate Soper

Ben Highmore, Mandy Merck and Jenny Bourne Taylor

INTRODUCTION

When we were planning this special issue of *New Formations*, we knew we wanted to engage with the work of the philosopher Kate Soper. In part this was because her recently published book, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism*, spoke so directly and urgently to the challenge of 'living' with and within a future of extinction, a future that to some degree is already catastrophic, but one where the possibilities of degrowth might mitigate the worst effects of global warming and provide a new understanding of what constitutes a satisfying life.[1] But we also wanted to acknowledge the importance of her work across the decades as that of someone who has staked out a position and a practice that brings together the politics of consumption, the reimagining of the 'good life', a philosophy of human needs, feminism and what might be called a post-post-structuralist sensibility. At the centre of her project is the realist question of human and planetary flourishing. Her scepticism, a natural disposition for a philosopher, is often aimed at theoretical propositions and positions that seem to prevent the kind of social and political commitments that might be required to bring about the progressive social change needed for that flourishing.

1. Kate Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism*, Verso, 2020.

Soper's philosophical work emerged out of the 1970s heyday of Althusserian 'scientific' Marxism, where humanism became a term used to downgrade philosophical approaches that engaged with terms like 'alienation' or 'species being'. But Soper's position never implied a return to old sureties. Her first book, which grew out of her doctoral research, was on human needs and established a path that sought to flesh out terms like 'human', 'need', 'citizen', 'gender', 'nature', 'consumption', and so on.[2] Terms like 'human' are invaluable to us, but only if we open them up to uncertainty and becoming, and wrestle them away from those who claim to *already* know the essence of the human and see it as existing outside of history. Taking on the topic of 'what do humans need', that book sets the tone for her subsequent work, not because she pursued the analysis of Marxist philosophy, but because it connected philosophy to a grounded politics. To imagine an emancipatory future, to work towards that future through political struggle, requires a generative mode of thinking: the future can only be better if it is better able to satisfy human needs, even if some of those needs are only just emerging or

2. Kate Soper, *Human Needs: Open and Closed Theories in a Marxist Perspective*, Harvester, 1981. Other works that pursue this generative approach include *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*, Blackwell, 1995.

DOI: 10.3898/NewF:107-8.13.2022

becoming known. Not to state what those needs are and what they might be if we could live emancipatory lives, is not so much a philosophical failure as a political one: it concedes the ground to others who are less mealy-mouthed about what it is we need. And it is here that her commitments to feminism were also about rethinking both need and the good life in a world structured around patriarchal assumptions.[3]

3. Kate Soper, *Troubled Pleasures: Writings on Politics, Gender and Hedonism*, Verso, 1990.

Perhaps the most surprising and engaging aspect of Soper's work is its emphasis on pleasure. Soper's approach to pleasure has always been a world away from the seductions of the shiny gizmo world of Amazon, of Hollywood glitz and of what critical theorists might call the dreamscapes of modernity. For her, pleasure is the antidote to the treadmill of work and commodification. In this way Soper performs a reverse image of the way that the political right paints leftism as a form of puritanism that seeks to destroy everyone else's 'harmless' fun. For Soper it is the hyper-consumerism of late capitalism, coupled with the gruelling competitiveness of longer and longer hours at work, and more and more demands on your time, that is puritanical. It is this which withholds pleasure. Hedonism, here, is not the individualised soporific of someone who wants-for-nothing, blunting their sensorium through over-consumption, it is the pleasure of someone who takes time to smell the coffee, so to say. In an interview from 1998 she lays out her position: 'For me the point of political emancipation has to be thought in terms of the pleasures it can provide, and the forms of happiness which it might enable … I want a political imaginary that highlights the sensuality, the almost baroque pleasures that we might otherwise indulge in'.[4] And it is pleasure that grounds her insistence that the forms of degrowth that wealthy countries have to adopt in order to face up to environmental catastrophe don't have to be experienced as a loss. Degrowth is here seen as the gateway to a more fulfilling way of living, a more sensual and aesthetically rich form of life.

4. Ted Benton, 'An Alternative Hedonism: An Interview with Kate Soper', *Radical Philosophy*, 92, 1998, p33.

New Formations: *You have been making the arguments for the need to find alternative forms of pleasure to those of dominant consumer culture for many years, and now arguments for degrowth are being made increasingly by, for example, Tim Jackson and Jason Hickel, who also link their analysis to a critique of capitalism. In what ways do your arguments go beyond theirs?*

Kate Soper: Tim Jackson has also, it should be said, been pressing the case for degrowth for a good while. His *Prosperity without Growth* was the culmination of his work at the Sustainable Development Commission from 2004 to 2011 (when the then new coalition government axed it), and it includes a section drawing on my 'alternative hedonist' argument.[5] He was also a plenary speaker at the conference I organised on alternative consumption at my university in 2006. So, our arguments have been quite closely aligned and, in many ways, complementary. A key difference, of course, is that Jackson (like Hickel) is

5. Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, Routledge, 2011.

an economist and brings that kind of expertise to his argument, where my approach is more informed by philosophy, social theory and cultural studies – and I have presented my work as a contribution to the cultural shifts of thinking that I view as the essential condition of building more support for any degrowth economic agenda. I have also probably been more influenced by left theory in my approach to thinking about social transformation and its agencies – and I am maybe more utopian/unrealistic in consequence! In his work as Director at CUSP (Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity), Tim has worked quite closely with other campaigning groups, notably the New Economic Forum, with politicians and the church and other, more mainstream, institutions and helped to make a degrowth agenda more acceptable in those circles. I would say that Tim also brings a somewhat more religiously influenced or inflected approach to thinking about the 'good life' than I have; I think he is less happy than I to invoke the hedonist idea. But we have talked about this together and clarified some of our disagreements in a podcast we did together last year.[6]

I know less about Jason Hickel's background and intellectual career, but I have also been influenced by him, and again endorse much of his argument. His *Less is More* is extremely helpful, and I have also drawn on his articles in writing *Post-Growth Living*.[7] Again, I would say that the main differences are to do with his more economically focussed (and anthropologically informed) approach, and his conception of 'living well' as defined by official human development indicators (life expectancy, sanitation, income, education, electricity, employment and democracy). His tendency, I think, is to accept more of the gauges of the 'high' standard of living associated with current affluence and its consumer culture, while insisting on greater justice in distribution as the way to supply them. And, also, of course rejecting growth for growth's sake as a way of delivering them. He is less ready than I am to criticise affluent living in virtue of its downsides and negative impacts on consumers themselves, or to appeal to emergent forms of disaffection with affluent consumption as a vehicle of political support for a less growth driven economy, or to cite them as legitimating his claims about human needs and wellbeing. Alternative hedonism, in this sense, does not really feature in his argument.

When it comes to ontology and how to conceptualise the humanity/nature coupling, Hickel is much more influenced by animistic and shamanistic thinking than I am, and this plays a larger role in his understanding of ecological crisis. I don't dissent from everything he says on animism and the 'interconnection of everything', but I do find his philosophical defence of it fairly shallow and unconvincing.

On the issue of degrowth, I should make it clear that I agree with Hickel that growth will be needed in the poorest nations as a condition of greater global harmony, also with Kate Raworth's arguments that growth may be a temporary impact of measures taken (e.g. on renewable energy and solar

6. The podcast can be found at: https://www.resilience.org/stories/2021-05-17/from-what-if-to-what-next-kate-soper-and-tim-jackson/

7. Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, Windmill Books, 2021.

power) to secure a 'regenerative and distributive' economy. In referring to 'post-growth living' I am pointing to the re-thinking of prosperity that will be needed to promote eventual transition to a degrowth economy.

NF: *Linked to this, there is also a move in mainstream culture around finding a 'simpler life', particularly since the pandemic. I'm thinking of the rise of crafting, TV programmes such as* The Repair Shop*, as well a range of self-help books such as Katherine May's* Wintering *and books decrying the importance of 'stuff' and the pleasures of downsizing, for mental health as well as climate-related reasons.*[8] *What do you make of these? Cause for optimism or an alternative form of consumerism?*

8. *The Repair Shop* is a BBC TV series, set in the living museum of Weald and Downland, near Chichester in West Sussex. Members of the public bring in items in need of repair, and often with enormous sentimental value, for the team to mend. Katherine May, *Wintering: the Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*, Rider, 2020.

KS: I see the new interest in craft (and especially the Craftivism movement) as quite positive and supportive developments (and acknowledge them as such in my own discussion of craft in *Post-Growth Living*). And TV programmes and other media encouragements of recycling, repairing, mending and making do, are likewise quite useful – and may help people to become more involved in doing things for themselves, and in loosening the grip of more brand and fast fashion driven ways of dressing, homemaking etc. I'm a bit less enthused about the mindfulness and minimalist trends, which I think are fairly locked into the capitalist market and often functioning as lucrative niche markets in themselves. But I don't want to get too iffy about them – and they have been defended by those who think degrowth advocates have to appeal outside leftish circles and to those whose values and identities are not fully aligned with the green agenda. The argument here is that we cannot allow 'downsizing' and 'minimalism' to be appropriated by neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility and conspicuous consumption. We need strategically to use their current popularity, expose their connections with more radical green causes, and thus, as it were, bring them more into that fold.

NF: *At times your definition of economic growth is 'ever expanding material production' and elsewhere 'ever-expanding Gross Domestic Product'. This seems to be equated with a 'technology driven way of life'. What is the status of service industries for this argument? What if the increase in those transactions does not increase CO_2 emissions? Or do you see Britain's bias to service production as inevitably being undermined by the importation of high CO_2 emitting consumer goods and therefore cancelling any advantage?*

KS: I think it depends what the servicing industries are servicing and how tied in they are to high carbon emitting activities, use of material goods and modes of transport. In other words, are the services in question locked into the growth driven 'consumerist' lifestyle, and largely provided by corporate businesses, or are they of the kind that could in principle co-exist with fairer and more democratic forms of ownership and control; with a more 'reproductive' (rather than growth-oriented) approach to essential forms of consumption and a

less competitive economic order; with eco-benign infrastructures and forms of provision that favour cycling and walking and trains and boats for longer distances, rather than a transport system reliant on car transport and air flight? Obviously, we cannot aspire to such an altered system of production and consumption without a public mandate for contesting the status quo. In this respect, my argument does not differ from that of environmentalists who insist on greater equality and a radical break with capitalism, or at the very least strong regulation of it, as a condition of any globally sustainable green renaissance. What is more distinctive to my approach is the emphasis I place on the role that 'alternative hedonist' thinking and campaigning on the pleasures and fulfilments of sustainable consumption could (arguably, must) play in building support for any political mandate.

As I have tried to make clear, however, in *Post-Growth Living*, alternative hedonism is not ascetic in outlook nor denouncing sensual pleasure. Indeed, I argue for it in part because of the greater opportunities it could open up for more convivial and expansive forms of interaction – and these forms of enjoyment are those that several parts of the service industries are currently providing in such areas as tourism, general travel, hospitality, entertainment, sport etc. But in a more sustainable socio-economic order they would be differently focussed (e.g. less fast-food outlets, more provision for allotment growing, artisan workshops, communal cooking and laundry, fewer gyms because of better outside facilities for exercise, far fewer urban areas devoted to car parking or advertisement, thus freeing up spaces for educational, recreational and cultural activities, impromptu art, etc.). And they would be differently supplied (more locally based, communally owned and run, etc.) Experiments are already planned or underway in some urban settings.[9] High streets and shopping centres would be transformed along with a transport infrastructure favouring pedestrians and cyclists etc. Consumption would gradually become less individualised, more reliant on collaborative initiatives, sharing and exchange of goods, with high street and shopping centre outlets for these.

9. See, for example, the plans for One Planet in Cardiff at: https://www.oneplanetcardiff.co.uk/

But there are, of course, other services (medical, legal, insurance, policing etc.) and the provision of utilities (energy, water, sewage, waste disposal and so on), which would need to adopt more sustainable practices, but could probably make such changes relatively easily and adjust more readily to the different circumstances, health needs, etc. I have always argued that we can and should combine the smartest forms of technology in some of these areas (notably medicine, energy provision) with recourse in other areas to slower and more traditional methods – that we should take advantage of hybrids of old and new techniques where it would be to the advantage of sustainability and pleasanter forms of working.

NF: *Your broadly optimistic approach has echoes of 1970s post-scarcity anarchy, but are most British people living in a 'post-scarcity' economy today? As someone of a similar*

age, I wonder if there is a generational aspect to your stance?

KS: Probably there is something of a generational stance – it may be inevitable that one becomes somewhat blinkered with age. I would be the first to admit it – I refuse to use social media, for example, experience nostalgias that younger generations are not subject to, and so forth. I do, however, have some sense of their fears and insecurities, even if I can't be inside their heads or fully understand their troubles and aspirations – and there has to date probably been more enthusiasm for *Post-Growth Living* from younger than from older readers.

As for 'post-scarcity anarchism': I'm a bit surprised by this comparison, although there are a few overlaps with Murray Bookchin's argument. Scarcity, of course, is a relative concept: some essential resources and provisions are scarce only because others have far too much – and fairer distribution is the corrective. In the UK, successive Conservative governments have obviously created considerable scarcity in this sense for a now growing swathe of the impoverished public. But 'scarcity' is also relative to what goods become more needed to maintain certain ways of living. Where public transport is lacking or very expensive, car ownership becomes more essential as a means of getting to work. But there was far less car ownership in the UK in the 1970s (around 13.5 million private cars as opposed to around 38 million in 2021). How do we theorise these kinds of shifts within a scarcity/post-scarcity framework? Or even within a rich-poor framework: there is now more car ownership even among the poorer, but has their life – or people's lives more generally – been enriched or depleted because of it? I would say that these frameworks are not all that helpful – they always need so much unpacking…

That said, there are also, of course, absolute limits on the quantity of natural resources, together with limits relating to their physics and chemistry on the modes in which it is possible to use them; and then there are also limits relating to human moral and aesthetic sensibilities on how we might want to use them. In *Post-Growth Living* I argue quite forcibly against the view that the left quest for universal provision of 'abundance' can remain an appropriate objective in the face of current ecological constraints; nor do I agree that we can or should trust to technology either to provide for 'abundance' or to free us from all forms of work (hence my criticisms of the 'tech utopians', Bastani's cavalier claims about 'infinity pools for everyone' or Srnicek's and Williams' enthusiasm for universal space travel, or for drones and robots doing all the work, etc.).[10] I do, however, press the case for less work and an expansion of free time, and for what I call a more 'ludic' (an eco-benign and less instrumentally driven) expenditure of it. Alternative hedonism would foster more 'abundance' in respect of that type of expansion.

I've also argued that the state would play an essential role in the implementation of a society committed to 'post-growth living' – as will a political party, or alliance of parties, in preparing the way and seeking a

10. Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto*, Verso, 2019; Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, Verso, 2016.

mandate for it. In short, although I express some qualified support for so-called 'folk politics' and some of the libertarian positions associated with degrowth advocacy, my own position is not politically anarchistic.

NF: *In a country in which mean average full-time annual earnings are £33,000, and many cannot work full-time or at all, what kind of 'consumerist' lifestyle are British people enjoying? Aren't most, as Teresa May said, 'just about managing'? Or in increasingly precarious circumstances as food and fuel prices soar? Is consumerism a practice or an ideology?*

KS: I certainly take your point here. But I also think it is a mistake too readily to equate 'consumerist' living with very excessive or high-end forms of consumption or to view its provision as the ideal of the 'good life'. Nor is it altogether 'enjoyable' even if you have the money for it: consider the associated congestion, pollution, ill-health, noise, time scarcity, toxic waste, its subjection of us all to what Shoshana Zuboff has called 'surveillance capitalism' and its insidious advertising, its use of the internet and other forms of high tech to off-load more and more consumption associated servicing and bureaucracy onto the consumer.[11]

Although I don't make this as clear as I might have done in *Post-Growth Living*, I instead tend to view 'consumerism' as a regime of consumption, the mode of creating and satisfying both wants and more essential needs that has been generated through the capitalist market. We are all, in this sense, whatever our income, caught up in consumerist culture and subject to what it provides, the work ethic it relies upon, the forms of comparison it invites around status and consumption, the constraints it places on what we can do and how (see above re: the dominance of the car culture, which is not only wrecking the planet but preventing healthier and safer forms of transport – and in the process stopping many from having and doing what they want). Viewed in this light, people who are very precarious, or 'only just managing' have not escaped the consumerist lifestyle but are victims of it. While even those in regular work but with limited time and income will often enough claim they have no alternative but to have recourse to 'consumerist' expenditure on ready meals or processed food, air flight for any family holiday, Amazon as the cheapest and most convenient dispenser of 'fulfilments' etc. Perhaps, then, the answer to your final query ('practice or ideology?') is that it is both. And it is the ideology of it as the 'natural' form and standard of the good life that needs exploding. I, at any rate, would argue that we now need to expose more fully the totalitarian and elite-driven aspects of 'consumerism'. Bent on marginalising whatever is not commercially viable, it dominates the time expenditure of the vast majority, monopolises the conception and aesthetic register of gratification, and is licensed to groom as many children as it can reach for a life of consumption. Indeed, it might better be seen at this stage in its evolution, not as a guarantor of universal freedoms and self-expression, but

11. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Profile Books, 2019.

as a means of further extending the global reach and command of corporate power at the expense of the health and well-being of both the planet and the majority of its inhabitants.

NF: *Your argument for universal basic income (UBI) has been challenged by the exponents of universal basic services, on the grounds that good quality health, housing, education and transport can be shared and defended in effective economies of scale, whereas the distribution of necessarily small amounts of individual income could increase the tendency to privatised 'choice' while reducing public provision.*[12] *Given the unlikeliness of both, which would you choose?*

12. Anna Coote and Andrew Percy, *The Case for Universal Basic Services*, Polity, 2020.

KS: An apt question, difficult to answer very succinctly. I would say that radical socio-economic changes of the kind now required ecologically will include importantly a reduction in work, and hence demand some kind of citizen's income. Less work will be available anyway because of automation; but we also have to rein in productivity. This, in turn, will depend on a cultural revolution in our thinking about the real nature of prosperity – what is it that we want to foster in the name of living well? The eco-crisis should be seized as an opportunity to move from a work-centred understanding of identity, purpose and self-fulfilment to one that revolves around more self-chosen ways of spending time and energy. I follow André Gorz in recognising that we can't – and won't want to – eliminate work altogether; but we need to move beyond the culture of the work ethic, its stigmatising of the unemployed and its lingering sense that only those in work are deserving of a living wage. As Gorz himself put it, we need 'to wrest life away from the commercial imaginary and its total employment model'.[13] We need, too, to think of UBI funding as allowing for 'slower', and more hybrid ways of working; it is also compatible with communally-owned enterprises and cooperatives in which labour is no longer subject to the imperative of maximising profit by reducing labour time. This more complex vision of the work-life balance should be reclaimed as an integral component of an avant-garde political imaginary, rather than dismissed as a 'folk politics', stuck in premodern social relations.

13. André Gorz, *The Immaterial: Knowledge, Value and Capital*, Chris Turner (trans.), Seagull, 2010, pp26-7.

I do recognise, however, that UBI funding is the site of considerable tensions regarding its purpose and impact – where the right defends it as increasing productivity through releasing time for entrepreneurial 'creativity', and see it as an alternative to welfare funding; the moderate left view it as a supplement to welfare and as lessening inequalities – with some arguing, as you say, that that agenda could be better met through effective welfare services; while those, like myself, who are more supportive of the degrowth movement, advocate it as encouraging a shift from GDP measures of wellbeing, and from viewing efficiency as time saved in production rather than as time spent on life-enhancing activity.

And just as there is a right-wing dismissal of UBI as 'money for doing nothing', so there are fears on the left that it would simply lead to more

shopping, thus doing little to reduce environmental damage. There are also similar divisions about its funding – if by eco-taxes then this could lock UBI into eco damaging forms of production; if by taxing wealth, it makes provision dependent on maintaining inequality. I share these reservations on funding; also, the concerns that UBI in affluent societies may do little to adjust global inequalities or reduce the transfer of natural resources from richer to poorer zones. (Alf Hornborg has argued in this connection for payment in currencies that can only be exchanged for locally sourced goods and services … But would that work?)[14] Overall then, UBI can only function in the way I would ideally want within a radically altered economy and value system – to which, of course, many, as you imply, will say: 'dream on'.

14. Alf Hornborg, *Nature, Society and Justice in the Anthropocene: Unraveling the Money-Energy-Technology Complex*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

NF: *Can the alternative hedonism you describe – cycling and walking, shopping at independent producers – be readily extended to those in rural environments, those with mobility problems, the time-poor, families with small children, etc? If not, how would you appeal to them?*

KS: I think the short answer is that, where there is the will and imagination and the necessary investment, then ways certainly can be found to provide for all these constituencies.

I'm no expert on sustainable transport. But free and frequent electrified bus services in rural areas would surely greatly help. (But so, too, would be more preparedness on the part of relatively well-off car-owners to use the buses that are already provided in rural areas – which often travel largely empty, as I know well as someone living in a rural village, who does use the bus while neighbours will only travel by car. There is no escaping the fact that those who profess their horror over climate change, deplore fracking etc. are often profligate in their personal use of the products of the oil and gas industries and highly resistant to changing their travelling habits).

There could also be more shared delivery services together with last-mile distribution by bikes or electrified vehicles (many vans delivering in both urban and rural areas are often largely empty). Electrified bikes, too, will help, with rickshaw type versions (many, of the best, I suspect still to be invented) to help the elderly and those with mobility issues. We could also look, where waterways are available, to restore more river travel and delivery. And school buses have to be restored – together, where suitable, with properly lit and serviced and guarded cycle routes; also schemes for collective and, where necessary for smaller children, escorted walking. As for the time-poor: the hope is that with more free time/a shorter working week, their burdens would be much alleviated.

NF: *I understand that your recommendation for a 'more spiritual consumption' (*Post-Growth Living, *p147) is not one for religion or religious asceticism. In regard to pleasure, you connect it to the 'aesthetic' (p146) – but that term is grounded in the*

physical faculties of sensation and perception. What is your definition of 'spirit' and 'spiritual'? Is this ontological dimension necessary to your argument?

KS: One of my problems is that I don't have an adequate definition of 'spirit' or 'spirituality', while nonetheless feeling a need to provide a secular version of the ideas the terms summon. In the absence of a better term, all I can offer is a sort of Wittgensteinian account of how I might want to employ it, if we did have one. As I argue in the book, the existing concepts are altogether too loaded with religious and ascetic connotations to allow them to figure easily in the role I would ideally like – which is to capture the importance to human wellbeing (as well as to planetary health) of reasserting the less material aspirations and corporeal dimensions of life; and to challenge the tendency of consumer culture to marginalise them or seek to gratify them with marketable goods and services. In part this is about rescuing ourselves from an overly instrumentalised view of the purposes of life, and of its needs and wants; of restoring more centrality to the idea of doing things for their intrinsic value, simply for the sake of their enjoyment or interest. There is, in this sense, a 'spiritual' dimension in play, sex, conversation, music-making, teaching and learning for their own sake, pursuing hobbies etc. And, yes, I do relate the loss of the 'spiritual' aspect to the failure of a work-driven, time-scarce way of living to allow us to respect and give due time and ceremony to what I term the 'aesthetic mediation' even of more bodily and sensual needs (eating, exercising, etc.). But I think I would not agree that 'aesthetic' response is always reducible to sensation and perception – that raises issues, however, that we probably cannot really argue through in this context.

I should add that I regard aspirations for such sources of wellbeing as loving relationships, security, health, more free time, easy access to the natural environment, a peaceful and sustainable world order, and so on, as also of a 'spiritual' nature, even though material forms of provision are very imbricated in their satisfaction. And I think we might look to current forms of depression and psychological illness as manifesting deprivation of such sources of gratification. A good deal of mental suffering, especially among young people, is arguably accountable to consumer culture and the encouragement it gives to narcissistic values and emulative consumption, and its relentless emphasis on the body, its health and looks and physical forms of response. Social media and the culture of 'influencers' have a good deal to do with this. But it is manifest in many other areas too. Even relatively high brow cultural critics (e.g. BBC Radio 3 commentary) often seem incapable these days of assessing the worth of works of literature, music, the arts generally, other than in bodily terms, what forms of physical response they evoke... (Has neuroscientific influence played a part in this …?)

But even more importantly for younger people, there is the theft that is going on of their future. Their outlook on what is to become of them in adult life must seem completely shadowed now by the likely impacts of

environmental collapse: can they even have children themselves, will they want to, what will become of an already very fragile sense of a common humanity when there will be millions, even billions, of environmental migrants seeking a safe space? There is now a huge sense of insecurity about the future – and doubt about how far old moralities and forms of human solidarity can hold out against its threats. These are concerns of the spirit.

NF: *You describe a democratic process, whereby various counter-consumerist policies are put in place, that only really get public support after the fact. Your example is the congestion charge in London which, had it been put to a public vote, probably wouldn't have been endorsed, but which since being implemented has altered the experience of living in London and gained popularity. At this point you talk about how such actions that decrease car use (your other example is increasing emphasis on cycling infrastructure) alters the 'structure of feeling' around cars and the environment. It is a fascinating argument, and it usefully reminds us that public feelings connect to material infrastructures (cycle lanes, taxation systems, and so on). But does it also suggest that we need to also work on less material infrastructure – advertising and publicity, for instance – that also structure feelings? In other words, do you see a role for a form of alternative advertising in altering public feelings around degrowth and counter-consumerist actions? And if so, do you have any examples of effective alternative advertising?*

KS: Yes, there is a kind of dialectic involved here: public support for moves that constrain consumption in certain ways (charge-free driving in central London, for example), can be extended and reinforced through experience of the 'alternative hedonist' benefits provided by such moves (less congestion, better air quality, etc.). I believe this 'dialectic' is of critical importance to the democratic credentials, and hence success, of attempts to promote more eco-friendly forms of consumption. Prior to implementation, for example, the introduction of congestion charging was a policy that was able to appeal for its legitimacy to dissatisfactions already experienced by consumers; through being implemented it has offered provision and experience of a kind that has encouraged more support and enhanced public appreciation of it. And, yes, I certainly agree there is a need to work on less material infrastructure through a similar dialectical approach, and thereby summon a new 'structure of feeling' and encourage what I've called 'aesthetic revisioning'. Advertising is key here since it currently enjoys an almost total monopoly over representations in the media and public spaces of pleasure and the 'good life'. Any 'alternative advertising' would need to appeal to already existing forms of disenchantment with consumer culture because of its stress, time-scarcity, congestion, toxicity, etc. etc. and highlight the pleasures and forms of wellbeing to be gained by shifting to a less growth driven way of living. It needs to present climate change as not only a disaster, but an opportunity for living differently and more enjoyably.

In *Post-Growth Living* I give a few examples of the ways in which advertisers have altered their address to the public in the light of shifting social views and changing approaches and policies on personal health (the example of cigarettes is instructive here; but so, too, in a rather differing way, is mainstream advertisement response to social movements, notably feminism – whose 'cultural revolution' has gone together with significant shifts in ethical and aesthetic responses to material goods and services). Marketing strategies, of course, are always partial and governed by the need to sell. And even as they seek to promote products as 'eco-friendly' they also try to obscure their more negative aspects (e.g. cars – always depicted as solitaries in nature, etc.). Alternative advertising could learn from these methods, and also undermine them where appropriate, in order to present unsustainable goods in ways that expose the ill-health, labour exploitation, environmental destruction and waste they create – and thus hopefully make them less attractive to buyers. Adbusters have tried to do something of this kind. But they were eventually banned from buying space on any major TV and other media networks, and the problem, given the extent to which mainstream ads pay for the media, is how any alternatives would find the slots and funding for business-hostile ads. Attempts at the 'aesthetic revisioning' of material culture will also come up against rules on the planning and development of public space and the very often private ownership and control of its use and of ad platforms. But we do indeed need the kind of alternative visions you are speaking of in order to allow for a reconstruction of aesthetic response, through which the attractions and repulsions of the world of lived experience undergo a kind of gestalt switch in favour of greener ways of living and revised views of prosperity,

NF: *Your central argument seems to involve rebranding pleasure in relation to consumption and showing how much more pleasurable counter-consumerist activities are than those that use up much greater material resources. Do you focus on pleasure, on rethinking the 'good life', because you see pleasure as a powerful political force and feeling? Do you see it as more powerful and more effective than other feelings and affects, or is it because it has a different ethical register? How are you thinking about pleasure as an affective force in relation to feelings like pride and shame, which have also been effective in altering behaviours around the use of shared resources? If pride/shame turned out to be more efficacious than pleasure/unpleasure in altering people's consumption habits, would it provide the 'better' response?*

KS: This is a very interesting question that I have not been asked before. Hedonism, with its connotations of decadence, fixation on sensual and possibly, too, self-oriented pleasure, and so on, is far from ideal, and I have had my own regrets about employing it. And the more so since it is associated with a number of distinct philosophical positions, and thus invites definitions from me of where I stand in relation to those. But my position quickly became associated with 'alternative hedonism', and I have had to

live with its drawbacks.

As in the case of my take on 'spirituality', I am loathe to offer too precise an account of the pleasure I invoke with the concept of hedonism, and I do in fact use it as a fairly general way of referring to forms of enjoyment, satisfaction and fulfilment. I also wanted a concept indicative of the ways in which sustainable consumption should be understood not simply in terms of altruism, belt-tightening and doing one's duty – but as a potential source of hitherto unrealised forms of gratification, and I wanted to avoid appealing to other concepts, notably that of happiness. I have not wanted to be associated with the subjectively based utilitarian leanings of Richard Layard's happiness economics.[15] I'm also not taken with the idea that I can, in some more objective understanding, know what happiness is for others, or what makes them happy.

15. Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Penguin, 2005.

When the left has in the past addressed issues of need and consumption more directly, it has often veered towards that kind of paternalism; or become caught in confusion on the extent of consumer freedom and accountability. (It has, after all, been rather contradictory for socialists to claim to be democratically representative of popular demand, while also claiming to know better than people themselves what they really need – and explaining the mismatch between actually experienced and imputed needs by reference to the unfreedom of people, in other words, their ideological mystification about the 'truth' of their needs). Some parts of the left have also had a tendency to opt for reductive and 'simple life' versions of human need and fulfilment, rather than to think in more imaginative ways about the complexities and potentialities of human pleasure, and the more baroque and enriching directions these might take in a post-capitalist society.

There are also related and difficult issues about what should count in the estimation of the 'good life' – the intensity of its more isolated moments of pleasure or its overall level of contentment? The avoidance of pain and difficulty or their successful overcoming? And who should decide on whether personal wellbeing has increased: is this entirely a matter of subjective report, or open to objective appraisal? Such issues have long been at the centre of debates between Utilitarianism and Aristotelianism. Where the former has looked to a 'hedonic calculus' of subjectively experienced pleasure or avoidance of pain in assessing life satisfaction, the more objectively oriented Aristotelian focus has been on overall fulfilment (eudaimonia), and thus on capacities, functions and achievements (with what one has been enabled to do with one's life, rather than with its more immediate feelings of gratification). Hence its attention to the lifespan taken as a whole. There is, then, a tension that needs to be recognised in discussions of hedonism and the good life, between the Utilitarian privileging of experienced pleasure and the more objective bias of the eudaimonic tradition. Where the focus on the having of good feelings risks overlooking the more objective constituents of the 'good life' and the 'good society', the latter does justice to those constituents but runs the risk of patronage, even of condoning the superior knowingness of

experts over individuals themselves. In my argument on pleasure and the 'good life', I've tried to steer a mid-way course between these two positions. And my argument overall has sought to avoid paternalism through its appeal to the latent understandings of people themselves, and to make the underlying yearnings in them more explicit – hence my recourse to Raymond Williams' concept of the 'structure of feeling'.

As for pride and shame and how they compare with pleasure as affective forces, I think this question bears on a relative omission in my argument: my failure more fully to address what Rousseau termed 'amour propre' (the esteem of others) and its essential role in human well-being. What modes of gratification of 'amour propre' might supplant those provided through status buying and emulative consumption in a post-consumerist society? I don't have the answers here – although I've thought about it quite a bit and wondered about the potential of sport and cultural and community-based activities to accommodate the competitive element that is often involved in seeking and winning esteem.

Pride and shame are obviously the affective forces most closely associated with 'amour propre' since both are heavily dependent on the responses of others to our actions. But I am wondering how far they are removed from pleasure/unpleasure. In my rather generous hedonist understanding, could pride and the winning of esteem and endorsement count as providing a kind of pleasure, shame and humiliation as causing displeasure? But I recognise that I haven't fully answered your questions about their respective affective forces – I need to think about that more…

NF: *What role do you see for cultural workers – novelists, songwriters, filmmakers and so on – in promulgating degrowth? Would their role be at the level of content and message or are there other ways that degrowth can be an active agent in the stories and images that get rendered? Perhaps this is also a way of asking you what imaginative cultural materials have inspired you in your work on degrowth?*

KS: 'Aesthetic revisionism' of the kind I've mentioned, together with the general revaluation of economic purpose I've sketched, can obviously provide subject matter and motives for art, film, music, literature. And there are now many cultural workers in these fields who have made environmental issues/climate change a main focus of their work – and sometimes, if less frequently, they have used writing, music, film to critique excessive and vandalising consumption.

But I also think that it is important to avoid 'agitprop' approaches to culture. We need to concern ourselves with the way that art survives through resistance to its politicisation as well as having a role in reflecting and changing politics. I have reservations about utopian forms of culture because they often ignore this dialectic and have too little to say on the role of tragedy and the less confirming or consoling aspects of art (aspects we surely do not want to

lose in a future society?). There is an interesting essay by Raymond Williams of some relevance here.[16] But there are, also, no doubt many innovative and subtle ways (for artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, etc. themselves to evolve) of dealing with themes relating to degrowth.

That said, I do also want to argue that there is a major contribution that art and the humanities can make to re-thinking education – moving it towards the development, and servicing, of a less work-driven more 'ludic' way of living; and this should operate from primary school right through to university. A post-consumerist society demands an educational system that views learning as a preparation for enjoying free time, rather than simply as preparation for work and career. We also need much more art, music, drama, dancing, at school level. And literature should be taught and read for its instruction and enjoyment, and not in extracts geared to passing tests.

16. Raymond Williams, 'Afterword to Modern Tragedy', in *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Tony Pinkney (ed.), Verso, 1989, pp95-105.