The Green Bubble

Ted Nordhaus, Michael Shellenberger / May 19, 2009

SOMETIME AFTER THE release of *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, environmentalism crossed from political movement to cultural moment. Fortune 500 companies pledged to go carbon neutral. Seemingly every magazine in the country, including *Sports Illustrated*, released a special green issue. Paris dimmed the lights on the Eiffel Tower. Solar investments became hot, even for oil companies. Evangelical ministers preached the gospel of "creation care." Even archconservative Newt Gingrich published a book demanding action on global warming.

Green had moved beyond politics. Gestures that were once mundane—bringing your own grocery bags to the store, shopping for secondhand clothes, taking the subway—were suddenly infused with grand significance. Actions like screwing in light bulbs, inflating tires, and weatherizing windows gained fresh urgency. A new generation of urban hipsters, led by Colin Beavan, a charismatic writer in Manhattan who had branded himself "No Impact Man," proselytized the virtues of downscaling—dumpster-diving, thrift-store shopping, and trading in one's beater car for a beater bike—while suburban matrons proudly clutched copies of Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food* and came to see the purchase of each $4 heirloom tomato at the farmer's market as an act of virtue.

For those caught up in the moment, the future seemed to promise both apocalypse and transcendence in roughly equal measure. *The New York Times* and *San Francisco* magazine ran long feature stories on the uptick of upper-middle- class professionals who worried to their therapists about polar bears or who dug through the trash cans of co-workers to recycle plastic bottles, as though suffering from a kind of eco-OCD. At the same time, folks like Pollan and Beavan provided a vision of green living that seemed to offer not just a smaller carbon footprint but a better life. Amid the fear was

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And then, almost as quickly as it had inflated, the green bubble burst. Between January 2008 and January 2009, the percentage of Americans who told the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press that the environment was a "top priority" dropped from 56 percent to 41 percent. While surveys have long showed that enthusiasm for all things green is greatest among well-educated liberals, the new polling results were sobering. For the first time in a quarter century, more Americans told Gallup in March that they would prioritize economic growth "even if the environment suffers to some extent" than said they would prioritize environmental protection "even at the risk of curbing economic growth." Soon thereafter, Shell announced it would halt its investments in solar and wind power.

Policymakers took note. As gas prices continued their upward trajectory, climate legislation to cap carbon emissions garnered less support in the U.S. Senate last summer than it had in 2003 and 2005. Confronted by chants of "Drill, baby, drill," Senate and House Democrats, led by candidate Barack Obama, embraced offshore oil exploration, reversing nearly a quarter-century of opposition. When it came time to justify stimulus investments in energy efficiency and renewables, the president did so in the name of job creation, not polar bears. And, last month, after floating the idea of forcing cap-and- trade legislation through Congress as part of the budget, the White House quickly backed down in the face of opposition from Senate Democrats, especially those from the hard-hit Midwest.

Today, Beavan and others pitch green lifestyles as thrifty ways to make ends meet in a difficult economy. And, no doubt, many Americans are seeking out some form of (in)voluntary simplicity in response to the financial crisis. But making virtue of necessity is not the same as making necessity of virtue. Whatever romanticized

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the *Times* and other newspapers run stories about how Americans are coping with their economic, not ecological, anxieties.

Of course, environmentalism itself has not disappeared. Earth Day was celebrated last week, magazines and marketers continue to use green to sell to upscale audiences, and legislation to cap carbon emissions, albeit heavily watered-down, could still pass Congress. But the cultural moment marked by the ubiquity of green self-help, apocalypse talk, and cheery utopianism has passed. It is tempting to reduce this retrenchment to economic pressures alone, with concrete short-term concerns trumping more abstract worries about the future. But a closer look at the causes of the green bubble reveals a more complicated story, not just about the nature of environmentalism but about modern American life itself.

THIS ISN'T THE first time an eco-bubble has inflated and then burst. In fact, the modern environmental movement was born in a bubble. In 1969, an industrial pollution fire on the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio, generated national publicity and outrage. The first photographs of Earth in its entirety transmitted from outer space were received as signs of a new ecological consciousness. The first Earth Day was held in 1970, and, over the next three years, Congress passed and (a Republican) President Nixon signed into law sweeping environmental statutes.

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But, in 1973, soaring oil prices pushed the country into recession. By the time Jimmy Carter suggested, a few years later, that profligate American lifestyles were partly to blame, the public reacted with resentment and ridicule. Three years later, Ronald

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The second green bubble began to grow in the summer of 1988, when NASA scientist James Hansen testified to Congress about the arrival of global warming. Coupled with images of the Amazon in flames and record heat and drought across much of the United States, it was easy for the press to wrap global warming in an end-of-times narrative. The following January, *Time* magazine eschewed its usual "Man of the Year" profile and declared Earth "Planet of the Year." In 1990, President Bush signed a Clean Air Act amendment on acid rain, and, two years later, he signed a global-warming treaty at a United Nations meeting in Rio de Janeiro.

But the bubble had already begun to deflate. In 1990, California voters rejected a sweeping environmental initiative by a two-to-one margin. The recession of 1991 and 1992 mostly pushed green issues off the table, and Gore, in a move that would foreshadow his own run for president eight years later, would spend much of his vice-presidential campaign with Bill Clinton downplaying his role as a leading environmental advocate. In 1994, Clinton's proposed energy-consumption tax played a significant role in costing Democrats control of the House of Representatives, and, three years later, the Senate unanimously rejected the Kyoto treaty before Gore could even fly to Japan to negotiate it.

Much like the most recent episode, each of these past bursts of environmentalism waxed and waned with the rise and fall of the economy. But, perhaps more significantly, the green bubbles inflated during highly polarized periods in American society and politics, often fueled by disastrously violent episodes in foreign policy. In the late 1960s, the Vietnam War motivated student militancy at home, which then combined with the civil rights, feminist, and gay freedom movements to open up a social divide that would last a half century. In the 1980s, Reagan's confrontations with the Soviets and his proxy wars in Central America split the country, and the old cultural divisions reemerged with a vengeance.

George W. Bush's administration, much like the Nixon and Reagan years, was a time in which American liberals felt alienated from the White House. But, while the first and second green bubbles were co-opted by the Republican presidents of the time, Bush resisted the third. The war in Iraq, the crackdown on civil liberties at home, and the president's strident nationalism combined to create a story line in which Big Oil,

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redemption, harmony, and healing, was less a response to the fear of future ecological disasters than to present-day social ones.

At the same time that liberal professionals were feeling estranged politically, they were also feeling alienated personally and socially. For perhaps the first time in history, according to New York University sociologist Dalton Conley's new book, *Elsewhere, U.S.A.*, American elites were working longer hours than the poor. They were making more money, but the price they paid was longer commutes, the commodification of everything (from private schools to bottled water), and less time for themselves, their families, and their friends. Inequality skyrocketed during the 1990s, resulting both in new affluence for the wealthiest 20 percent and in heightened social anxiety. In these conditions, upper-middle-class liberals started questioning and resenting hyper-materialism, even while enjoying the status and comfort it offered.

Little surprise, then, that they would start buying a whole new class of products to demonstrate their ecological concern. Green consumption became what sociologists call "positional consumption"—consumption that distinguishes one as elite—and few things were more ecopositional than the Toyota Prius, whose advantage over other hybrid cars was its distinctive look. A 2007 survey that appeared in *The New York Times* found that more Prius owners (57 percent) said they bought the car because it "makes a statement about me" than because of its better gas mileage (36 percent), lower emissions (25 percent), or new technology (7 percent). Prius owners, the *Times* concluded, "want everyone to know they are driving a hybrid." The status effects were so powerful that, by early 2009, Honda's new Insight Hybrid had been reshaped to look like the triangular Prius.

Of course, for many greens, healing required more than a new kind of consumption, however virtuous. In *The New York Times Magazine's* 2008 Earth Day issue, Michael Pollan argued that climate change was at bottom a crisis of lifestyle and personal character—"the sum of countless little everyday choices"—and suggested that individual actions, such as planting backyard gardens, might ultimately be more important than government action to repair the environment. Pollan half-acknowledged that growing produce in your backyard was ecologically irrelevant,

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It's easy enough to point out the insignificance of planting a garden, buying fewer clothes, or using fluorescent bulbs. After all, we can't escape the fact that we depend on an infrastructure—roads, buildings, sewage systems, power plants, electrical grids, etc.—that requires huge quantities of fossil fuels. But the ecological irrelevance of these practices was beside the point. What downscalers offered was not a better way to reduce emissions, but rather, a way to reduce guilt. In 2007, we asked environmentalists in focus groups about green consumption. None thought that consuming green would do much of anything to address a huge challenge like global warming. They did it anyway, they said, because it made them feel better.

Utopian environmentalism has, to some extent, always promised to heal the alienation wrought by modernity. But, during bubbles, increasing numbers of Americans become captivated by the twin thoughts that human civilization could soon come crashing down—and that we are on the cusp of a sudden leap forward in consciousness, one that will allow us to heal ourselves, our society, and our planet. Apocalyptic fears meld seamlessly into utopian hopes. The end of the world is near—unless we heal all that divides us.

TO OBSERVE THAT green bubbles are fueled by the discontent of upper-middle-class liberals is not to dismiss environmentalism as elitist. Against nostalgic accounts like Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, most social-change movements are started and directed by the relatively affluent and well-educated, from the preacher-led civil rights movement to modern feminism to gay rights. The problem is not that most greens are elites, per se, but rather that too few of them acknowledge the material basis for their ecological concern and that too many reject the modern project of expanding prosperity altogether.

Recall that the inconvenient truth for which Gore named his movie was "that we have to change the way we live our lives"—and nobody could have the impression, after watching the movie, that it would be for the better. No new technology could save us—we would have to live differently. The public got the message. Of the 67 percent of voters who told the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in 2006 that it is possible to reduce the effects of global warming, nearly twice as many

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in 2008 that we could deal with global warming by creating carbon-eating trees, he was widely ridiculed. What critics seemed to find most offensive was the idea that a big environmental problem like climate change might be overcome without significantly altering modern life.

There are, to be sure, negative and disorienting aspects of modern life: pollution, alienation, loneliness, inequality, and the proliferation of choices. But the truth is that, while we often talk of our desire for greater community and interconnectedness, we choose ever more privacy, autonomy, and personal freedom. Few of even the most ardent greens could seriously imagine subsuming their individual identities to a pre-agrarian tribe, or abandoning their office jobs for a life of hard agricultural labor. The retreat from older forms of community, and the move toward greater individuation, is universal and largely positive. Colin Beavan and Michael Pollan lament, respectively, the loss of community and the loss of connection between humans and the land. But both choose to live alone with their families in cities, not on agricultural communes, and both express themselves as unique thinkers and writers.

Green anti-modernism brings with it other contradictions. Despite the rhetoric about "one planet," not all humans have the same interests when it comes to addressing global warming. Greens often note that the changing global climate will have the greatest impact on the world's poor; they neglect to mention that the poor also have the most to gain from development fueled by cheap fossil fuels like coal. For the poor, the climate is already dangerous. They are already subject to the droughts, floods, hurricanes, and diseases that future warming will intensify. It is their poverty, not rising carbon-dioxide levels, that make them more vulnerable than the rest of us. By contrast, it is the richest humans—those of us who have achieved comfort, prosperity, and economic security for ourselves and for our children—who have the most to lose from the kind of apocalyptic global-warming scenarios that have so often been invoked in recent years. The existential threat so many of us fear is that we might all end up in a kind of global Somalia characterized by failed states, resource scarcity, and chaos. It is more than a little ironic that at the heart of the anti-modern green discourse resides the fear of losing our modernity.

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mortality, treatable disease, short life expectancies, and grinding agrarian poverty. The convenient and ancient view among elites that the poor are actually spiritually rich, and the exaggeration of insignificant gestures like recycling and buying new lightbulbs, are both motivated by the cognitive dissonance created by simultaneously believing that not all seven billion humans on earth can "live like we live" and, consciously or unconsciously, knowing that we are unwilling to give up our high standard of living. This is the split "between what you think and what you do" to which Pollan refers, and it should, perhaps, come as no surprise that so many educated liberals, living at the upper end of a social hierarchy that was becoming ever more stratified, should find the remedies that Pollan and Beavan offer so compelling. But, while planting a backyard garden may help heal the eco-anxieties of affluent greens, it will do little to heal the planet or resolve the larger social contradictions that it purports to address.

Even in the United States, different interests help shape different attitudes: Poorer Americans in states more dependent upon cheap coal electricity are far less likely to support policies that would cost jobs or significantly increase energy prices than are wealthier Americans on the coasts, whose energy supply is already much cleaner. Believing that our common interest in halting global warming should bring us together, Al Gore spent some of the $300 million he raised from his movie and rock concerts on magazine and TV ads attempting to overcome partisanship. His ads showed famous people who disagreed—such as Nancy Pelosi and Newt Gingrich—sitting down together on a couch. He called it the "We Campaign." We might disagree on politics, the ads said, but we can all agree that we need to do something about global warming. But Gingrich recently testified against the climate-change legislation Gore favors.

The idea that a common connection to nature might allow us to overcome our divisions and transcend the essential messiness of politics is an idea that is as old as it is fantastical. Politics will always involve conflict, contradiction, and compromise. Fashioning a way forward will require us to frankly acknowledge our different interests as well as our common interests. While utopianism has a bright side—it is a way of imagining a better world—it also has a dark side characterized by escapism and a disengagement from reality that marks all bubbles, green or financial.

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and our longing to transcend it. The low-grade dissatisfaction that almost all of us have felt is not a reason to forsake our modern lives but rather an inescapable consequence of the extraordinary choices, opportunities, and security that envelop us—and of the self-awareness and individualized identities that modernity itself makes possible. As such, the contradictions that drive our dissatisfaction and desire for transcendence are irresolvable. And this we should celebrate.

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