

Fiddling while Rome burns

I read Brick and van der Linden's article in the September issue of *The Psychologist* on the way back from a degrowth conference held in the European Parliament building in Brussels. There, it was clear that most of the participants had not "got it": If our species is to survive we have to *radically* change the way we live. Projections of our ecological footprint show that it would require 3 to 5 back up planets for everyone alive today to live as we do in the West. What is more, the laws of physics relating to the conservation and interchangeability of energy and matter, show that it cannot be done. If one consumes energy or material from any source none of the resulting products, desired and undesired, go away. They simply show up elsewhere as such things as noxious gases or products which have to be disposed of in the soils, seas, or atmosphere (including space debris). There is no such thing as "green energy".

The change that is required is as great as that from an agricultural to an industrial society. And, just as no one in an agricultural society could envisage what an industrial society would look like, so no one in our society can envisage what a sustainable society would look like. There can be no blueprint. All we can do is set in train changes in the institutional arrangements (i.e. governance and financial arrangements) for the management of society which might lead to the evolution of an alternative society.

And these comments apply with a vengeance to the thinking of Brick and van der Linden. Here we have a typical academic article driven by a backward-looking review of approximately 40 references (which were not included in the published article) which do not even include a reference to the 1972 Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth* or Weizsacker *et al's* 50th anniversary update*.

In point of fact climate change is only one, and probably not even the most important, indication of the urgent need to change our way of life. Tackling it on its own (and Lovelock and others have argued that it is already too late) would not yield the requisite changes because the effect would be over-ridden by the reactions of the rest of the system.

Systemic change is needed. Amazingly, although the general population seems to be aware of this, psychologists seem to be remarkably blind to it. Indeed, if psychologists are to attend to these issues it will be necessary to "turn psychology inside out" in the sense in which Newton turned physics inside out. Before Newton, if things moved or changed direction it was because of their internal properties. They were "animated". After Newton it was mainly because they were acted upon by invisible external forces which could nevertheless be mapped, measured, and harnessed. A similar reorientation in thinking is needed in psychology.

* A critique of this report together with recommendations for how to build more directly on the systems studies which lay at the heart of *Limits to Growth* will be found at <http://eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/review-Weizsacker.pdf> or in an edited version in English but with a Russian abstract at *Azimuth of Scientific Research: Economics and Administration* (2018), T.7. no. 2 p.400-410.