Believing Cassandra: How to Be an Optimist in a Pessimist's World

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Many of us can name the book that provoked our epiphany, that 'ah ha' moment when we realised the world was experiencing an ecological crisis of serious proportions. As a student in the 1980s, it was *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972) that did it for me with its logic and simplicity: the Earth is a finite system, there are limits to its capacity to absorb the waste we spew into it and there are limits to what we can take out of it.

In this book, which is divided into two sections, Atkisson begins by summarising Meadows et al. (1972), using systems theory to explain the mess we have got ourselves into. Simply put, the [human] World *takes stuff* like fresh water, soil nutrients and minerals from the source (Nature) and *puts stuff* like pollution, carbon and other waste back into the *sink* (also Nature) at an *exponential rate* of growth, which means the *flow* of stuff happens at a much quicker pace than Nature can absorb. The *feedback loops* (such as ocean acidification, resource depletion and global warming) occur too slowly for humans to realise what is happening and take action within any reasonable timeframe. Atkisson suggests our slow reaction may be part of our neurological programming: we respond better to a hungry tiger than a slow creeping threat like climate change. Regardless, all the evidence is pointing to *overshoot and collapse* in Nature, which is bound to have a catastrophic impact on the human world.

Atkisson acknowledges, but does not dwell on the fact that the global poor are the ones who already disproportionally suffer from overshoot and collapse, even though they have not contributed to the problem in the same way as the over-developed West. He also acknowledges but does not dwell on the fact that there are powerful people in the world who deliberately deny or dilute the feedback messages about climate change, depleted fish stocks or species extinction, to protect their own interests.

New proper nouns are created in this book. Aware of the power of language and discourse formation, Atkisson entices us to share his take on environmentalism and seeks to convince us that he and his ilk have some of the answers. For example, he presents us with a typology of people based on how they perceived global change (drawing on the work of the TARGETS project in the Netherlands). We can all recognise the Individualists (think high flyer entrepreneur), Egalitarians (think Green), Hierarchialists (think EU bureaucrat), Fatalists (think Forrest Gump) and Hermits (think hermit). According to Atkisson, Egalitarians are the ones who have got it right. Even if they are wrong about the whole scenario, they are working towards a better, kinder, fairer world anyway, so it doesn't matter.

To prime the reader for the idea that sustainability is an antidote to ecological overshoot and collapse, Atkisson unsettles the dominant ideas about Growth and Development (more proper nouns): growth must cease and development accelerate. Clearly he has a different idea of development than most.

> Through all of human history, these two concepts, Growth and Development, have been joined together like Siamese twins. They must now be separated, or human civilization inevitably will come to a screeching halt. For the genuine Development of humanity to continue, our species' physical Growth must slow down and stop. And for Growth to stop, our understanding of Development must be reinvented. (p. 21)

Atkisson argues that we can have as much development (innovation, creativity, movement, work, activity) as we want, but unconstrained growth, particularly as it relates to the production of stuff, is bad. In this sense, his thinking is line with Leonard (2010).

Throughout the book, the author maintains a friendly, accessible style; there is a light-hearted tone, with witty chapter titles and summaries such as 'The Future in a Word wherein we introduce, finally, after much beating around the bush, the "S" word and explain it in ways that will (possibly) silence its critics once and for all while rallying people to its flag' (p. iv).

Part 2 of the book, 'Reinventing the World', defines sustainability as *sustainable development* and presents us with a number of formula that can be used to understand and operationalise this reinventing. For example, there are Five Clarifying Declarations of Sustainability, and the first one is *Sustainability is not environmentalism*. Environmentalism (which he defines as Green activism) aims to 'protect Nature from the ravages of the economy [and] is different from working to redesign the economy itself' (p. 140). Environmentalism is important but there needs to be support for sustainability or people can't see a way through the mess. The final declaration is that *Sustainability is not the end of history*: 'We have no idea what phase in the evolution of conscious organisms comes after sustainability. But it would certainly be nice to give our descendants a chance to find out' (p. 142).

At the core of Atkisson's model for change is Rogers' (1995) innovation diffusion theory, which describes how ideas or innovations are taken up by the mainstream. Rogers identified the players involved in the take-up (or discarding) of an innovation or idea such as electric cars, solar panels or marine parks. For example, Innovators invent, discover or initiate and are likely to be so wedded to their idea that they will be dogmatic and put people off. Change Agents are the people who can 'actively and effectively promote new ideas … salespeople and organisers' (p. 169). They translate the Innovators' ideas for laypeople, particularly the Transformers or early adopters who will embrace the idea and make it acceptable and cool for the mainstream. The Laggards are the late adopters who only change under pressure, and the Reactionaries resist new ideas, often because they have a vested interest in the status quo; they will be the ones arguing that cloth nappies are bad for the environment. The Iconoclasts are the protesters and angry critics of the status quo, lacking alternative solutions, but useful for motivating the Innovators and keeping the reactionaries occupied while Change Agents do their thing. Spiritual Recluses have their place, although it is hard to find a useful role for the Curmudgeons, who 'project a nihilistic sense of disappointment and disillusionment' (p. 171) and sap hope from everyone else (aka the Mainstreamers).

The innovation diffusion theory is explained by Atkisson and others at workshops and seminars, which they run using games and simulations to get people motivated and active. To what end? Essentially, the purpose of all this is to motivate people toward transformation by promoting new inventions and ideas, holding a critique of the old and facilitating the switch to the new. Of course, Atkisson has a list for how this should

happen as well, his 'Five Critical Characteristics of Successful Innovation'. You can tell when an innovation has been successful because it will: appear highly advantageous (and be cool), be relatively simple to understand, allow people to try it out before they irreversibly commit to it, result in visible improvements to people's lives or to Nature, and be relatively easy to incorporate into a person's (or society's) existing way of life. Innovations don't have to have these qualities, but if they do, they will be more likely (or more quickly) to 'sweep through a cultural system, and become the newest version of "normal"' (p. 181).

Atkisson's *desirable version of normal* is one where the world's economic, political, social and cultural policies, processes, products, activities and places undermine growth and promote sustainable development. Not surprisingly, for a book trying to sell optimism through principles, procedures and models, Atkisson avoids the tricky issues of politics and power. He never mentions the C[apitalism] word and avoids the P[atriarchy] word, staying upbeat about his ideas and those of his (mostly male) mates. However, for all that, I was entranced by this book and, more to the point, I developed a new sense of optimism.

This book is grounded in the history of the environment movement and offers a way of thinking about the global predicament that avoids blame and shame and encourages a sense of agency and activism. Naïve? Yes. Arrogant? A bit. And yet, it provides a framework for action. Any action. It doesn't prescribe what you should do. It simply suggests with humour and optimism that it is worth doing *something*. The book ends with the author sharing the source of his own optimism:

> But strangely, I also find hope in the fact that humanity has already changed the planet's atmospheric balance and performed other amazing acts of ecological destruction. If we can do that, then we can do anything. . . . In a mere few centuries, with far fewer people, using very primitive technology, we have managed to create a huge, sprawling mess of a World, displacing much of Nature in the process. This tragic yet undeniably enormous accomplishment supplies the proof that we have the capacity to create — with similar speed, and at a similarly large scale — a bountiful and more sustainable World. (p. 194)

Finally, who is Cassandra and what is her dilemma? Cassandra tried to warn the Trojans about the Greeks hiding in the wooden horse, but she wasn't believed. To some extent, anyone reading this journal is probably a Cassandra living out the dilemma. If we warn people of impending ecological doom (as many of us do) and things go belly up for humans, then why didn't we act earlier or more convincingly so people could take heed. If the crisis is averted, because people took evasive action, then why did we bother? We were being alarmist and it was all going to turn out all right in the end anyway. Rock on Cassandra!

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Reviewer Biography

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Making Peace With the Earth

Vandana Shiva Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 2012, 267 pp.,
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When the short list for the first Nobel prize for ecological understanding and activism is announced, Vandana Shiva will be on it, and a strong contender to win. Her insightful readings of the politics of ecological disequilibrium and the responsibilities assumed, or not, on a local and a global scale, are among the most influential in the field. Her work covers broad issues of land usage and is featured in internationally circulating publications. Her principal concern is the life of the Indian village. Accordingly, her politics is rooted in the social-ecological experience of those who belong most intimately to the land they work. This book, *Making Peace With the Earth*, published in Australia by Spinifex, is said to have 'grown out of Shiva's 2010 Sydney Peace Prize lecture' and 4 decades of activism. Despite the local publisher and the Sydney award, this book makes only passing reference to Australia and Australian issues. Nonetheless, by focusing on Indian social-ecological concerns Shiva offers insights that are of relevance far beyond her homeland.

Shiva is in awe of the human diversity of India. She integrates the biodiversity of nature with the richness of the communities that inhabit it. Accordingly, she aligns the destruction of natural biodiversity with the dismantling of traditional communities — those who 'understand the language of nature'. In her work, the struggle of local villagers against globalising forces takes an archetypal form: the village becomes a symbol, almost a metaphor for 'the local' in all nations. While offering the opportunity for this reading, Shiva's study is also focused. It is detailed, evidence based, strongly argued, and of interest to anyone seeking critical insight into the 'green revolution', the politics of seed cultivation, gene patenting and global food production and distribution. Each of these are addressed in the context of the corporatisation of food and the destruction of local community self-governance. She positions this work in the context of a modernising India (the globalising client of Australian exporters) and identifies this as the source of the destruction of indigenous traditions and the basis of a movement that 'must commodify everything' (p. 30).