

Troubled pleasures

Kate Soper, *Post Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020). 240pp., £16.99 hb., 978 1 78873 887 3

Kate Soper has made some vitally important contributions to ecosocialist and feminist political theory over the last four decades and more. Her interventions around ‘troubled pleasures’, humanism and its discontents, realism/constructionism, and more, have often been seminal. Perhaps one of the most striking threads in her body of work has been the proposition that if a sane and progressive ecopolitics is to have any serious prospect of success, it needs to advance a compelling cultural politics of pleasure alongside a material and feminist politics of egalitarian redistribution. In this respect, her ecosocialist advocacy has been distinctive in its persistent push back against a certain kind of scolding miserabilism that has long fueled some of the worst aspects of environmentalism in the first world with unfortunate political results. The arrival of *Post-Growth Living* then is something to be celebrated.

The core arguments of *Post Growth Living* are made in concise fashion in the first few pages. *Contra* the claims of assorted ecomodernists and fully automated luxury communists, our climate and broader environmental crisis ‘cannot be resolved by purely technical means.’ Rather, it will require ‘... richer societies substantially to change their way of living, working and consuming.’ Soper does not seek to ignore the importance of technology – ‘Green technologies and interventions (renewable energy, rewilding, reforestation and so on) will prove essential tools for ecological renewal.’ However, she maintains an eco-technical shift will only have a chance of success if it converges with ‘a cultural revolution in thinking about prosperity’.

Perhaps the most interesting move in *Post Growth Living* is Soper’s call for post carbon visionaries to go on the offensive. As she notes, ‘[t]he call to consume less is often presented as undesirable and authoritarian. Yet, the market itself has become an authoritarian force – commanding people to sacrifice or marginalise everything that is not commercially viable; condemning them to long hours of often very boring work to provide stuff that often isn’t really needed; monopolising conceptions

of the “good life”; and preparing children for a life of consumption’. We could do better. Alternative hedonism offers ‘an opportunity to advance beyond a mode of life that is not just environmentally disastrous but also in many respects unpleasurable, self-denying and too puritanically fixated on work and money-making, at the expense of the enjoyment that comes with having more time, doing more things for oneself, travelling more slowly and consuming less stuff.’

Post Growth Living consists of seven chapters that make the case for not only alternative hedonism but a version of this political project that is grounded in Soper’s broader commitments to ecohumanism and qualified realism, as articulated in her classic text *What is Nature?*. The argument centres around what Soper sees as the intersection between the narrow range of acceptable pleasures that consumer society allows and unfreedom in the capitalist workplace. It is these two self-re-enforcing features of high carbon capitalist living that are not only eco-destructive but, Soper argues, constraining of our liberty and our capacity for flourishing. The route forward is to stage a confrontation with work-and-spend culture around the question of pleasure.

This is an argument that does not place all the weight on naturalistic imperatives or crisis to cultivate eco or climate friendly behaviour. Nor does it follow the desire of more empirically orientated researchers to define an objective set of human needs and work back from this to consider the ways in which these needs might be satisfied by alternative institutional or cultural forms. Rather Soper outlines her argument as moving ‘from expressions of concern to delineating an alternative structure of satisfactions, rather than presupposing unconscious needs for this alternative and then casting around in a theoretical void for consumers who might come to experience them’.

Alternative hedonism does not assume consumption will shift because of altruism or the desire to be ‘responsible’ or ‘civic minded’. Rather, ‘The hedonist aspect of this shift in consumption practice does not lie exclusively in

the wish not to contribute to the unpleasant by-products of collective affluence, but also in the intrinsic personal pleasures of consuming differently.’ As she observes in relation to making a choice to drive or cycle: ‘The cyclist or walker enjoys sensual experiences, including those of greeting other cyclists and walkers, that the insulated driver cannot. But these different pleasures themselves require and thrive on alternative hedonist self-policing in car use and support for policies that restrain it’.

In terms of here and now politics, Soper casts alternative hedonism as a utopian longing for other ways of existing. She speaks of ‘expressions of regret for pleasures we can no longer enjoy’. As such, alternative hedonism is also to be found in ‘more subdued and private nostalgia over lost landscapes, communities and spaces for playing, socialising, loitering or communing with nature’. There are cultural sentiments which are somewhat elusive but may surface as:

... a more generalised lament over commodification, as a yearning for a less harried existence or as an elegiac sense that, were it not for the dominance of the combustion engine, there would be much better provision for greener forms of transport, and both rural and city areas would look, feel, smell and sound entirely different. Or it may just figure as a vague and rather general malaise that descends in the shopping mall or supermarket: a sense of a world too cluttered and encumbered by material objects and sunk in waste, of priorities skewed through the focus on ever-more extensive provision and acquisition of stuff.

A further well-spring for alternative hedonism could arise from greater attention to the depth of alienation that is experienced in the contemporary workplace following four decades and more of neoliberalism. Here, Soper argues that the endless growth of ‘bullshit jobs’, precarious contracts and the expansive subordination that defines the information age workplace is ripe for transformation. Fuller recognition of the role that consumption plays in affluent societies as compensation for alienation at work and a suppressant of democratic citizenship outside work could bring into view a desire for other pleasures. As she notes:

Time-scarcity and the sense of being dominated by the demands of work place a constraint on personal liberty: the more caught up you are in work, the less time you have to envisage, let alone act on, alternative ways of

living, or to acquire insight upon or formulate political resistance to the existing system. Through its theft of time and energy, the work and spend culture deters development of free thinking and critical opposition.

Sustainable alternatives to this would have ‘to provide for distinctively human forms of need, and meet our appetite for novelty, excitement, distraction, self-expression and the gratifications of what Rousseau called *amour propre* (the esteem and approval of others we respect).’



In more institutional forms, Soper presents alternative hedonism as minimally a call for a cultural politics that allies with and seeks to augment the practices of certain social movements such as aspects of fair trade, ethical shopping and investment but has a further, more expansive commitment to ‘the various initiatives seeking to bypass mainstream market provision via alternative networks of sharing, recycling, exchange of goods and services and expertise (the Slow City, Slow Food movements, Buen Vivir, the New American Dream and now, most recently, and possibly most ambitiously, at least for the US, the Next System project).’ But it is also a politics that seeks to link ecological downscaling to a politics committed to the fundamental reorganisation of work

and an unravelling of the gendered division of labour.

Soper argues policies that strengthen unions and explore policy options for work time reduction all have their place here. Whilst rejecting technopian accelerationism, she acknowledges automation of toil has a role to play in the reworking of work as long as it actually makes free time more available. The replacement of GDP with more humane and ecologically sane indicators and a universal basic income could, if properly designed, break down gendered divisions of labour. The focus of an alternative hedonism is not to eradicate work but to decentre a work-centred vision of prosperity with an engagement in intrinsically valuable activities: 'For some, this will mean doing less work, and thus having more free time; for others it may entail working in differing ways and to different rhythms'. More broadly, alternative hedonists need to be open 'to new forms of ownership and control over the means of provision for consumption, to more self-provisioning, mending and making do, to greener ways of travelling and, in general, to a less novelty- and fashion-driven way of meeting our material needs.' With less pressure derived from time scarcity, she argues that we could open up to slow, more sensuous travel, convivial lingering, a recovery of street life and communal mixing.

It is argued here that alternative hedonism with its focus on pleasures foreclosed and new pleasures that could be, might offer a more subtle and powerful policy framework through which more expansive public discussions could take place to guide sustainable transitions. Environmental policy battles, Soper argues, need to be bolstered by arguments that are premised on something more compelling than utilitarianism, nudge or cost/benefit, rational choice type arguments. A more democratic and deliberative mode of eco-social policy-making can appeal to citizenship but Soper maintains it ultimately needs to tap into much deeper latent desires for something different. Both suppressed pleasures, but again latent utopian 'structures of feeling', need to be mobilised to facilitate change. As she argues:

As well as pointing to the benefits that will follow from new regulations and modes of provision (greater sustainability – but also improved health, richer sensual and aesthetic experience, more amenable public spaces), those pressing for their introduction must be able to appeal to some pre-existing disposition in their favour. Policy moves introduced on the basis of quite limited and low-

profile manifestations of public support can, through the positive effects of their implementation, prove educative in ways that overcome subjective prejudice against objectively good practice.

Soper's alternative hedonism is an attempt to unlock for environmental politics a thread of utopian desire for something different that runs from William Morris, the young Marx, Sartre and de Beauvoir to Mary Mellor, Juliet Schor and Murray Bookchin. It is, at root, an attempt to start a conversation about what human lives might be like if they were released from the law of value and it is a reflection on what the humanist Marxist and feminist traditions might offer to this project. These are important resources to deploy and this is why Soper's project is so valuable. However, the arguments in *Post Growth Living* are often more suggestive than definitive and some key moments in these arguments reveal several issues and limitations.

Alternative hedonism must be a big church politics if it is to have any chance of success. Yet, Soper offers in the first few chapters a set of fairly restrictive realist ontological demarcation strategies for who is philosophically in and out of the club. Notably, *Post Growth Living* commences with some quick critiques of various contemporary currents of post-humanism, new materialism, neo-animism, accelerationism and strong social constructionism, which clump together a fairly diverse group of thinkers as essentially saying the same thing. Here, Haraway's cyborg socialist feminism, Srnicek and William's left accelerationism, Latour's confused liberalism, Silicon Valley's neoliberal transhumanism and biologically reductionist currents of neuroscience are treated as more or less making the same moves and hence as needing to be regarded as politically suspect.

The general points that *Post Growth Living* makes in this regard, that some versions of hybrid or non-binary positions as political positions *can* be descriptive, self-defeating and incoherent in their attempt to unravel the human subject as political agent, and often decorative in their politics, are not without grounds. It was an argument that was well made in *What is Nature?* But the analysis in *Post Growth Living* often collapses together four different issues: (i) the value of entangled accounts of socio-ecological relations writ large; (ii) the coherence of the human/non-human continuum; (iii) the extent to which ecopolitical theory should accent non-human

agencies; (iv) the ontological status of 'Nature' as an independent causal force separate from the social. These are issues which do not necessarily run together.



Different disciplines across the human/natural sciences often follow different ontological protocols because they are asking different questions in different contexts. Even within hybrid social theory, Latour's evasion of political economy and his anthropomorphic account of non-human agencies do not generate the same issues as the transhumanist preference for Promethean/Randian fantasies of everlasting life in the singularity. The technophilia/determinism of left accelerationism generates different kinds of political problems from neuro/bio-reductionism that can evolve in some parts of the life sciences and are then put to work in political discourse.

Post Growth Living sidesteps engagement with a vast body of applied work in feminist/queer/post-colonial and other kinds of political ecology, environmental history and human ecology that have found it important (and productive) to suspend nature-culture binaries to be able to investigate colonial landscapes, racialised and classed urbanscapes, gendered science or exploited socio-technical infrastructures. Much of this work has fairly conclusively demonstrated that when the socio-ecological histories of slavery, capital accumulation, and so on, are separated out from the social production of nature, bad, purist environmental politics often result.

Some of the most profound explorations of utopian

longing and dystopian reflection are to be found in the work of contemporary afro-futurist, indigenous-futurist, queer, feminist and more-than-human science fiction where the grammar of cyborgs and nature-culture hybrids is now ubiquitous.

It could also be observed that many of the pleasures referred to in *Post Growth Living* have something of a high-minded Anglo-centric 'bracing country walks and listening to Mozart' feel to them. The elaboration of alternative hedonism does leave rather unexamined the possibility that pleasure and taste can be tools of differentiation, distinction and exclusion as much as they offer opportunities for joy and wonder. For example, as Julian Agyeman and Carolyn Finney have argued, a great deal of seemingly eco-friendly outdoor engagement in the US and the UK performs a certain kind of able-bodied white masculinity with its 'right' to occupy certain kinds of spaces. The 'wrong kind of people' walking through the countryside can lead to disaster. It would be interesting to consider how an alternative politics of pleasure found in what Stuart Hall called the popular cultural – sports, digital culture, street fashion/food/music – might expand the cultural project of *Post Growth Living*. De-centring an alternative hedonist analysis further to a more cosmopolitan, comparative and critical registrar could greatly enrich the conversation.

Whilst *Post Growth Living* is aware of the limits of a moralising liberal environmentalism, the relations between consumption, race and class are also left rather under-explored. Indeed, the analysis at times is oddly individualist. There are moments when the narrative of *Post Growth Living* slides from Sartrean humanism to an almost Blair-ite discourse of personal responsibility. A desire to tell 'uncomfortable home truths' presents a universally constructed 'western consumer' addicted to the purchase of white goods and cheap flights, resistant to energy taxes and traipsing around shopping malls. Yet this is the very same western consumer that Soper elsewhere acknowledges has been subject to four decades of wage stagnation, the vast expansion of healthcare and education funded debt, a massive housing affordability crisis and the unbounded expanse of elite consumption with public squalor.

This leads one to a further issue: the extent to which 'consumption' does the job as the pivotal organising concept of the book. *Post Growth Living* is cognisant

of the ways in which what we call ‘personal consumption’ is situated more broadly in processes of accumulation and desire shaping. The analysis offered overstates the amount of agency that generic ‘consumers’ rather than producers have over patterns of industrial production and waste generation. We know from research in political ecology that certain kinds of high carbon consumption (say rural car dependency) are shaped by the spatial division of labour, built-in infrastructure, underinvestment, and historical racial, class and gender exclusions. Without access to a car, many people living in rural or ex-urban areas can’t eat or work. A good deal of research by environmental justice scholars has suggested sustainable consumption movements can be deeply exclusionary and can end up promoting a politics of (white) upper-class virtue signalling and shaming which may not produce sustainable, let alone just outcomes. Modes of ecological analysis primarily focused on end-use behaviour can obscure the fact that the vast majority of waste, ecological damage and exploitation occurs much further up the chain at the point of extraction. A more systemic accounting of the socio-ecological consequences of *production-consumption relations* across the whole extraction-manufacturing-marketing-consumption-waste chain could open up the discussion. Locating alternative hedonism in a more global frame that outlined how commodity supply chains are further influenced by uneven exchange, militarism, imperialism, and so on, could expand the analysis here.

The criticisms outlined above should not detract from the virtues of this text. Whatever its sociological and geographical limits, there are many moments when *Post Growth Living* provides an important normative attempt to think about a pleasure-based politics that can facilitate more humane, less alienating and less carbon intensive modes of being in the world. Working time reduction and plant rich diets, a political challenge to work and spend culture, and attempts to validate more convivial, ecological, egalitarian and pleasurable ways of being in the world are important moves for getting us to a more-sane future.

Yet, blind spots in *Post Growth Living* – particularly in relation to racialised uneven development – also point to certain political limits to the insights of the largely white, middle class environmental movements that defined the small is beautiful/limits to growth 1970s moment (and

their utopian socialist offshoots).

Rapid and just decarbonisations are going to have to operate at scales proximate to the crisis we face. This will involve finding multiple leverage points and policies at scales that can shift whole sectors of the global economy towards just transitions and decarbonisation whilst also improving the lot of the multi-racial working people in the developed North and vastly improving quality of life for people living in the Global South. This is a politics that will have to constantly and iteratively adapt to and design for life on a warming planet. We will have to deal with a world marked by further challenges posed to coastal cities by rising sea levels, waves of people movements escaping worst effected areas, a possible upscaling of regional and geopolitical challenges, and very possibly new patterns of conflict: between the ‘carbon entrenched’ and the ‘carbon transitioners’, the political ecological ‘winners’ who benefit from a warming world and the flooded losers, the lucky and the unlucky.

Politically, this is not an easy circle to square. History reminds us that past eras of major transitions have often been bloody and chaotic. There are good reasons to believe though that for a progressive post-carbon politics to have any chance of success, it will have to be highly differentiated, attentive to context and contain both productivist *and* anti-productivist moments. It will have to master a practical politics that can address the communities that have been historically and structurally locked into high carbon production by necessity, the communities that have never been included in the consumer society, and offer a fairly compelling account of the material gains *and* the pleasures that could allow just transitions that open up other pathways. In short, in almost all conceivable circumstances, decarbonisation is going to involve a highly complicated and messy set of moves which will surely involve *degrowing* some areas, sectors and activities and *ecomodernising* others. More bike paths, yoga studios and charity shops alone are not going to cut it. This is perhaps where the Green New Deal might offer some hope and offer space for regrounding Soper’s project in a sturdier institutional frame.

Despite its many flaws, the Green New Deal is a practical political project that is attempting to think about scale, trade-offs, alliance building and messy complexities in ways that have never really been accomplished by decades of anti-productivist utopian ecosocialist think-

ing. Nevertheless, there could be many convergent points between Green New Dealers and alternative hedonists. A technocratic focus on energy transition dominates much of the public discussion of the Green New Deal. Yet, Soper is correct to suggest that changes in living, working and consuming will have to become part of this discussion. A Green New Deal over the long term will have to move from addressing energy, infrastructure and investment to consider ways in which further shifts could occur in material culture, from 'more' to 'better', from disposable design to emotionally and physically durable design, from object production to post carbon service provision to meet a range of needs for transportation and entertainment, pleasure and leisure. Here the kind

of vision of the Green New Deal recently articulated by Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen and Thea Riofrancos, with their focus on *decommodification* of the essentials of life and public investment to provide low carbon *communal luxury* for all, provides one potential bridging moment with Soper's project. An individualist and consumer-driven alternative hedonism focused on equitable downscaling and centring the eco-virtues of the upper middle classes is not going to win any elections and is not ultimately going to go anywhere. An investment, regulation and justice orientated Green New Deal that is further focused on a cultural politics of pleasure might just have a fighting chance.

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Contingent contagions

Angela Mitropoulos, *Pandemonium: Proliferating Borders of Capital and the Pandemic Swerve* (London: Pluto Press, 2020). 132pp., £14.99 pb., 978 0 74534 330 3

'When every home becomes a quarantine zone, and every epidemiological map is mistaken for an accurate representation of molecular spread, the convergence of neoliberalism and fascism around an oikonomic understanding of health and disease is all but complete.' Posting these words on her website on 12 March 2020, Sydney-based scholar and activist Angela Mitropoulos remarked forcefully on the biopolitical measures undertaken as the inexorable unfolding of Covid-19 was beginning to take shape. For anyone familiar with Mitropoulos' work prior to *Pandemonium*, these words, tagged as a 'postscript' to her earlier book-length publication *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics To Oikonomia* (Minor Compositions, 2012), could not but elicit the uncanny feeling of historical *déjà vu*. For *Pandemonium* can be said to appear 'after' *Contract and Contagion* only in the crudest, chronological sense one might experience historical time. Much like its predecessor, *Pandemonium* is an indispensable intervention that exposes the dangers of the culturalisation of the biopolitical and the biologisation of the geopolitical. While shorter and more journalistic in tone than *Contract and Contagion*, this publication continues the significant critical work that Mitropoulos has been devel-

oping through a number of journal articles, interviews and blog posts. Because of this pre-Covid 'pre-history', as a theoretical contribution, *Pandemonium* is best-read in the context of queer-feminist, autonomist conversations on precarious labour, risk and indebtedness, and on the constitutive role of the household in upholding the values and borders of the capitalist nation-state – before, during and, no doubt, 'after' Covid.

Over the past decade, Mitropoulos has been one of the many post-Foucauldian voices to insist that the moral logics of economic liberalism and political authoritarianism, and of financial speculation and securitisation, are co-constitutive modes of governance. More singularly, Mitropoulos has astutely diagnosed the ever-present fascist undercurrents within (neo)liberalism and presented a trenchant critique of policies and discourses firmly rooted in the imaginaries of purity, origin and the restoration of legal and natural order. Yet unlike other voices on the left who can only conceive of the 'not-privatised' through the lens of 'the nationalised' (health-care provision being an obvious case in point), Mitropoulos cautions against forgetting the murderous distinction between citizen and non-citizen, and between