

ECOMODERNISM

Two Modernities, Two Ecomodernisms

Love and the Death of Environmentalism

MAR 6, 2024

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I have a t-shirt The Breakthrough Institute
2017 Dialogue—an annual summer even



range of environmental thinkers and practitioners. The t-shirt defines [ecomodernism](#), an innovative approach to environmental solutions launched via Breakthrough's multi-authored [Ecomodernist Manifesto](#) of 2015. According to what's printed on my t-shirt, an ecomodernist is:

1. A pragmatic optimist
2. A seeker of technological solutions
3. A believer in a future that is good for humans and nature

The Death of Environmentalism at Twenty

B by *Jim Proctor & Jennif Bernstein*

Ecomodernism is arguably Breakthrough's best-known idea. Ecomodernism has been documented in dozens of articles and books from its inception up to recent months, and applied on the [Breakthrough website](#) a wide range of policy issues addressing climate, conservation, energy, food and agriculture, and more.

Between DoE and Breakthrough

by *Jennifer Bernstein*

The Death of Environmentalism, Precient and a Port

To most Breakthrough insiders and commentators, ecomodernism defines Breakthrough in word. But Breakthrough was launched in 2007, long before the Ecomodernist Manifesto, and the organization was perhaps best known back then by an earlier tract, [The Death of Environmentalism](#) (DoE) — now enjoying its 20th anniversary in 2024. Where the Manifesto opted for a more hopeful tone as suggested in my t-shirt, DoE did not mince words: "...modern environmentalism is no longer capable of dealing with the world's most serious ecological crisis [global warming]." The authors, Breakthrough founders Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, ultimately called for the "death" of environmentalism-as-usual, so as to more successfully address the environmental problems of today.

by *Ida Buttrick*

To those of a whiggish inclination toward history, DoE can be understood as a slightly more in-your-face version of the Manifesto. Indeed, a contemporary reading of DoE suggests a

heterodox environmental approach consistent in places with ecomodernism. Certainly, for instance, one hears shades of pragmatism in the final passage of DoE: “We in the environmental community today find ourselves head-down and knee-deep in the global warming river. It’s time we got back to shore and envisioned a new path for the crossing.”

But DoE is strikingly divergent in its take on nature and environment. In many ways, environmentalism’s conception of environment says much about its identity: is it about wilderness? charismatic species? rising sea levels? healthy neighborhoods? One longstanding bifurcation in Western conceptions of nature has been, in the mid-19th century words of [George Perkins Marsh](#), whether “...man is of nature or above [today we might say below] her”—whether environment is *the* environment, that once-pristine realm separate from humans, or *our* environment, a web of interactions of which we are a vital part.

In the Manifesto, the watchword is decoupling, functionally [depicted](#) in the [original Manifesto website](#) as a densely packed, high-rise city surrounded by near-untouched forest—environment as *the* environment. DoE, in contrast, quotes John Muir in its critique of “the environment”: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe”—in many ways the inverse of decoupling. Where the Manifesto celebrates a nature freed from human impact, this very notion of a separable nature is repeatedly rejected in DoE as one of many “unexamined assumptions” and “outdated concepts” that “...must die so that something new can live.” Decoupling is perhaps too technical to appear on my t-shirt, but is everywhere in the Manifesto. Decoupling is the metaphysical notion at the heart of ecomodernism. Yet DoE rejects decoupling, years

before its embrace in the Manifesto.

What is going on here? Did Breakthrough reverse their thinking at some point between DoE and the Manifesto? Why would an environmentalism of connection eventually become one of disconnection? I think this ambivalence represents something bigger. Breakthrough has always been about bringing environmentalism up to date with the current conditions of our world. But what if these current conditions—call them modernity in short—are themselves ambivalent, pointing in radically divergent directions? What if nature in modern times can rightly be understood via *both* coupling and decoupling?

An environment conceived as connection, and as disconnection, resonates with what scholars have written about modernity. Social theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Bruno Latour have broadly noted that modernity has involved both purification along the lines of decoupling, and mixing along the lines of DoE. Modernity has decoupled industrial sites of resource production from post-industrial sites of consumption, while recoupling the entire world via this same process of globalization. Modernity has shown two faces, in many ways two modernities, resulting both in the radical entanglement of humans and environment summed up in the [Anthropocene](#), and the radical disconnection of humans from nature in their predominantly urban, digital everyday lives.

Some of these theorists have taken a particular interest in Breakthrough given their mutual fascination with modernity. As one example, Bruno Latour was drawn to Breakthrough in part due to the strong resonance between DoE (and the followup volume [Break Through](#)) and his own

work, culminating in the 2011 Breakthrough publication [*Love Your Monsters*](#). The title of *Love Your Monsters* was derived from Latour's [contributed essay](#), where he differentiates between a modernity of emancipation and his preferred modernity of attachment—one largely supported by Breakthrough contributors to the volume. Yet, following publication of the Manifesto, Latour published a [critique](#) based on its embrace of emancipation, and increasingly distanced himself from Breakthrough—in part holding true to his classic works including [*We Have Never Been Modern*](#), where Latour suggested that the more modernity tries to separate culture from nature, the more thoroughly they are mixed.

Is, then, DoE wiser in its take on nature and modernity than the Manifesto? Let's consider modernity in a functional vs. theoretical way, channeling the pragmatic spirit of Breakthrough. As such, we could identify actual landscapes upon which emancipation on the one hand, or attachment on the other, are evidenced. Breakthrough has often exemplified decoupling via agricultural intensification, and perhaps here a modernity of emancipation is most compelling, as agricultural land use constitutes one of the most significant human impacts on Earth. It thus seems logical that reducing our agricultural footprint via more intensive methods of food production would be a good thing.

But, as just one counter-example, many contemporary forests are a different story, certainly in the U.S. West where Breakthrough is headquartered, and where I live. Here, the fearsome ravages of forest fire and insect infestation, likely attributable to anthropogenic drivers including fire suppression and climate change, would only be worsened

via decoupling, if we were to remove ourselves from the opportunity and responsibility to actively manage these forests.

Many forested landscapes thus represent a modernity of mixing, and demand greater attachment to what Latour lovingly described in his essay (in reference to the famous story of Dr. Frankenstein) as our “monsters.” As Latour says early in his essay, “Dr. Frankenstein’s crime was not that he invented a creature through some combination of hubris and high technology, but rather that he abandoned the creature to itself.” Decoupling, to Latour, robs us of our moral responsibility to care for our creation—what Shellenberger and Nordhaus, in a [parallel essay](#) in *Love Your Monsters*, call a “modernization theology” vs. a more distanced, decoupled “ecotheology.” Their essay launches with the constant challenge of keeping Venice above sea level, then argues:

"Saving Venice has meant creating Venice, not once, but many times since its founding. And that is why her rescue from the rising seas serves as an apt metaphor for solving this century’s formidable environmental problems. Each new act of salvation will result in new unintended consequences, positive and negative, which will in turn require new acts of salvation. What we call “saving the Earth” will, in practice, require creating and re-creating it again and again for as long as humans inhabit it."

Decoupling, the byword of ecomodernism, makes technical sense in a modern world where rampant climate change necessitates that we reduce the carbon intensity of economic well-being. Yet our global climate system is a highly coupled one, especially in the Anthropocene. The same goes for our forests, our cities, and the many landscapes we are called to—in Latour’s provocative word—

love.

Perhaps DoE, and other early Breakthrough writings, thus complement ecomodernism, ultimately suggesting two modernities, two ecomodernisms: one of decoupling, the other of attachment. Surely there is evidence and need for both.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Georgia Reid, Jennifer Bernstein, and Martin Lewis for their ideas and the many conversations leading to this essay.



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