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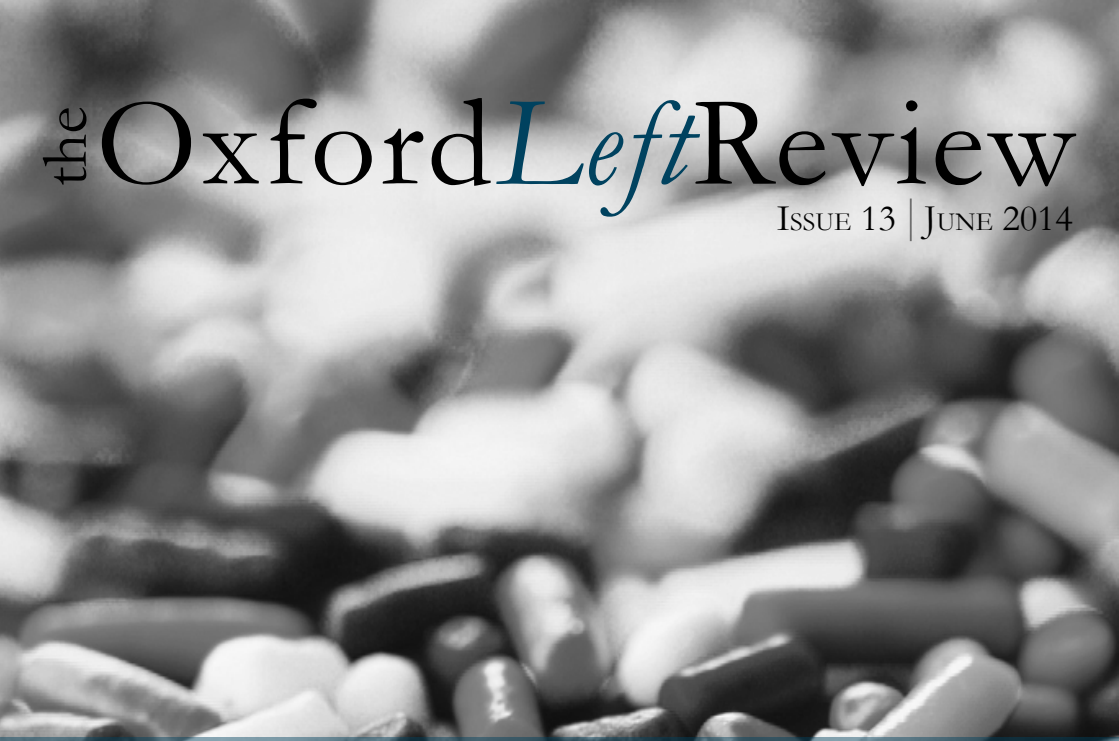

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Fracking, Food, and Futurology: An Interview with Paul Mobbs

PAUL MOBBS

Paul Mobbs is a man of many labels. He is often referred to as an "environmental consultant", but describes himself as an "ecological futurologist", and has been described by others as an "anti-fracking lobbyist" and an "electrohippy". He is the author of countless books and articles on a range of topics, including technology, extreme energy, consumption and the limits of growth. He has recently published a review of the UK government's policy on unconventional fossil fuels and climate change, which is available online from his Free Range Activism Website.[1] In light of recent campaigns in Oxfordshire focusing on the ethics and environmental impact of the fossil fuel industry, the Oxford Left Review contacted Paul Mobbs for an interview.[2]

On your website, you describe yourself as an 'ecological futurologist'. Could you briefly explain what this is?

I used to be a good old-fashioned environmental consultant working for community groups in the 1990s, and then I travelled abroad, and realised that the place that really needed help was Britain, and so I came back and started

1 Paul Mobbs, 'Extreme Energy and Climate: A critical review of the UK Government's policy on unconventional fossil fuels and climate change', available at http://www.fraw.org.uk/mei/archive/extreme_energy_and_climate-critical_review.pdf, last accessed 3rd June 2014.

2 Local organisations include the Fossil Free Oxford University campaign (see: http://campaigns.gofossilfree.org/petitions/fossil-free-oxford, last accessed 3rd June 2014) and the Oxon Against Fracking group (see: http://frack-off.org.uk/local-group/oxon-against-fracking/, last accessed 3rd June 2014).

working on what I've been doing for the last decade, which is [looking at] energy, climate and consumption. It requires that you look at what we're doing now and what happens if you keep doing it, and there are series of events which will flow from current energy and economic policy which are fairly inevitable due to the nature of physics. 'Futurology' implies crystal-ball-gazing, but where I'm coming from is far more based in science and economics: I study the conflict between the general accepted view of economics and what research is telling us about the nature of the finite world we live on.

Is there a problem in generally-accepted economics which prevents it from confronting environmental problems effectively?

There's a group which sprung out of universities demanding a new economic syllabus, and I'm all for that. For 40 or 50 years, we've had ecological economics, which presents economics as being constrained by the capacity of the environment to serve human demands. The cornucopian idea of endless economic growth, wealth and consumption is an impossibility because physics prohibits it. The laws of efficiency are a diminishing return; eventually there's no point trying to be more efficient, since you'll consume more in trying to be more efficient than you'll save. Going right back to the 1860s, you'll find that people are realising that the more advanced technology becomes, the more it consumes. If you look at 100 years of economic data, the only time we ever help the environment by reducing waste, pollution and carbon emissions is during economic recessions. And so the discussion we should be having is: how do we tame the economic system to produce environmental outcomes? Not how we retro-fit technologies onto the back of this system, which is itself so deeply flawed it cannot continue.

You have said that you trained as an engineer, and so have a greater understanding of technology than most economists. Based on that understanding, do you think it's possible to have an economic system not predicated on growth, and yet allow for the continuation of some of the great technological achievements of our time, like global communications, labour-saving devices and modern hospital treatments? How do you envisage that?

Yes. I have computers in my attic which are ten years old and they're still working. [It's about] redundancy, an idea which is imposed by the financial realities of the computer manufacturing and production system: *they need to keep selling computers*. It is quite conceivable to build a computer which would last thirty years, but it could not keep growing indefinitely; you would have to say, "this is email", and build the best, most efficient system. My website is a good example. It's optimised to use the minimal amount of resources, so it doesn't use databases,

it's all static; for that reason, it's also much harder to hack. The more we try and build in functionality and gismos and gadgets and features, the more insecure you make technology, and the more liable it is to fail.

You seem to acknowledge that there's a relationship between the way technology is developed and sold and the economic system which calls for endless growth. This viewpoint seems to fit with your idea of "degrowth".[3] *Why does our current ecological situation necessitate degrowth?*

We are consuming more than the planet can supply. At the moment, the size of the human race is about 40% above what the planet can sustainably supply indefinitely. We need degrowth in order to both live within those planetary restrictions, but also to reallocate some consumption from those who consume the most to those who have the least, hopefully to meet somewhere in the middle. And that isn't the Stone Age - if you look at the restrictions, it would look, in consumer terms, like the late 1950s. How you make that work is a different issue, because people have become accustomed to the dream of consumption.
I started thinking along these lines when I started travelling abroad to Eastern Europe and the Caribbean. I would do a workshop on recycling computers, and it would be easier to teach people who had no contact with technology than it would be to teach people in Britain, because of what technology has done to people in developed countries; it has simplified them, deskilled their lifestyle, and so they have a very poor connection to how their life actually works. The basic skills of simple living which exist in developing countries enable them to take technology and be far more selective and choice-driven about what they want it to do and how to make it work, and therefore they can use and adapt it far more easily than those in the developed world could.

What do you mean by 'simple living'?

All society begins with food. Food is the basis of society; it always has been. If you go right back to, let's say, Ancient Egypt, and the process of making the agricultural system work on a floodplain, it requires mathematics and civil engineering in order to map out plots of land and govern them, and to run the irrigation systems. That foundation has been the foundation of the world ever since. Likewise, in a simpler society, the understanding of how your life operates and how to make it function to the optimal efficiency will help people to get past what seems to be an impossible bottleneck we have to squeeze through to live a less consumerist lifestyle.

3 Defined by the organisation Research & Degrowth as "a downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet". See: http://www.degrowth.org/definition-2, last accessed 3rd June 2014.

Do you think that it is possible to have both immediate material benefit for the world's poorer people and long-term ecological sustainability?

Yes. It's all about reducing consumption. There is so much tied up in ineffective consumption. [For instance,] what is packaging for? These days, packaging is about brand identity, and has very little to do with the product it contains. If we go back to the foundations of modern economics, then Adam Smith, in chapter 9 of book one of *The Wealth of Nations*, talks about the economy reaching a point where people have what they need, [claiming that] it will then cease to grow. John Stuart Mill talks about the economy reaching a stage where people have sufficiency for their needs. So all the early economists foresaw a time when the economy would stop growing because we would have enough. Then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, we have this wonderful idea called 'marketing', [with which] we create insatiable needs: no matter how much you consume under our current system, you will never have enough. There was a wonderful book that came out in 1971 called *The Harried Leisure Class* by a Harvard economic sociologist called Staffan Linder; he was looking at the last frontier of economics in the 1970s, which was monetising people's spare time - how you make people spend money to do nothing. Arguably, from the internet and games consoles through to gyms, it's all about getting people to pay not to work. So when we talk about reducing consumption, there is an awful lot of scope for deintensifying our lifestyle, which will [help us make] sorts of incredible savings.

How do you think we can convince people of the need for ecological sustainability and degrowth?

There is no convincement required, it is going to happen whether they like it or not. It's interesting; there are some letters from Marx to Engels where they were having a go at Malthus and the idea that there are limits to population. There's always been this idea that we can somehow solve the problem, but the point about the ecological limits is that they're insoluble - you cannot consume more than the planet will let you consume. If people could recognise this then they could consciously decide [what to do next], but there is a complete denial of ecological limits. I used to work for major environmental campaign groups, but I don't anymore, because they don't want to have this discussion. In fact, there are two groups of people I have problems with - one is economists, and one is environmentalists, because one group doesn't believe it, and the other group tacitly believes it but will not say it. That's the real difficulty: if we cannot have the discussion, then we'll never find a solution.

On your website, you criticise the optimism of those people who believe we could fully

replace fossil fuels with renewable energies.[4] Considering the dire situation that we're in, is there any point in attempting to start using more renewable energies?

Absolutely. There is no other option. In terms of energy, why are we still paying £1.30 for a litre of petrol? The reason is that there's not enough oil in the world. All the ideas of capitalism are based upon access to cheap energy. How is it that in the last five years, [there have been] trillions of [pounds of] subsidy for the system and yet it has had very little effect on commodity prices? You'd think, somehow, there would be tremendous activity in the economy, but it's stagnating. It's because, if you go to research by Reiner Kümmel, when you crunch the numbers, the price of energy only accounts for 5% of the economy, but it's responsible for half of all our economic growth, because without cheap energy, you can't have a system that grows. We need energy to do all sorts of things in life, but this idea that there are huge quantities of seemingly on-demand energy only arose with fossil fuels. North Sea oil production peaked in 1999 and gas production in 2003, and it's on its way out. Why do they want to do fracking? It's because the conventional stuff is running out. Most of the major companies - Esso, Exxon, Total - have no business model in 10 or 15 years time, because their resources will have gone. All major large-scale energy sources are limited. Even if we could do Carbon Capture and Storage and solve the climate problem, it solves nothing, because we will still have constraints on our use of energy. [5]

You've brought up fracking a few times. I was initially put in contact with you by the Oxon Against Fracking group, who described you as an "anti-fracking lobbyist". What is happening with regards to hydraulic fracturing in Oxfordshire, and why do you oppose it?

I usually talk about 'extreme energy', because 'fracking' is not a source of energy, it's a process.[6] You can frack shale to get shale gas; you can also frack coal seams to get coalbed methane. Both of those technologies are currently being rolled out around the country as part of this government's policies, and in addition,

4 "Renewable energy (sources) or RES capture their energy from existing flows of energy, from on-going natural processes, such as sunshine, wind, flowing water, biological processes, and geothermal heat flows." Definition from Science Daily, available at http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/r/renewable_energy.htm, last accessed 3rd June 2014.

5 "Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) is a technology that can capture up to 90% of the carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions produced from the use of fossil fuels in electricity generation and industrial processes, preventing the carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere." Definition from the Carbon Capture and Storage Association, available at http://www.ccsassociation.org/what-is-ccs/, last accessed 3rd June 2014.

6 More information about the fracking process is available at http://www.dangersoffracking.com/, last accessed 3rd June 2014.

they're giving out licenses very quietly for something else called underground coal gasification, or as my son always says, "setting fire to coal underground". It uses a technique very similar to the old gasworks, where they used to put coal into a steel vessel and heat it to produce gas - except it isn't inside a steel vessel. Some of the worst contaminated land sites in the country are old gasworks; this is the same process but without even the minimal containment they had in those days. Wherever they've done it for the last 100 years, it's gone wrong.

In Oxfordshire, if you take a box from Banbury to Kidlington to Aylesbury back to Milton Keynes, that's where they'd like to offer a license for gas extraction, and that's because over the last 100 years, they've drilled that land 3 times, and every time they've hit gas. It's only 200 metres down, so that will be some of the shallowest fracking going on in Britain. In similar sites in America, it's always resulted in contamination of the surface water. Will they give a license for that? Possibly. I have been told that there have been approaches made to the council about what would happen if they put an application in, so somebody's interested. But until the government announce these licenses, we don't know, and there is no public consultation on these licenses at all.

I noticed in your Extreme Energy and Climate Critical Review, you pointed out in the conclusions that it seems that the government have been ignoring the negative consequences [of fracking]. What do you think accounts for the resistance in government to admit fracking's environmental impacts?

Economics has become a secular religion. It's no different to other types of economic theory that are dominated by a belief system. Anything that challenges that belief system won't get heard, because it challenges too many aspects of what they're there to do. Don't forget, the first budget in Britain where the policy was economic growth was Rab Butler's budget from 1954. Before that, the budget was about balancing the books, and ensuring responsible care of the nation's finances. It was only after 1954 that we had this idea that we would grow and grow and everybody would be happier. We've had 60 years of politicians promising more [growth], and I don't believe they know how to do anything else.

If anything, what fracking and the way it's been dealt with as an issue shows is that politicians and the media have lost faith in the public. They don't believe the public can handle complex or difficult choices and technical information. But I spend a lot of my time going round the country talking to community groups and halls full of people, and people *can* handle it. If you take your time and explain what's happening, they can have a very rational, very measured conversation about things. That's what we've lost: we've lost the belief of the politicians in the public as much as the public in the politicians. In some ways, that's a reciprocal process.

Another issue is that environmental change is inevitably a global phenomenon, and

the perpetuation of national interests over global interests means that governments, as long as they don't feel that the negative changes to the environment are affecting them, carry on with bad policies.

But do we actually talk about policy in public anymore? All government debate is on how government polices people's lives, not how they run the state. We don't have a big debate on how to restructure corporation tax, [or ask] whether houses are an asset or a service. We're not having any meaningful debate because all sides are in general unanimity that "we don't touch that". And that will have to change, because if you ignore a problem for long enough, it becomes a crisis.
When it becomes undeniable that we have a problem, I believe people will rationally decide that we need to do something, but we need to prepare as much as possible before that. In a way, that's why for the last 10 years, I've spent most of my time going round the country working with community groups, helping them to do their own little projects, which in small ways [help us to] adapt. It's developing awareness in a way that means when the crisis finally comes - a crisis of capitalism, let's call it that - that [people] at least have options that they can understand.

What do you think are the positive steps forward that we can each take?

Work less, cook more. Your biggest personal impact on the entire planet is your food supply. We've enabled ourselves to work longer hours in order to get more money, in order that we can have more of the stuff that is supposed to measure us as being successful. A major part of that has been reducing the amount of time cooking by buying more processed products. Processed products use far more energy and resources than raw products. If you spend less time working and spend more time cooking, you might earn less money, but you will spend less money by buying less branded foods. You might get into a food co-operative;[7] you might get into a vegetable box scheme.[8] All of a sudden, little local alternatives will become apparent as a way you can solve this. If I'm positive, that's why: because in microcosm, I see these things happening around the country.
Food is the thing. If you have enough food, you can sit in the dark and sing songs;

7 "The main principle behind all community run food co-ops is that by pooling their buying power and ordering food in bulk direct from suppliers, a group of people can buy good food at a more affordable price." More information available at http://www.foodcoops.org, last accessed 3rd June 2014.

8 "A vegetable box scheme is an operation that delivers fresh fruit and vegetables, usually locally grown and organic, either directly to the customer or to a local collection point." Definition from Wikipedia, available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vegetable_box_scheme, last accessed 3rd June 2014. For information on vegetable box schemes available in the Oxford area, see: http://oxnosh.co.uk/shopping/vegbox.php#guide, last accessed 3rd June 2014.

if you don't have enough food, you get grumpy and start hitting people. The great ecological salvation of humanity will be a sustainable and workable food system, and then everything else after that is negotiable.

This interview was conducted by Kate Bradley, a member of the OLR *editorial board.*