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**ENVIRONMENTAL
SUSTAINABILITY**

TIM BLACK



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KEY TERMS

Cornucopian

Green Revolution

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INTRODUCTION

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In 2009, on the eve of the Copenhagen climate conference, the head of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Rajendra Pachauri issued a warning: ‘Today we have reached the point where consumption and people’s desire to consume has grown out of proportion. The reality is that our lifestyles are unsustainable’ [Ref: [Observer](#)]. Ahead of last year’s Rio+20 Earth summit, Prince Charles, the founder of the International Sustainability Unit, re-iterated Pachauri’s concerns: “Like a sleepwalker, we seem unable to wake up to the fact that so many of the catastrophic consequences of carrying on with “business-as-usual” are bearing down on us faster than we think, already dragging many millions more people into poverty and dangerously weakening global food, water and energy security for the future.” [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. What both Pachauri and Charles touch upon is the issue of sustainability. That is, they believe that human society as a whole is currently consuming more than the planet can provide, a process that many sustainability advocates believe will lead to resource shortages and contributes to climate change. Not that this view is shared by everyone: some counter that it is excessively pessimistic [Ref: [Reason](#)], a case of environmental alarmism that down plays our capacity to change the quantity and quality of environmental resources [Ref: [marklynas.org](#)].



Unsustainable behaviour

Regardless of how aware we are today of our effect on the environment, it seems we still make choices that are to the environment's detriment. As professor of sustainability Tim Jackson describes it, we continue "to consume certain products and services or to live in certain ways rather than others", which has direct and indirect impacts on the environment, as well as on "personal (and collective) wellbeing" [Ref: [Sustainable Development Research Network](#)]. For example, we are aware that carbon emissions contribute to climate change, but we continue to take carbon-emitting flights abroad [Ref: [Guardian](#)]; we are told that resources are finite, that we are using them faster than we are able to replenish them, yet we continue to lead energy-intensive lifestyles [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. As Unilever's Inspiring Sustainable Living report puts it: "Creating a sustainable future will require fundamental changes in attitude and behaviour across society". The former head of the Sustainable Development Commission, Jonathan Porritt argues that we need to shift our collective focus from "consumptive, life-threatening growth" to a focus on "improved wellbeing and real quality of life" [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

A nudge in the right direction

How behaviour change is to be achieved, however, is far from simple. Some suggest legal measures and incentives, such as the idea of a carbon tax - 'the sole necessary solution to climate change' [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. A carbon tax would effectively mean that companies have to pay a fee for every amount (for example, a tonne) of carbon gases produced. Another similar example involves the use of smart metering to address the problem of

the overconsumption of water. That way people would not only know how much water they are using, but, because of the financial incentive, would be encouraged to use less [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Others, uncomfortable with the force implicit in legal measures, argue that it is best if people choose to change their own behaviour. This sentiment is most evident in nudge theory, also known as 'libertarian paternalism', which rests on the assumption that we can be encouraged, through 'choice architecture' to freely make decisions that are in our best interests [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. For instance, principal nudge theorist Richard Thaler argues that by locating a salad bar near cash registers, consumers can be encouraged to make the healthier food choice [Ref: [National Record](#)]. Likewise, people can be nudged into behaving in a far more environmentally sustainable way by shaping the context in which they make everyday decisions. For example, researchers demonstrated that by making sustainably sourced foods an implied default in cafeterias (that is, they could be chosen by diners and served up most quickly) as opposed to less sustainable options for which diners had to wait a little longer, 80 per cent more consumers chose sustainable dining options [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

A shove too far

But there are others who contend that such attempts to change our behaviour, be they regulatory or nudging, violate our basic liberties. Of environmentalist taxation schemes, one commentator argues that they are an attempt to radically overhaul people's lives using the threat of financial punishment [Ref: [The Age](#)]. And nudging, some insist, while not as explicitly coercive as taxation as a mechanism for behaviour change, is

just as much an infringement on individual freedom. A society governed by nudging policymakers, argues one commentator, does not 'enable people to make better choices for themselves'; it corrals people into making a particular choice according to the design of others, namely, the government's 'choice architects' [Ref: [spiked](#)]. As one psychologist writes, behaviour modification is fundamentally a means of controlling people and, therefore, by its very nature "inimical to democracy, critical questioning, and the free exchange of ideas among equal participants" [Ref: [Salon](#)].

Rational optimism

Others contend that behaviour change is simply the wrong way to approach the issue of sustainability. Bjorn Lomborg, for instance, calls for less scaremongering about climate change, and more investment in the research and development of new energy technologies [Ref: [Wall Street Journal](#)]. For those keen on pursuing technological solutions to the problem of sustainability, human history shows that people have consistently innovated and expanded what are considered to be natural limits.

'Rational optimist' Matt Ridley argues that the possibility of cost-effective nuclear fusion (or thorium fission), would allow us to continue to consume energy at the current rate without having to worry about unsustainable carbon emissions [Ref: [Economist](#)]. There is nothing fixed about what is sustainable and what is unsustainable, he argues, "Humanity is a fast-moving target. We will combat our ecological threats in the future by innovating to meet them as they arise, not through the mass fear stoked by worst-case scenarios" [Ref: [Wired](#)]. Indeed, as Dieter Helm argues, innovation can change things very quickly

and in unpredictable ways: "in just the past seven years, fracking and shale oil and gas have transformed the fossil-fuel markets. North America is now moving towards energy independence... The important point is that none of this was foreseen a decade ago" [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. Some counter that such faith in technology - 'techno-fetishism' or 'techno fixes' - is dangerous. As one commentator argues, imagining the possibility of a technological solution to climate change makes people and governments complacent. It distracts us from "the difficult challenges of cutting greenhouse gas emissions or finding a way to live together on a shared planet" [Ref: [Yale Environment 360](#)]. As another columnist suggests, the best and cheapest solution to our environmental concerns is not to be found in our "techno-fixation" but in "consum[ing] less" [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

ESSENTIAL READING

The Royal Society gets it wrong on people and the planet
Mark Lynas 26 April 2012

Switching our whole way of life
Shaun Carney *The Age* 2 March 2011

Western lifestyle unsustainable, says climate expert Rajendra Pachauri
James Randerson *Observer* 29 November 2009

FOR

Why is the left silent on the scourge of consumerism?
Neal Lawson *New Statesman* 29 November 2012

Nudging people towards sustainability
Joe Arvai and Victoria Campbell-Arvai *Guardian* 1 October 2012

An alternative to the new wave of ecofascism
Micah White *Guardian* 16 September 2010

Resisting the Dangerous Allure of Global Warming Technofixes
Dianne Dumanoski *Yale environment 360* 17 December 2009

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AGAINST

Climate-Change Misdirection
Bjorn Lomborg *Wall Street Journal* 23 January 2013

Environmentalists praise the 'vital wisdom' of anti-doomster
Julian Simon and Ronald Bailey *Reason* 10 January 2013

Why are Americans so easy to manipulate?
Bruce E Levine *Salon* 13 October 2012

Getting better all the time
Economist 13 May 2011

IN DEPTH

Apocalypse Not: Here's Why You Shouldn't Worry About End Times
Matt Ridley *Wired* 17 August 2012

Nick Clegg's sinister nannies are 'nudging' us towards an Orwellian nightmare
Brendan O'Neill *Telegraph* 4 January 2011

Inspiring Sustainable Living: Expert insights into consumer behaviour
Unilever 2011

Meeting Environmental Challenges: the role of human identity
Tom Crompton and Tim Kasser *WWF* 2009

BACKGROUNDEERS

Resilience, not static sustainability, is what world needs

Robin Mills *The National* 29 January 2013

'I Got it Wrong on Climate Change—it's Far, Far Worse'

Daniel Politti *Slate* 27 January 2013

Fears that innovation is slowing are exaggerated, but governments need to help it along

Economist 12 January 2013

In Praise Of Pigou Taxes: Especially A Carbon Tax

Tim Worstall *Forbes* 6 January 2013

New paths to power

Dieter Helm *Spectator* 10 November 2012

Eight radical solutions for the water shortage

Vanessa Barford and Lauren Everitt *BBC News* 4 April 2012

The Royal Society: Geoengineering: taking control of our planet's climate?

Andy Ridgwell, Chris Freeman, Richard Lampitt *The Royal Society* 2012

Why a nudge is not enough to change behaviour

Baroness Julia Neuberger *BBC News* 19 July 2011

Harrabin's Notes: Population overload?

Roger Harrabin *BBC News* 11 January 2011

Human civilisation 'will collapse' unless greed culture is stopped, report warns

Andrew Hough *Telegraph* 13 January 2010

Swapping technologies fails to address the root causes of climate change

Merrick Godhaven *Guardian* 15 July 2009

An end to infinite growth and blind consumerism

Jonathan Porritt *Guardian* June 2009

For the sake of the world's poor, we must keep the wealthy at home

George Monbiot *Guardian* 28 February 2006

ORGANISATIONS

Behaviour Change

CO2 Capture Project

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

Forum for the Future

Friends of the Earth

International Energy Agency

International Sustainability Unit

Statoil Sustainability Reports

The Global Warming Policy Foundation

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IN THE NEWS

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China burns half of coal consumption worldwide, figures show
Guardian 30 January 2013

Green deal seeks to boost energy efficiency
Financial Times 27 January 2013

Glasgow awarded £24m funding to make it a 'city of the future'
STV 24 January 2013

Airlines 'made billions in windfall profits' from EU carbon tax
Guardian 24 January 2013

Warning over mackerel stocks
Herald 22 January 2013

Governments must confront climate change in 2013
Guardian 10 January 2013

Climate: another year of living dangerously
Guardian 31 December 2012

Radical technology improvements 'essential' for low carbon society
Telegraph 21 November 2012

'Alter lifestyle to counter climate change'
Times of India 11 October 2012

Survey: Americans Rank Last In Green Lifestyles, Don't Feel Guilty
Forbes 13 July 2012

Rio+20: Prince Charles in climate change warning
BBC News 17 June 2012

Unsustainable consumption – the mother of all environmental issues?
European Environment Agency 15 March 2012

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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