

Building the Vision of the Good Life

[Kate Soper, Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism]

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The crux of Kate Soper's *Post-Growth Living* is simple: we need to redefine "the good life." We need to move away from a culture that equates the good life with endless consumption and toward one that equates it with experiences that are not defined by the market. Not only is this transition ecologically

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necessary, but it will also lead to fairer, and far more pleasurable, experiences, such as Soper's desired "alternative hedonism." I am confident that this singular plea is both fecund and needed, even if, after reading, I am still not sure exactly what "alternative hedonism" actually is.

For decades, Soper has written elegantly and persuasively on feminism, continental philosophy, environmental ethics, and other topics, never ceding to a position without first interrogating it for herself. In what is likely her most well-known work, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*, Soper genuinely absorbs arguments from what she terms "nature-endorsing" approaches, typical of natural scientists who invoke the intrinsic value of "nature," and "nature-skeptical" approaches, characteristic of poststructuralist scholars who draw attention to the cultural, discursive construction of "nature," synthesizing the best of each through critique. What emerges is an understanding of socioecological relationships that is at once realist and humanist, and, most importantly, immensely useful.



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What Is Nature? lingers throughout *Post-Growth Living*, particularly its refusal to accept wholesale anyone else's position on "nature." Soper opens the book through a critique of contemporary ecological Marxist scholarship, in particular Jason

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Moore and Alf Hornborg. Soper has discussed Moore's "lack of cultural vision" more thoroughly elsewhere, though here she accuses him of "a hypostatisation of the system, as if capital itself were responsible and acting autonomously."¹ Soper has

kinder words for Hornborg, although she does propose that we move on from some of his analytical framing, which she criticises as forwarding the idea that "ecological debt...can be understood in monetary terms."² Nevertheless, she applauds how these two, Andreas Malm, and other thinkers (noting the variation among them) have appropriately redirected our attention to the history of industrial capitalism. No good deed goes unpunished, however, for these thinkers have so thoroughly focused our attention on industry that a central impulse of Karl Marx's work is being "overlooked"—namely, that the production of material wealth is not the point of life.³ To render it so is perverse. Putting forward a critique of the way capitalist economies reduce human beings to simplistic means of production, therefore, necessitates, by Marx's own program, building a vision that breaks from these confines. *Post-Growth Living* is largely a plea to better construct such an alternative vision.

Post-Growth Living is a book that expects its readership to be quite comfortable with the fact that we share much more with other beings than previously thought, that we should move far away from nonhuman relations built on cold

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calculations, and that there is a relationality of all beings. Yet it is also a book that expects its readership to recognise that relationality between things does not imply that they are one in the same. On these grounds, Soper has no truck with post-humanism. She contends that the attempt of practitioners of post-humanism to "collapse...what they see as misguided or arrogantly humanist distinctions between ourselves and

other animals" should be "resisted as unhelpful to the environmental argument."⁴ This is because, she argues, nonhumans are not absolutely inseparable from us, nor do they have powers and forms of agency that uniquely define the human. To pretend we can fully absorb them into our worlds is then to deny the specificity of their own worlds. This particular point might not convince post-humanists, who, much like ecological Marxists, have a diverse set of positions.

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(Indeed, many scholars draw from both ecological Marxism and post-humanism.) And some post-humanists would likely reply to Soper that acknowledging the specificity of other unique worlds and their distinct histories remains very much the point. Her next critique, however, is a bit more robust. The responsibility for ecological crises is profoundly human. Against post-humanist impulses, then, addressing ecological

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So, what does this alternative mode of human living look like? It begins with a rejection of the type of consumption on which current ideals of the good life are built, which problematically are today lodestars in the Global South as much as

¹ ↪ Kate Soper, "Capitalocene," *Radical Philosophy* 197 (2016); Kate Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020), 29.

² ↪ Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 17.

³ ↪ Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 14.

⁴ ↪ Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 20.

in the Global North. The majority of the world aspires to consume more—more cars, more fashion, more electronics, more everything—and these prima facie unsustainable aspirations are rooted in the everyday life of most of humanity, across class lines, dialectically wedding consumption to processes of production. To reify them as simply the “choices” or “desires” imposed by an all-powerful capital is to reproduce the idea that people exist only as workers or as capitalist consumers, and this is the idea that Soper is begging us to escape.

After this theoretical positioning, the bulk of the book works toward developing a vision of this alternative hedonism. The day-to-day aspects of her vision are not particularly radical, but this is likely the point. Soper’s alternative world is not a

The alternative world is simply ways to better reflect on and incorporate the environmental consequences of our consumption, and, in doing so, consume far less. This means less flying, less building, less stress, less needless work, less demand for technological “progress,” and more biking, more rehabbing, more walking, more creativity, and more time for conversation.

profound change from our own, it is simply one in which we develop ways to better reflect on and incorporate the environmental consequences of our consumption, and, in doing so, consume far less. This means less flying, less building, less stress, less needless work, less demand for technological “progress,” and more biking, more rehabbing, more walking, more creativity, and more time for conversation. The “hedonism” in Soper’s vision refers to the sheer pleasure to be gained by adopting such a slower-

paced, less carbon-intensive life. For the ugliness of contemporary high-speed, consumption-oriented living, even if it were sustainable, claims Soper, is, anyway, simply not worth it. A counter-consumerist ethic thus contains the twin benefits of developing less environmentally intensive relationships while also building more gratifying, more cooperative societies.

Soper is well aware that her call to liberate ourselves from wonton consumption toward the gratifications of a slower pace will sound to many like an ad campaign for a new glamping app or crystal-laden luxury mindfulness retreat. And she is right in telling us that we should get over it. Just because someone has found ways to make money off a polluted form of environmentalism does not render all attempts to consume environmentally rotten. The whole point, of course, is for us to not let capitalist actors define our visions of our lives and communities. An ethical consumption, perhaps reminiscent of your local cooperative grocery store, is therefore a part of Soper’s alternative vision, though hers is a form

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of consumption that is quite aware of the dangers of greenwashing, false authenticity, and similar means of co-opting environmental ethics for private gain. The rise in organic produce, a desire to ethically source clothing, the development of green building rehabilitation, and

more should be cautiously welcomed because they reflect a popular connection between consumption and its impacts. Our work should not be in rejecting these deeply imperfect developments in consumptive behaviour, but in placing them within a broader post-growth vision and, as part of the effort, fully defetishising them while making them more accessible. Swallowing our pride and working with the world we have is a thread that runs through *Post-Growth Living*.

Soper’s alternative hedonism may not seem culturally revolutionary, for the bones of the cultural shift she is advocating for already exist in many places across the world (if often co-opted for capital gain). It is, nevertheless, politically revolutionary, as any even remotely convincing plea that we consume less must be. Throughout, Soper stresses the importance of connecting consumption to the structural role of capitalist economies and their imperatives that we must all shop until we drop, and it is clear that this stress is what drove the Marxist theoretical positioning of earlier chapters. Again, she is worried that our dialectical foci are overly concerned with production at the expense of consumption. To be clear, production does matter, but it is also important to consider consumption as a part, however limited, of a greater

whole. The humility to take on this maligned aspect of ecological Marxism is in part what makes this book refreshing.

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Soper is very clear that she is not putting forth a complete path toward some defined socioecological future. She is rather disjunctively rounding out our socioecological present, highlighting some things that can currently be done to make it better. Politically, this includes moving on from the naive “old left” jobs-through-growth platforms pursued by Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Our well-being, in terms of our environmental relationships as well as our own day-to-day lives, can no longer depend on programs that equate health with continuous economic growth.

What realistically successful political program can such change depend on? Soper is circumspect, though she insists that a successful politics involves transitioning our focus from worker militancy, with its predefined goals of more production, to questioning why and what we are even producing and consuming. This means emphasising how everyday acts of

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consumption have political dimensions that should be up for debate, how a good life can be lived at a slower pace, reclaiming public space, and embracing a (less technology-dependent) Green New Deal that emphasises rewarding work as opposed to just work. “Marxists,” she insists, “must press for a debate on the good life,” developing new forms of desire as opposed to thinking about ecological collapse.⁵ Still, in the face of such an uncertain environmental future, is this choice so clear cut? Soper is correct that Marxists and those influenced by Marx can do a better job of reaching out to wider audiences. In this ever-dynamic project, however, there is room for multiple emphases. The sheer weight of our contemporary environmental predicaments today motivates a great deal of people. An alternative hedonism can and should be part of the effort to address contemporary environmental problems, though not necessarily by itself.

It is this lack of a thorough connection to other traditions, past and present, that renders the concept of alternative hedonism a little blurry. Part of Soper’s appeal is indeed her uniqueness, though, here, perhaps, her individuality gets in the way of possible connections. For instance, Soper is not the first to argue that ethical consumption not only leads to

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better environmental relationships, but a better life. Indeed, I was shocked to see that this book was published by Verso and not Kelmscott Press. William Morris looms large in *Post-Growth Living*, but largely in silence. Much of Morris’s life was spent arguing for a similar position to Soper’s—that labour should be by definition creative, time should not be defined by the production of goods one does not care about, and social and ecological health are understood as twin benefits of a very possible alternative way of life. “The lack of this pleasure in daily work,” Morris wrote in 1885, “has made our towns and habitations sordid and hideous insults to the beauty of the earth which they disfigure, and all the accessories of life mean, trivial, ugly.”⁶ Like Soper over a century later, Morris defined his view against those on the left who, like Edward Bellamy, advocated for mechanising labour in order to free us from the daily drudge, in favour of the opposite position, one in which work itself is an art.

⁵ ↪ Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 184.

⁶ ↪ William Morris, *Signs of Change* (London: Longmans, Green, 1896), 119.

Soper's perspective is of course not identical to Morris's, if only because it benefits from over a century of additional thinking. But how, exactly, might these positions align? Should a push for an alternative hedonism draw from the established, popular notoriety of Morris and other Romantics? If so, how much? If not, why not exactly? Morris is mentioned but once in *Post-Growth Living*, paired with his contemporary utopian socialist Edward Carpenter, both brushed aside as simplistic paragons of a dated Romantic age, if still "important resources."⁷ Important how? Later in the

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book Soper does call for an "avant-garde nostalgia" in which a critique of the past is developed, serving as the basis to draw useful insights for the present. Unfortunately, Soper does not engage in this process in regard to Morris, though my guess is that she did not want to incorporate Romantic thinkers for fear of coming across as too, well, romantic. This fear, however, is likely founded on later uncharitable or misinformed distillations of Morris's work, not Morris's work itself, which is quite clearly part of the tangled roots of Soper's own program. If Soper has something more complex in mind than a back-to-nature romance, and she very much does, then a demonstration of how her thought draws and does not draw from Morris and his ilk would have been welcome. Moreover, the examples that Soper does provide, mostly anticolonial imageries, seem rushed. "Avant-garde nostalgia" is a potentially useful frame, though without a thorough application (Romantic or not), it washes away in ambiguity.

Questions regarding tradition aside, this is a brave and needed work. If at times hasty, it is an erudite challenge to many of us to think more holistically about what sort of world we are working for and why. Critically wading through the mire of green consumption, defending it in small part while exposing its foundational inadequacies, is no easy tension to illuminate and Soper does it well. *Post-Growth Living* demands that we explicitly think about how we can build a world that is more enjoyable, one that finds deep comfort in the limits of life. It is a task that demands, as Soper clearly understands, some deeply uncomfortable conversations.

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⁷ ↪ Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 49.

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