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Mary Lawhon and Tyler McCreary, *Enough! A Modest Political Ecology for an Uncertain Future*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2023. ISBN: 9781788216203 (paper)[1]

For decades, the imperial industrial-capitalist status quo has been thoroughly analysed, criticised and deconstructed, and many conclude they no longer want it. But beyond shared analysis and critique, do we know what we want instead? This issue increasingly comes up in progressive debates: a wish for radical change is not in itself clear about what future is desired, and a preoccupation with critique alone is insufficient. It is also Mary Lawhon and Tyler McCreary's starting point and a recurring question posed to them: if we know what we are against, what then are we for; what are desirable alternatives and viable pathways forward? Some would object that we have enough knowledge and now is the time to act upon it. The authors agree that broad activist engagement is indeed needed, yet their concern is "not so much the tactics for building a movement *as the underlying ideas* … [given] movements for justice and environmentalism are not constrained so much by a lack of interest or action … [but] what is missing is a clearer unifying analysis and shared narrative" (p.14, emphasis added). With too little agreement about what should change, progressive actors are "faced not with a lack of proposed solutions but their near incoherent abundance" (p.20). The authors therefore aspire to clear a path through many different, sometimes conflicting proposals and find an answer to the question what to be for and what to do, sketched out as a radical and compelling vision of a "good green future" (p.8) and common political project that finds broad approval across the Global North and South, contributing to ongoing like-minded debates in political ecology and beyond. In short, they start with great ambitions and promises.

The book is structured in six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces a central theme: the fault line "modern" versus "antimodern"/"arcadian" in sustainability debates and social theory more generally. Affinity to these "camps" traditionally explains a large part of what sustainability debates most fundamentally disagree on, in that they stand for fundamentally opposed perspectives on modernity as a civilizational model and corresponding perceptions of problems and solutions. The authors are "unconvinced by the political and ecological analysis of either side" (p.9) and therefore seek to formulate a position and politics beyond this "more/modern" vs. "less/antimodern" divide. However, while modernity and its flaws are described extensively, it could have been more clearly

[1] Open access version available at https://www.agendapub.com//resources/pdfs/OpenAccess/ENOUGH!_Lawhon_McCreary_OA.pdf (last accessed 16 May 2025).

explained why "arcadian" perspectives should equally be discarded, not least as the authors seem to endorse radical critiques of modernity and often draw on related concepts and scholarship. In describing a varied mix of intellectual traditions, they sometimes also reiterate old stereotypes and fall back into a modernist narrative that tends to neglect the actual struggles against industrial-capitalist modernity or articulations of serious alternatives (Graeber and Wengrow 2021; Kothari et al. 2019; Scheidel et al. 2020)—which are much more than a romantic, backward "inverse" of modernity, more than the absence of modern flushing toilets (p.41 f.).[2] Nevertheless, it is helpful that the book highlights an important cleavage in sustainability theory and politics.

Chapter 2 explains the book's "modest approach" aimed at "enough for all". Most generally, *enough* is understood as "a subjective, variable, political ecological concept" (p.3) which cannot be universally defined but is based on "fundamentally political decisions about values and trade-offs" (p.55). More precisely, enough encompasses two aspects: having enough as in *being fed up with the state of the world* ("In this moment, so many of us have clearly had enough" [p.2 ff.]), or enough as in *everyone needs enough* (e.g. "calories, water and shelter" [p.55]) *to survive*, i.e. enough in a perspective "from below" a certain threshold, from potential need, lack and scarcity, aiming at basic material provisioning "*above* a biological baseline" (ibid., emphasis added). Interestingly, this does not include the distinct meaning of "enough" as in *not needing or wanting more because more is unnecessary, too much or wasteful*, i.e. enough in a perspective "from above" a limit, from abundance or excess, aiming at sufficiency and self-limitation (Spengler 2016). The authors oppose this dimension of reduction and self-restraint, apparently because they understand it as a matter of "arcadian" individual sacrifice, austerity and involuntary imposition, and "modest" as "quite different from asserting the morality of limits and simplicity" (p.53). Here, the authors unfortunately do not draw on debates on collective self-limitation as a matter of autonomy and democracy (e.g. Asara et al. 2013; Blühdorn 2022).

Another central element of the book's "modest imaginary" is the assumption of radical *uncertainty*, rejecting the modern idea of all-encompassing control based on full, universal scientific knowledge. Yet, the authors' take on uncertainty or "modest science" also implies a more general reservation against substantiated, knowledge-based conclusions and actions. Moreover, they

[2] Dismissal as "romantic" (i.e. irrational, naive) is actually a widespread move in academic debates: any suggestion that pre-/non-/anti-modern perspectives and ways of life could be sources of inspiration will reliably be countered that "this should not be romanticised"—an interesting reflex in itself and clearly too general in light of the varied literature and practices opposed to modernity.

eventually take it in a distinct direction when singling out the "ambiguity" (p.54) of ecological limits. To understand limits, thresholds or shortages, they believe political economy is more decisive than material realities and "[i]nstead of fixed limits" they "emphasize constraints and the possibilities for working within, stretching and rethinking them" (p.10). Here and elsewhere, the book's "modest approach" is essentially an articulation of radical constructivism and relativism—common in political ecology (Knudsen 2023)—in contrast to a critical realist philosophy of science (e.g. Graeber 2015), more common in ecological economics, social ecology, degrowth and allied fields which take biophysical reality as the basis and limit of human existence seriously. This old, fundamental debate between ontological realism and constructivism resurfaces regularly in the context of sustainability and limits to growth (e.g. Gómez-Baggethun 2021).

Two problems may occur here. As the authors themselves point out (p.20), in times of science denial, "alternative facts" and disinformation where agreement on a shared, fact-based reality is often lacking, a strong constructivist and relativist approach that questions both physical realities and any possibility of certainty runs the risk of playing into the hands of far-right demagogues and the capitalist status quo. Moreover, while some caution about modern science is justified, it still provides a substantial body of profound knowledge on urgent problems. Generalising statements like "[s]cientific controversies remain over the causal mechanisms of the problems that we face" (p.19) are therefore misleading.[3]

After an "interlude" on universal basic income (UBI), Chapters 3, 4 and 5 outline a "modest politics" in the domains of the economy, state, and livelihoods/work, before Chapter 6 summarises. The third chapter suggests to embrace "difference and diversity without providing a singular vision of what a modest economy looks like" (p.85), making the case for a mix of ownership forms; "embedded" markets, money and profits; the old belief in the end-of-work through automation; redistribution through cash transfers, corporate and wealth taxes; as well as for the position of "a-growth", i.e. an explicit, "agnostic" disinterest in the question "whether the economy (at any scale) grows" (p.87). Overall, what a "modest approach" means for the economy is an interesting overview across a variety of debates but also remains (intentionally?) uncertain.

[3] To use the examples given here (p.19), we understand very well what causes climate change, droughts, wildfires, species extinction, pollution with chemicals, soil contamination and erosion, *and* how these threats could be tackled. Moreover, uncertainty is an integral part of scientific research—not an argument against it—and scientific confidence and certainty are themselves objects of research (e.g. in climate science; see Kause et al. 2022).

Chapter 4 discusses a "modest state" including the book's most prominent proposal, the case for UBI as "a clear example of modest statecraft" (p.111). A key reason for UBI, contrasted with universal basic services (UBS), is that market-based provisioning is considered superior to provisioning through "collectives", i.e. in particular the state but also the commons. Moreover, UBI secures "a basic livelihood not dependent on labour" (p.133).

This connects to Chapter 5 on "modest livelihoods" which is the book's strongest, most inspiring part and thus merits closer attention. It formulates a fundamental critique of the *modern imaginary* of work, distinctly locating the modern cultural phenomenon "work" (as commodified employment and the values, norms and institutions that underpin it) in space and time by highlighting that in historical and global comparison it is by no means natural, universal or "an inherent human condition", but "a cultural anomaly, … a socially created, politically reinforced and economically interested imposition" (p.124). Underlying this imaginary is the belief in "the moral virtue of work" (p.116), that work is inherently good and "has moral value beyond its use value" (p.124). Accordingly, regardless of economic necessity work is believed to create good, deserving subjects and expected "to be the primary source of a livelihood" (p.116). Moreover, this modern work ethic is accurately described as a significant obstacle to social-ecological change: because of the unquestioned moral sanctity and social centrality of work its many blind spots and severe problems are usually disregarded or accepted as inevitable.

Although the authors do not mention postwork, they frequently draw on Weeks' (2011) seminal book on this concept—and genuinely contribute to postwork debates through an explicit global and postcolonial perspective: modern formalised waged work has never been the norm for the majority of the world's population and their variety of forms of livelihood provisioning (Monteith 2025). Work played and continues to play a problematic role in colonial history and development politics, while the history of widespread resistance to it (both in Europe and its colonies) is largely forgotten. This is also why the authors chose the term modest "livelihoods" as a concept developed "in the global south to expand our thinking about the diversity of ways people get what they need" (p.115) and as useful "to help us think beyond work-based incomes in the global north too" (ibid.)—clearly a valuable suggestion.

Yet, the modern work imaginary is still widespread and taken for granted (not least among otherwise critical scholars) to the effect that the modern "valorization of work continues to shape, and constrain, radical politics" (p.116). This issue can be perfectly illustrated with another currently popular policy proposal which the authors reject as modernist: the job guarantee (JG). Arguments

against the JG include that it "continues to valorize employment as a good in itself" (p.128) and further normalises the modern work-centred society. Related is the book's general critique of the modern state which through a JG would become even more intrusive: the JG discourse "resonates with decades of (often neoliberal) demands that welfare be replaced with workfare" (p.126), reinforcing moralisation and coercion through the disciplinary system of modern work instead of breaking up the link between labour and livelihoods—something a UBI would accomplish. Another valid point is that JG-induced focus on job creation "has perverse impacts for sustainability" (ibid.) and "creates a complex set of incentives that will make it difficult to reduce unnecessary, unsustainable activity" (p.127). This relates to the ecological problem with the modern work ethic: it "underpins the urge to put everyone to work, even when a sustainable world of enough would be easier to achieve without the pressure to create employment for everyone" (p.116).

These are strong reasons, however the last JG counter-argument is less convincing: state-administered job creation supposedly "collectivizes decisions over what work matters and whose work counts" (p.128) in line with hegemonic norms and what the workfare state is able to control, empowering panoptic super-bureaucracies at the expense of individual autonomy. In contrast, a "modest approach means it is not our collective task to determine what types of activities ought to be valued, nor who ought to value them" (p.132). Rather, UBI and rejecting the modern valorization of work would ensure the freedom, time and security for "people to choose, as freely as they can, how to live their lives" (ibid.) and the work they want or don't want to pursue. At the same time, the authors also concede that "market-based decisions about what work is valuable … are significantly flawed" (p.130) yet do not suggest an alternative mechanism of labour valuation and allocation.

This is not enough for the kind of transformation we need. Besides decoupling livelihoods from work and challenging its glorification, "collectively", i.e. democratically, distinguishing the social and ecological value of work is a necessary building block of a structural ecological transformation of the economy. Work needs to be revaluated according to whether it is essential, meaningful, pointless or harmful, and on that basis selectively reduced or entirely phased out if ecologically required. What remains needs to be reorganised on a sustainable, post-fossil material and energy basis. This implies institutional innovation beyond labour markets, and relates to currently burgeoning debates and movements on economic democracy and democratic economic planning (Hoffmann and Frayne 2024)—something occasionally mentioned but not elaborated.

Overall, the book is well-written, yet sometimes long-winded, vague and inconsistent—the authors themselves are undecided if modest practices are best characterised by ecosocialist,

degrowth, capitalist, libertarian or anarchist thought (p.142). In line with the common methodological approach in political ecology (p.137), case studies and experiments are preferred over the analysis of structures, actors and institutions underlying systemic problems. Due to its ontological constructivism and radical relativism, the book also lacks ecological realism and (explicitly: p.138) ecological ambition—although without ecological integrity a "modest approach" cannot guarantee freedom, justice and security. The challenge is not total uncertainty but understanding how to align our economic and social organisation with the fundamental conditions of life on Earth. The various facets of reduction and finitude are integral parts of life, not something "arcadian", and avoiding them is (ironically) emblematic of modernity. Despite this, the book refreshingly questions work and productivism, invites us to broaden our horizons on sustainable and emancipatory ways of organising livelihoods, and thus contributes valuably to current debates and politics of work.

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