

OPINION

REBOOTING REALITY

Listen to The Science, demands the widespread rallying cry, even though there is clearly no such singular thing. Whether the topic is climate, virology or gender, the diversity of purportedly scientific publications is such that (rather like quotes from the Bible) one can be brandished as evidence for almost any view, however outlandish.

There will always be outliers, and sometimes these are genuinely important. But that doesn't mean all such publications carry equal weight. Science can be done well or badly, results can be presented honestly or disingenuously, and the standards applied by journals can vary from impossibly stringent to effectively non-existent.

Despite mischievous claims to the contrary, this has not yet rendered the whole exercise pointless. As the sheer number of published studies on all topics has exploded, so the idea of 'scientific consensus' has become increasingly central. This has arguably worked pretty well in the case of climate change, where surveys have repeatedly shown that over 97 percent of published scientific literature supports the hypothesis that human activity is warming the Earth. Putting it mildly, this does seem like something that should persuade most open-minded people, and broadly speaking this has now happened.

Information Deficit?

'Listen to the Science!' might have been a reasonable demand to make of someone who still didn't believe human activity was causing climate change. But that was yesterday's conversation, and the slogan is much less useful in the context of today's debates. These are messy political and ethical fights about what *priority* acknowledged environmental objectives should be given relative to other social goals. They cannot be short-circuited by appealing to science as a source of unarguable truth, attractive though this option may seem.

Environmental movements have long been hamstrung by naive 'information deficit' models of communication. Yet it is still often claimed that decision makers, corporate bosses and humble 'consumers' are under-informed about impending eco-doom, and would behave more virtuously if only they had more accurate information. History does not support this view. Oil companies researched climate change in depth long ago, but recognising a threat to profits, kept their findings secret and carried on regardless. Governments will not voluntarily introduce strong regulation that might displease lobbyists, reduce growth or lose them the next election, even though people actually want them to do so.¹ These are complex political problems, requiring political solutions. They cannot be resolved just by 'listening to the science'.



These scientists are understandably frustrated. But how helpful is their message?

Ecomodernist Epiphanies

Against this background, some degree of scepticism is warranted when prominent people claim that the siren voice of science has whispered in their ear and convinced them that previous ethical or political beliefs were mistaken.

Connoisseurs of such epiphanies may remember the notorious case of Mark Lynas, whose Damascene conversion to the exaggerated merits of genetic modification led him to disavow his (apparently also exaggerated) earlier role in anti-GM campaigning, and eventually to become an enthusiastic ambassador for GM agriculture, paid by the Gates Foundation, via the so-called Alliance for Science.²

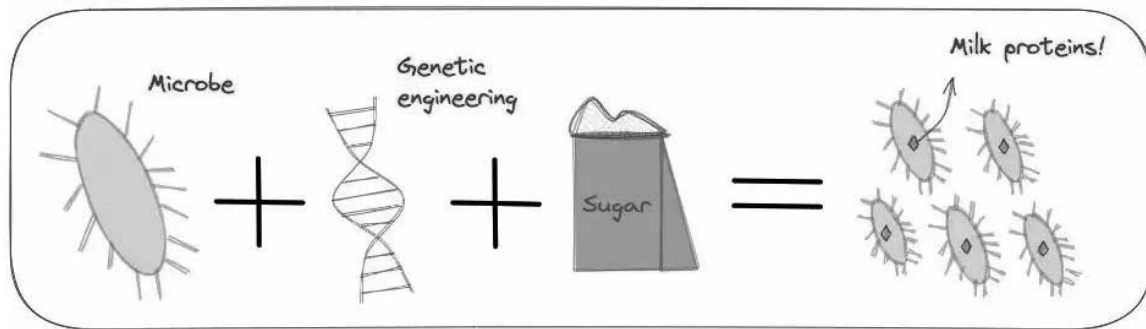
Lynas was an author of the *Ecomodernist Manifesto*, which promoted the idea that high technology and entrepreneurial innovation could largely 'decouple' human civilisation from the natural world, removing physical limits to growth and deliberately splitting the planet between curated 'wilderness' and intensive human settlement.³ He is now a central figure in a new organisation called RePlanet, which he describes as

'Not just a disparate movement but a professionally organised network of activists in multiple countries, dedicated to overtaking mainstream green thinking, not just in science but in ambition.'⁴

Imagine...

Like the Ecomodernist groups it emerged from, the RePlanet network is very active in pushing environmental NGOs and political parties to support nuclear power and genetic modification.⁵ Currently though, its most high profile campaign is one called Reboot Food, in whose fantasy narrative the world will be rescued from the cruelty and ecological destruction of existing agriculture by heroic technological breakthroughs, in particular precision fermentation (PF). Visitors to the RePlanet website are invited to

Precision Fermentation



A typically sophisticated diagram illustrating how precision fermentation works to produce, in this case, milk from sugar.¹³

'Imagine producing the entire world's protein on an area of land the size of Greater London. Imagine rewilding three quarters of today's farmland. Imagine eating guilt-free meat, milk and cheese without ever having killed an animal. Imagine providing abundant food to the world's poorest.'⁶

As often discussed in these pages, the plausibility of a global move to high-tech veganism and extreme rewilding is highly questionable. Adding the idea that this would somehow feed the world stretches credibility to the limit. For instance, many of 'the world's poorest' are subsistence pastoralists, who would presumably be told (by whom is unclear) to give up their livestock and accept the 'rewilding' of whatever grazing land they previously had access to.⁷ This misguided idea is far from new, but previous efforts by NGOs and governments to impose it have usually gone pretty badly (as noted by one G. Monbiot – see eg *The Land* issue 30, p35). The twist this time around, that involuntary vegans in the Global South would somehow be provided with 'abundant food' from their local fermentation plant, suggests either considerable cynicism or a remarkable ignorance of real world politics and economics.

Smells Like Astroturf

How best to promote this curious vision to the world? Enter Lynas's old Oxford friend and sparring partner George Monbiot, who has of course recently had a surprising epiphany of his own about such matters.⁸ In late 2022, RePlanet kindly funded a speaking tour of Europe, and associated media blitz, promoting Monbiot's controversial book *Regenesi* as a statement of their own position.

The explicit aim of Reboot Food is not only to change public perception, but also to secure government funding for the emerging PF industry. Applicants for a recently advertised £47K job as Campaign Manager were set this task:

'RePlanet wants to see massive government investment in the emerging field of precision fermentation (a technology with the potential to end animal agriculture). Outline three actions you would take as a campaigner in pursuit of this.'⁹

RePlanet calls itself 'pro-science' and says it is 'entirely charitably funded and strictly accepts no funding from industry'. However it very much does accept funding from 'charitable' foundations set up by companies and wealthy individuals to further projects they favour. The trail is not hard to follow.

As noted by GMWatch, 'Monbiot fits neatly into the ecomodernists' rebranding exercise, [but] teaming up with Lynas is a seriously bad idea'. In short, Monbiot of all people is

surely well-equipped to see that RePlanet has all the hallmarks of a sophisticated astroturf organisation, whose real job is to advance industry interests, not least by weakening EU regulations around agrochemicals and 'novel foods'.¹⁰

One of the two people recruited to join Lynas as the public faces of RePlanet UK, Joel Scott-Halkes, attended COP27 as part of a delegation from the Canadian Nuclear Association¹¹, after co-writing a bizarre article with Lynas entitled 'How I came to love (and even hug) nuclear waste'.⁵ His core interest however seems to be food, on which he recently tweeted that 'puritanical anti-science Greens' who support EU regulations on GM which are 'unfounded in science' are thereby 'holding back actual planet saving'.¹² Such messaging perfectly suits the interests not only of PF start-ups, but more importantly of industry giants like glyphosate maker and GM seed merchant Bayer.

Is This 'The Science'?

Scott-Halkes and his new colleague Emma Smart are best known as repeatedly arrested Extinction Rebellion activists. This connection has been prominently flagged, no doubt to make RePlanet seem like a radical grassroots organisation.

While 'Listen to the Science' remains a core XR slogan, it seems fair to assume that many XR supporters would not share RePlanet's industry-friendly ecomodernist interpretation of it. Science does not mandate the adoption of any particular technology, diet or economic system. It cannot replace political and ethical deliberation, or dictate 'solutions' to be rolled out across the world, controlled by investors in high-tech industries.

XR have called for 100,000 people to gather at Parliament Square on 21 April. Some may perhaps attend with a view to demanding nuclear power, genetic modification and precision fermentation. Most, hopefully, will not.

MH

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2. <https://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/another-god-delusion>
3. <http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto-english>
4. <https://www.replanet.ngo/post/what-defending-science-means-when-you-re-an-environmentalist>
5. <https://www.replanet.ngo/written>
6. <https://www.rebootfood.org/>
7. <https://theconversation.com/how-pastoral-farming-can-help-to-avoid-a-biodiversity-crisis-195274> . Monbiot *The Land* 30 p35
8. <https://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/monbiotic-man>
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10. <https://gmwatch.org/en/106-news/latest-news/20127-george-monbiot-teams-up-with-mark-lynas-and-ecomodernism-to-reboot-food>
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