



Why every day should be a Sustainability Day

Environmental philosopher Yogi Hendlin calls on students to join the global climate strike and Dutch education strike.



[Elzeline Kooy](#)

During the Erasmus Sustainability Days, environmental philosopher Yogi Hendlin calls on students to join the global climate strike and the nationwide education strike on 15 March. “Because if we don’t prioritize education, there will be little hope that we have sufficient knowledge and power to provide the next generation of leadership that our world desperately needs.”

Yogi Hendlin 08-03-2019 9 minute read 0 comments

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[Yogi Hale Hendlin](#) is Assistant Professor in Theoretical Philosophy at the Erasmus School of Philosophy and core faculty in the Erasmus Initiative Dynamics of Inclusive Prosperity. As an environmental philosopher, he gave an opening address to the Erasmus Sustainability Days last Monday. This essay is an adaptation of his speech.

Sustainability first and foremost has to do with shedding stuff we don't need, rather than adding more quick fixes to the mix. We'll get more health and happiness out of each euro of investment by rewilding our cities, getting rid of cars and turning our streets into forests, than buying an air purifier, bottled water, or other gadgets to give us some imagined personal advantage. The punchline of nature's joke is that unless we improve the commons for all – the health of those inextricably shared elements of land, air, water and temperature – we're deluding ourselves, sustaining unsustainable conditions of business, politics and life. There's no individual salvation against the harm humans as a collective have perpetrated against nature. The only solution with stamina is a collective one that systematically stops and undoes the harm of technological industrial culture.

But in order to address that, we need to change the incentives. We need to confront our public officials on why it's cheaper to jump in an airplane than buy a train ticket. We need to ask why the poor air quality in Rotterdam has been deemed acceptable, even though the pollution will kill many extra people, statistically, per year. We need to ask how many cyclists will be killed before we demand more car-free streets. We need to ask, according to Kant's Categorical Imperative, what would happen if everybody used as many throwaway items as I do? Is it sustainable far into the future for the whole planet to buy something at Spar or Albert Heijn, and throw away kilos of plastic every week just to package food and drink we could bring our own reusable packaging for? And we need to ask the European Union why a carbon tax and dividend has not yet been passed, so the goods and services we use reflect their actual impact on the environment, making low- or zero-carbon options the default.

Magic tricks of technology



around us'

The ecophilosopher David Abram in the film adaptation of his book *Becoming Animal* remarks: "It's kind of wild witnessing this outrageous proliferation of technology right at the same moment that there is such a fraying and fragmentation of the earth's various ecosystems. I can't help but wonder, what is the relationship between these two contemporaneous happenings?" As we are becoming increasingly entranced by our digital artefacts, they enable us not to feel what is really going on. These magic tricks of technology enable us to become disembodied from the earth, to tune out and numb out to the whispers and rumblings in our own body. "So we hang out in those virtual spaces ... and lock the doors, closing us ever more thoroughly into that circuit of exchange with mirrors of our own invention", he writes. Technoculture has finally become the image of Narcissus, so insecure and self-absorbed by our own reflection, that we have failed to look up and realize that the land is on fire all around us.

To really open up to the pain of the earth would require such a shocking confrontation with ourselves, that many of us flinch and look away. But as the venerable ecophilosopher and Buddhist systems thinker Joanna Macy emphasizes, it is impossible to be content until we wake up and accept the pain of the earth. Macy discusses the need to develop grieving practices and rituals to get in touch with those numb parts of ourselves that have been armoured and hardened. She urges us to come back to life, to come back to the animal and child parts of ourselves that have suffered, and to have great compassion for all of this suffering – for ourselves and the earth. For ourselves, because we have been violently forced to distance ourselves from our intuition and wisdom in order to get where we are today. And for the earth, because industrialism has for so long ignored nature's 'NO' that we will now suffer the direst consequences.

Uneasy alliance

George Santayana is famous for saying "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it'. But the situation we face is unprecedented. Prior in our history, the self-cannibalization of Rome, Persia and other great cultures, merely meant the downfall of a circumscribed, delimited civilization, plunging the region into a dark ages, but allowing other civilizations elsewhere to flourish. Had Rome not fallen, the Celts or Incas might have had to waste their precious time defending themselves from imperialists.

Currently, however, there is no such alternative. The business model of capitalism and in many ways even democracy as we know it has been one of colonialism: stealing resources and ideas from the peripheries and siphoning them towards the imperial centres. This has been a model constructed on inequalities and injustice. More than a century ago, the sociologist Max Weber already observed, however, that 'we have no new continent at our disposal' to metabolize for a growing economy, and thus Weber was well aware that we need to find a new basis and

needed to placate the lower and middle economic classes from questioning and rejecting the obscene power asymmetries between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent baked into the economic system and thus the political system. Now, we need to find more resilient and compassionate models than the old world nation-state to reflect the simultaneous needs of coordinated global action on matters of the environment and human rights, on the one hand, and the local abilities to preserve ecological cultures, languages, and harmonious just traditions on the other.



Sustainable, really?

Sustaining the unsustainable

As they currently stand, institutions all around us are aiding and abetting our ignorance. Instead of taking the climate threat seriously and mitigating it, as was already known to be immediately necessary in the 1980s, governments have instead been more interested in sustaining the unsustainable, and managing adaptation to climate chaos rather than reconfiguring the power relations of governments, people, corporations and the earth.

This is your future – one of staggering massive disruption and turbulence, more than any previous single generation has ever been forced to face in recorded history. This time, however, it's not provincial to Europe, but it's occurring just as dramatically around the planet.

Hungry ghosts



hungry ghosts

And it's not like no one knew this was going to happen. Since the 1960s the oil industry's own top scientists warned them about catastrophic climate change if we continued to pump out carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. The oil executives listened attentively, and deliberately chose to ignore it. The oil executives opted instead to sustain their unsustainable practices for as long as humanly possible – until everything melts down and the ruse is up. In making this decision, though, they are taking down the entire biosphere with them: you, me, 40 per cent of all biodiversity on earth, the coastal cities of New York, Tokyo, Amsterdam. They are willing to sacrifice all of civilization to make one more dollar, to feed that hole in their hearts – like hungry ghosts.

And it's not like this has stopped. It's still going on, right at the heart of our own university. Until December 2018, Shell was allowed to influence what was being taught at RSM. Such deals with the devil ensure that the essential solutions to cleaning up their own messes will not be considered and implemented, in deference to watered-down proposals and half-measures. The revolving door between corporations and government ensures that the policy captures what happened at our own university happens around the globe – writ large.

Even though every major corporation has been anticipating a carbon tax for over a decade, because they haven't been forced to do so by governments, none of them have voluntarily implemented a carbon tax, as they have been successful in fending them off.

Disruptive regulation

What we need right now is disruptive regulation, regulation that will finally put our global civilization back on track ecologically and socially focused on the common good. Disruptive regulation firmly says NO to unsustainable practices while saying YES to the greater good, to the true indicators of happiness rather than chasing after the bottomless pit of never-enough material excess. Disruptive regulation allows a new constellation of actors such as NGOs, indigenous people, women, children and civil society to have more voice in politics, putting economic imperatives to work for these aims rather than against them. Disruptive regulation allows giving incentives to B corporations, cooperatives and other businesses that make planet and people part of their charter, with their products and profits serving these collective goods in a thoughtful and non-fragmented way. Disruptive regulation allows sectors like wind, solar, and biomass, in addition to long-term reusable multiuse packaging a chance to succeed in our current throwaway culture of cheap plastics and trashy morals. Disruptive regulation is part of the solution – and we as a society should not be afraid of drastic changes in our laws and policies, and way of life as long as they go in the direction of supporting the underpinning ecological processes that sustain all life and recognize that in our infinite variety as humans, no model based on arbitrary discrimination will prosper.

business people would redirect their energy very quickly on sustainability and decarbonization if that was the only game in town. By removing the distractions of creating more first-world problems, we could do this. It is very clear that if humanity puts its attention on consuming less, flying way less, eating locally and ecologically, and creating more local economies, then in five years' time, our future would look much brighter.



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Broken tax system

A month ago at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the Dutch historian, writer and thought leader Rutger Bregman shot to even greater international fame as he, along with Winnie Byanyima, the executive director of Oxfam International, stunned the world when they talked about the elephant in the room: wealth distribution. Rutger made clear to the world's economic elite that 'philanthropy is not a substitute for democracy or proper taxation or a good welfare state', that we need to fix our broken tax system. "I want to live in a world where philanthropy is not necessary", Rutger said, because we have a tax system that takes care of everyone rather than just the few.

If we start taxing advertising for luxury products, or products that cost our society billions in healthcare costs like McDonalds, then we have more than enough resources to ensure that everyone has enough to live a simple but dignified life and dedicate resources to reversing climate change. Policies like carbon taxes and dividends also act as a form of universal basic income for those purchasing lower-carbon products.

Hero

No one thought that a 16-year-old girl would change the course of climate history, but Greta Thunberg has done exactly that. Greta's commonsense approach has rocked the world in her simply observing that the emperor has no clothes on, that all of our collective blustering about climate change has so far amounted to dismally little. There is no one more powerful in the



In her TED talk in Stockholm, Greta proclaimed: “We can’t change the world by playing by the rules, because the rules have to be changed.” Greta is a hero to me, and for millions of others around the world who are striking every Friday, making their voices heard, going to parliament and becoming visible. She has accomplished so much because she refused to accept the status quo that will render the world uninhabitable for the next generation. Instead, this autistic girl’s determination in striking for the climate has raised awareness, giving her the opportunity to speak at the last United Nations Climate Change Conference in Poland, and to present at the same World Economic Forum that Rutger Bregman attended.

In the spirit of Greta, next Friday, 15 March, has been declared a global strike for the climate. This is your opportunity to define yourself, and let the world know who you are, by striking with us. This date also happens to be a day of action in favour of education in the Netherlands. So feed two birds with one seed, and come out on 15 March at 12:00 at The Hague for a joint student and staff demonstration of all Dutch universities to demand sufficient resources for education. Because if we don’t prioritize education, there will be little hope that we have sufficient knowledge and power to provide the next generation of leadership that our world desperately needs. Our future depends on you.



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Yogi Hendlin

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