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Book review: picking holes in litany of loss

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Picking holes in litany of loss

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16 November 2001

Eric Neumayer

Crisis, what environmental crisis? Eric Neumayer examines the facts.

Rarely has an essentially academic book created as much media attention as Bjorn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. One wished this attention was because the book presented many new insights, facts or ideas. Unfortunately, this is not the case. There is little in this book that cannot be found in earlier works such as *The State of Humanity*, *The Ultimate Resource* or *Small is Stupid*, written or edited by Julian Simon or Wilfred Beckerman - whom Lomborg strangely does not cite.

The book's objective is to prove to the reader that environmentalists such as Paul Ehrlich, Norman Myers and Lester Brown from the Worldwatch Institute, as well as environmental activist groups such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), are almost always wrong in their warnings about large-scale environmental degradation and the need to take decisive action against it. Lomborg argues that what he calls the "litany" put forward by these people and groups is not based on sound facts and scientific research and is therefore plain wrong. Contrary to the litany, he purports to show that "mankind's lot has actually improved in terms of practically every measurable indicator", and while some environmental problems exist, they have often been vastly exaggerated - environmental quality is rising rather than falling in most instances. He follows the lead of others in denying that an environmental problem exists or, if it does exist, denying that it presents cause for alarm. Acid rain? Does not kill forests. Pollution? The "air and water around us are becoming less and less polluted". Biodiversity loss? Vastly exaggerated. Global warming? Lomborg believes it "will not decrease food production; it will probably not increase storminess or the frequency of hurricanes; it will not increase the impact of malaria or indeed cause more deaths". And so on.

If this argument is not new, why has the book received so much media attention? One reason could be that Lomborg, contrary to Simon, Beckerman and others, once believed in the litany himself and the conversion of a former sinner always makes for good marketing. Lomborg describes himself as an "old leftwing Greenpeace member" who was provoked by reading an interview with Simon in a magazine, tried to refute Simon's arguments with statistical facts and soon resigned himself to accepting that Simon was right and the litany wrong.

One might wonder why millions of people, including many academics, still follow the litany when a sober look at the facts purportedly demonstrates that it is all wrong. To this Lomborg gives the same answer as Simon and Beckerman before him: the media are to blame because they focus on bad and alarmist news. Also, they fail in their duty to distinguish sound science from the errors of the litany. Ironically, environmentalists such as Paul and Anne Ehrlich in their book, *Betrayal of Science and Reason: How Anti-Environmental Rhetoric Threatens our Future*, also argue that the media give far too much attention to a "body of anti-science".

There are two aspects of Lomborg's book that are different from the earlier debate between what one might call environmental optimists and the environmental pessimists under scrutiny in this book. First, he does not assume the highly aggressive and arrogant tone characteristic of the earlier debate. He does not engage in personal attacks and *ad hominem* arguments. Second, he is more cautious about dismissing the existence of environmental problems. His optimism is based on arguing that environmental problems are vastly exaggerated rather than that they are imaginary. In addition, his book is marvellously referenced, providing many details with a comprehensive list of all sources of data.

But having said this, it suffers from a number of shortcomings. To begin with, Lomborg is at fault in believing that science can provide a clear answer to the severity of environmental problems and thereby prove that environmental optimism is right. He fails to recognise that the dispute between environmental optimists and pessimists has its roots in science and is a consequence of the scientifically contested nature of environmental problems. Whether, for example, the world really loses biodiversity at a rate of 0.7 per cent per 50 years (as Lomborg firmly believes) is highly contested, and not just by the proponents of the litany.

Second, Lomborg ignores the politically and socially contested nature of environmental problems. He does not appreciate that individuals can have divergent views on what the correct political and social response to an environmental problem should be. Lomborg assumes a welfarist position: environmental problems are one of many that humankind faces, and environmental protection must be subjected to a stringent cost-benefit analysis. Only if the benefits outweigh the costs (including opportunity costs) should environmental protection be initiated. Otherwise, scarce resources are wasted. While this is one possible view of how mankind should treat nature, it is certainly not a position one would call "environmentalism". Lomborg does not seem to understand that environmentalists want to give priority to certain environmental protection measures independent of any estimated cost-to-benefit ratio, because with environmental destruction something unique may be irreversibly lost. Whatever Lomborg might be, he is not an environmentalist because he regards the environment as he does any other commodity. His "environmentalism" is one of the "we all care for the environment" kind, which paints over the fact that some people actually benefit from environmental degradation and that there are real conflicts between environmentalists and non-environmentalists on how far efforts to protect the environment should be pursued. Consequently, he fails to understand that, for example, from an environmentalist perspective, even a loss of tropical forests at an annual rate of "only" 0.46 per cent, which Lomborg suggests is the true rate as opposed to the 1.5 to 4.6 per cent put forward by the litany, is cause for alarm.

Third, in his focus on the litany, Lomborg neglects the fact that many environmentalists have a more sophisticated perspective on the changing welfare of humankind and the environmental problems it faces. While, for example, drawing time and again on data provided by the World Resources Institute, Lomborg fails to appreciate the good research and policy work undertaken by this particular environmentalist institution as well as many others, including many environmentally concerned academics all over the world. It is too easy to refer time and again to Ehrlich, Myers, Brown and their followers while ignoring the existence of an entirely different strand of environmentalism. Those who are more sophisticated than the proponents of the litany in their arguments, appreciate that in a world of scarce resources, not all claims for any and every environmental protection effort can be satisfied.

Fourth, Lomborg fails to give credit to environmentalists whose frequent and sometimes unfounded alarms about imminent environmental destruction have mobilised policy-makers into bringing about the many environmental improvements he correctly celebrates in his book. Whatever the fault of the strand of environmentalism under attack in this book might be, its often exaggerated claims have historically been important in waking up a dormant public and community of policy-makers. While he is right in arguing that policy decisions should not be based on exaggerated claims, he could give some credit to the proponents of the litany here.

So far no attempt has been made to refute any of Lomborg's claims in this review. There are two reasons for this. In many, but by no means all instances I share Lomborg's view. Where I disagree, there is not enough space here to attempt a substantive engagement with his detailed arguments. Instead, I have tried to put Lomborg's book into context as part of a much older debate between environmental optimists and pessimists.

One lesson to be learnt from this book is that one might want to differentiate between different aspects of the environment. If one agrees with one side of the debate in some respects, one does not need to agree with it in all respects. For example, if one shares the environmental pessimists' view on global warming or biodiversity extinction, there is no need to share their view on non-renewable mineral and energy resources too. The world economy has exhibited a remarkable capability to overcome natural resource constraints via substitution and technical progress. The false alarms about the running out of essential resources are a case in point, as Lomborg says. Global environmental resources, such as the global atmosphere or biodiversity, on the other hand, lack a defined property-rights system and functioning markets; therefore prices cannot play the role of a self-correcting feedback loop. These environmental resources are more vulnerable and, because they are more important to mankind, one needs to be cautious about a threat to them even if the existence of the threat is contested. Such resources often need collective action by countries to provide for the global public good.

It is the failure to suggest a way out of the old trenches in the debate between environmental optimism and pessimism that is disappointing about this book. Which environmental problems are non-existent or relatively harmless, and which provide cause for real concern from an environmentalist's point of view? Lomborg does not tell us. In the end his book is essentially just another contribution to environmental optimism. But to his credit, he

has written probably the most comprehensive, up-to-date and provocative contribution to environmental optimism so far, and a book that is accessible to academics, students and virtually anybody interested in environmental issues. Given that what the book calls the litany is all too often taken as incontestable truth in the literature on the environment, agriculture and conflict, this is no small achievement.

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