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Greening the Media

Staring Into an Abyss

We are confronting ecological disaster. Why can't we see it?

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We are looking into an abyss: our climate is changing in ways that imperil us, our fellow animals, and the very planet. But the contours of the abyss are far from clear. How can that be? Shouldn't something like that, lying right in front of us, be pretty obvious?

Climate-change scientists are at pains to explain the need for patience in undertaking and understanding their work, which relies on the steady accumulation of data. After all, climate is the average of weather. Naturally observable transformations caused by climate change, such as new forms of hybrid shark¹, or ongoing threats to Australia's Great Barrier Reef ², are also about things that happen over a considerable period (though this is diminishingly the case; events, shall we say, are heating up).

We need patience and trust in science, and the proof of our own eyes, to survey the current and anticipated damage of untrammelled economic growth and climate change.

But two major barriers obscure the abyss, holding back our ability to discern it. First, the idea of endless material progress is ingrained into our very view of the landscape; even the cranes we notice on the skyline are less likely to be birds in flight than girders in construction.

Things have been like this for a comparatively short time. Just "half a century ago, less than 12 materials were in wide use: wood, brick, iron, copper, gold, silver, and a few plastics." Conversely, the computer chip that enables us to type this column, and you to read it, contains more than 60 materials. There is truly a "materials basis to modern society."³ New materials are taken as signs of progress.

Developments in the alloys that bind them together and form new materials have frequently led to greater efficiency and diminished greenhouse-gas emissions. But the notion of endless growth and progress fails to acknowledge that unearthing these things is a drain on natural resources. There is a finite supply of the basic ingredients of modern material life, and the potential substitutes do not deliver equivalent quality.⁴

Those limits to growth are not obvious when we pile into a cellphone store, download a software upgrade, or play a game online. They hide the abyss. But it is around the corner.

Then there is the second barrier obscuring our capacity to see the abyss: politics. For example, a few days ago, the Republican Party passed an amendment in Congress ⁵ that blocked funding for the Pentagon's national security plan to counter climate change.⁶

The Department of Defense is the Republicans' pet government agency. It delivers both ideological backing to their intensive program of nationalism and massive spending in their Congressional districts. So on the surface, this refusal looks bizarre. But it's not, because the Republican Party depends on the denial of climate change to appeal to its electors and funders. As a consequence, Republicans are prepared to block their beloved Pentagon's tax-and-spend plans when the latter do not involve overt nationalism, or guarantee major public

expenditure on select constituents.

So for those of us who want science to triumph over ideology, and planetary wellbeing to trump national chauvinism, the tasks are complex. But there is hope.

When we read about the cross-genetic hybridization of sharks, or see the result ⁷; when we view a report on the destruction of the Barrier Reef, even though it was censored by the Australian government ⁸; and when we learn that systematic distortions of climate science are peddled by corporations, third-sector Astroturf organizations, and their intellectual chorines-for-hire ⁹, the outline of the abyss may become clearer. The next task is to confront our own feelings about it.

The 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant gave an impassioned account of the natural world as equally beautiful and sublime, aesthetic and awesome, attractive and wild. That paradoxical amalgam forced him to confront a space beyond nature and human activity—a terrifying place where “the shadows of the boundless void into the abyss before me.” ¹⁰ This raised a horrifying specter: that there was nothing left, nothing else, nothing beyond; rather akin to William James noting that “nature is but a name for excess.” ¹¹ That specter became crucial to Kant’s realization that the objects of natural science had a history, and hence, perhaps, a limited future. It took Friedrich Engels, a century later, to recognize the fundamental truth of environmentalism: that nature “comes into being and passes away.” ¹²

As Engels poignantly put it, the emergence of human beings marked the evolutionary point where “nature attains consciousness of itself.” ¹³ As such, people have the ability to speak for those without voices and protect those without power. Although our fellow animals are also capable of transforming their living conditions, they do so without an evident, deliberate, and elaborated codification of what this achieves or means, and without direct access to shareholder meetings, representative democracy, or street protest.

There is a way forward. It is difficult to make out the contours of the abyss that lies before us, and to deal with our own emotional responses to what it might hold. But human beings have three gifts: science, to understand the costs of our current path; philosophy, to comprehend what that means for us; and democracy, to express these things in a participatory forum.

Now if only free speech didn’t cost so much that corporations and billionaires had so much more of it than the rest of us ...

1. <http://lightyears.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/02/scientists-dozens-of-hybrid-s...>
2. <http://elibrary.gbrmpa.gov.au/jspui/bitstream/11017/1140/1/GBR%20Climate...>
3. <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/20/6295.abstract>
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12. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/EngelsDialectics_of...

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