

Cooking scones with The Prodigy; or, why do climate campaigners not understand logical fallacies?



Some may not find this recipe tasteful, but then again, that's the problem we face generally with 'mainstream activism' right now

Paul Mobbs, *The 'Meta-Blog'*, no.6, 18th May 2020

OK, from outside the kitchen window this probably looks a bit absurd – throwing flour and sultanas around as I boogie on the spot to The Prodigy's 'Music for the Jilted Generation'; but hey, we all need to get our exercise when we can right now!

Certainly it lightens up what has been, for some out there, a humourless week as 'climate change campaigners' have taken exception to my recent work.

In this house, at least, we still have plenty of flour and other ingredients. We had set up a 'Brexit Box' in the post-Christmas/New Year sales (we always buy in bulk anyway). Little could we suspect that its contents would become more significant in the panic buying during the run-up to the lock-down.

We need snacks; I decide to bake scones...

When in the mood for frenetic cooking I like to put on some really good music: I run my finger through the CD stack, pull out my favourite [Prodigy album](#), put it on and [press play](#)...

"So, I've decided to take my work back underground, to stop it falling into the wrong hands".

Yeah. I've had that feeling of late. Except that I refuse to retreat.

Stirring things up

The bass rhythm of 'Break & Enter' starts almost simultaneously as I grab the flour jar...

To solve the problems around us today we face a choice between: personal, physical action; or, the dream or the elaborate planning of possible actions; or, doing nothing ourselves and rolling with what our 'leaders and betters' decide for us. Those three options [are not the same](#) for everyone; and the outcomes, in a time of radical [ecological change](#), will be very different in a few decades time.

Why am I making scones?

Often people will try to provoke with words in order to drag you into their problems, in a sense, to give them justification. Social media is made for people who want to share their personal hell with you. The best response? Go and solve some of your own immediate problems instead.

This morning's scan of email and social media revealed yet more people who really don't like my last blog post on ['Planet of the Humans'](#); but more especially, my recent criticism of [George Monbiot's article](#) about the film.

In my view George's article is a straight-up distortion of the facts. I tried to get in touch with him to talk about that, but he refused to reply. That being the case I spent a couple of days this week putting a comprehensive complaint together instead.

I get a bowl and put half a jar of flour into it (we keep our ingredients in large glass jars as it's tidier, and keeps them fresher than leaving them in the bag). We're nearly out of my beloved wholemeal so I resort to using white.

Most of our flour will be used for bread-making. Rather than keeping both plain and self-raising it's easier to keep lots of plain and a lesser quantity of [baking powder](#). As we're running through the bak-



ing powder quite quickly too I decide to use straight [bicarb](#) and [tartaric acid](#) instead – as with scones you need something more vigorous in any case. A big heaped teaspoon of each should suffice for this quantity of flour.

That's the key to keeping a stockpile – *versatility*.

In a sealed container flour keeps longer (1 year) than scones brought from the shop (1 week); at the same time flour can be turned into a wider range of products than if I just bought the finished article.

I blend the powders in the bowl with my fingers...

Often the best way to understand an argument is not as a series of words, or facts, but as a sequence of logical meanings; *or not?*

I learned to take arguments apart as a result of working on an awful lot of public inquiries – where often the best way of take down a developer's case was not to dismantle their proposal specifically, but the extraneous flaws in their reasoning about the law, or the site, or the data used to justify it.

Arguments are like a fine mechanism. Unlike pastry or scones though, which obey a purely '[one-way](#)' process from flour to cake, the logical mechanisms of reasoning should be able to run forwards and backwards: If *A* is equivalent to *B* then *B* should be equivalent to *A*.

The problem with a lot of the stuff that people put out in relation to the climate crisis is that it doesn't obey that principle. It's what's known as a 'logical fallacy'; or more specifically in George's case, the fallacy of '[affirming the consequent](#)'.

George's article falls flat on that count, from the title onwards: '*How did Michael Moore become a hero to climate deniers and the far right?*'

If people on the right-wing love Michael Moore's new film, then it must mean that Michael Moore has done something to please them.

True.

Now let's run that backwards: Is Michael Moore, his work, and the new film he's produced, expressing right-wing viewpoints?

False.

Many right-wing reviews of the film don't like the content of the film at all – given that it talks about ecological limits, and 'less must be the new more'. People on the right are pleased with the film because it causes the liberal left so much anguish, not because it represents a right-wing position.

In citing right-wing pleasure at the film's depiction of renewable energy as ineffectual, and mainstream environmentalism as "a self-seeking scam", George doesn't demonstrate how the core ideas of the film originate on the political right; but in saying that they originate from the 'climate denying' right, he allows himself to dismiss those arguments without ever having to justify why they are wrong.

The trick is to pre-soak the sultanas

"What we're dealing with here is a total lack of respect for the law."

'[Their Law](#)' clicks on...

One of the messages this morning implied that George Monbiot was a putative prophet whose words should always be taken as having authority.

I think '*Their Law*' succinctly concludes how I feel about that idea!

To quote another secular saint, [Carl Sagan](#) (from chapter 14, '*Billions and Billions*', 1997):

A central lesson of science is that to understand complex issues (or even simple ones), we must try to free our minds of dogma and to guarantee the freedom to publish, to contradict, and to experiment. Arguments from authority are unacceptable.

This is a vegan recipe; no eggs, milk, or butter. It's not simply that vegan food 'agrees' with me. Non-dairy products keep for far longer without refrigeration, and so being a vegan '[prepper](#)' is more ecological than being a [dogmatic](#), carnivorous one.

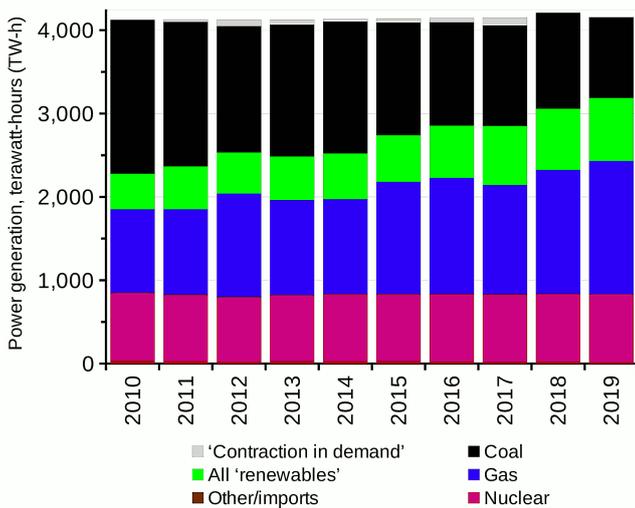
To the flour I add perhaps 100ml of oil and begin slowly rubbing the contents of the bowl between my palms, blending the two...

As a child I used to get the chore of blending the butter and the flour by hand, slowly thinning the lumps of hard fat until it produced a fine crumb. By contrast vegetable oil – in this case some cheap, bulk olive oil – is so much easier to do.

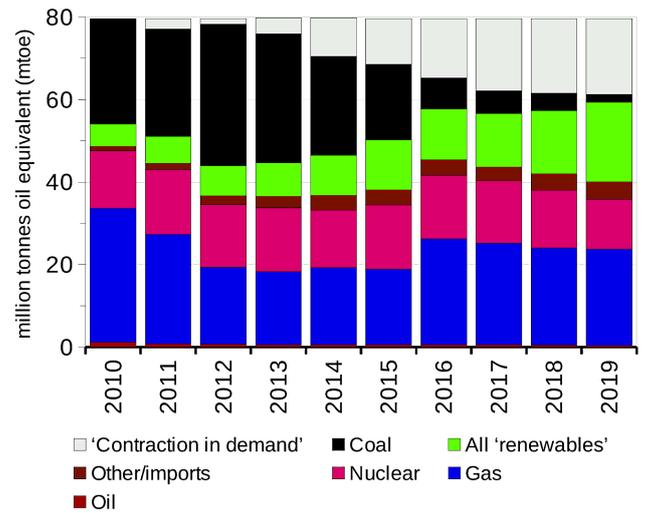
What must lead our thoughts for change is practical verification though experiment – namely, making changes in our own lives first.

It is only by practically living our proposals for change that we can gather the data necessary to demonstrate a viable trajectory for change. Having big ideas, and modelling changes to large-scale and complex systems [does not prove that](#). If anything it only [demonstrates how uncertain](#) such large-scale, top-down visions for change are.

Power generation in the USA, 2010-2019



Fuels used in UK power generation, 2010-2019



This is where many climate activists promoting [technocratic solutions](#) to the ‘problem’ of carbon emissions fail; George Monbiot included. When you look at their proposals – taking all other practical, [physical interactions](#) or limits into account – the details of their claims do not add-up.

What the film, *‘Planet of the Humans’*, so clearly exposes is that such technocratic arguments are not advanced simply to ‘save the planet’; they are advanced to preserve the affluent Western lifestyle while *attempting* to save the planet.

That is also why many in the environmental mainstream are critical of the film. It questions their ability to have their ecological cake and consume it – *instead of, as a more radical alternative, perhaps making a cake for themselves?*

George’s article, and its distortion of statistical data to support its arguments, also helps to confirm a core thesis of the film. George’s article makes claims about renewable energy production – in Britain and the USA – that are either demonstrably false, or taken so out of context as to paint a false picture of what [the real situation](#) we face today is:

“On average, a solar panel generates 26 units of solar energy for every unit of fossil energy required to build and install it” – though if you read the [journal paper](#) you referenced, George, you’ll find they specifically state that the paper should not be used as a comparison with present-day technology, because of the assumptions used in the model underestimate present-day impacts by 30% to 250%.

“*Planet of the Humans* also claims that you can’t reduce fossil fuel use through renewable energy: coal is instead being replaced by gas” – well George,

thing is, that’s exactly what [the US statistics](#) (above, left) and recent [research papers](#) show.

“As a result of the switch to renewables in this country, the amount of fossil fuel used for power generation has halved since 2010” – albeit, George, [the UK data](#) (above, right) indicates that’s not the case.

The greatest factor in recent UK decarbonisation – for both electricity and fuels – is something more powerful than renewables; *austerity*. As the UK economy has contracted over the last decade power consumption it has fallen. Coal use has fallen in proportion to the contraction of demand, not a proportionate increase in renewable supply.

George doesn’t even see the inconsistency of praising renewable electricity in the US and UK, while at the same time condemning the use of biomass in his article – even though up to 60% of the renewable energy in the USA and [UK comes from](#) varying sources of biomass.

I add the sultanas – pre-soaked in warm water. It makes them, and the ultimately the cooked scones, more ooshy. Then I add tepid water to the mix and stir with my hand until I have a neat ball of sticky dough – which I then knead for a minute or two, until it becomes elastic, to ensure that the oil, water and flour have been evenly blended.

Seriously though, jiggling along to the striding baseline of *‘Their Law’*, and getting my hands around the tactile feedback of dough-making, I don’t really care about the dodgy fact-heaped-upon-twisted quote as to why George is wrong.

He’s wrong because his vision is not joyously human, it’s coldly technological; not a prescription for ecological change, but technological modification.

Rolling and cutting

The tempo jumps 'Full Throttle', just as I put the oven on to pre-heat...

I take a baking tray, wipe a small dribble of oil evenly over its surface, shake a small handful of flour over it, and knock the loose remains back-and-forth to create a more 'ecological' [non-stick coating](#) on the metal surface.

I dust flour onto the table, and roll the ball of dough flat to cut circles from it.

Cutting and chopping is key to good food preparation. It's also how George has twisted the content of the film in order to suit the slant in his article.

In [his open letter](#) of the 24th April, Josh Fox used an '[8½ minute ellipsis](#)' (the "... " symbol often used in quotes to omit a few words or sentences) to flip the meaning of something that was said in the film.

George does exactly the same, but this time it's only two minutes long:

"The film offers only one concrete solution to our predicament: the most toxic of all possible answers. 'We really have got to start dealing with the issue of population... without seeing some sort of major die-off in population, there's no turning back.'"

During those two minutes, four academics talk about: the [ecological overshoot](#) of the human species; why 'business as usual' [cannot sustain](#) that; and so, why any solution to the [ecological crisis](#) has to encompass the [multifaceted nature](#) of our ecological predicament – and hence why it's so difficult to achieve.

Therefore, in the context presented in the film, the '*major die-off*' is not a result of 'the plan', the die-off is the result of not accepting the need for ecological change and enacting 'a plan' to avoid that outcome. George's article implies the opposite – that a population die-off is intentional in 'the plan'.

What is the implication of George stating that any discussion of ecological overshoot is toxic now? What does that mean for an entire field of academic study, and ecological [resource footprinting](#) analysis generally?

Actually, no: George provides no proof of the errors of talking about ecological overshoot.

He wants it to sound like the film is some right-wing plot upon the world's poor and minorities, because that's what he (apparently) believes – and hopes you will that share too.

The one thing money can't buy: 'Poverty'

I cut about 14 circles of dough and place them on the tray. Then I kneed the remains back into a ball and repeat the procedure. Then I take what's left and fashion a large dough-ball. All-in-all, when finished there are 20 scones lined up on the tray...

I'm sliding the tray in the oven when the opening chords of '[Voodoo People](#)' blast out. As the bass and sequencers kick-in moments after, I skittle across the floor to the rhythm of the music and the anticipatory joy of soon-to-be-baked scones.

I cannot remember the first time I helped to cook scones; *I was very young.*

I come from a family where we baked and cooked – and grew – food as an economic necessity, not for some higher ideal. Where food was a joy because you realised how scarce a resource it was. I was taught to grow and cook food so that I could live more 'resource-fully', not as a form of cultural virtue signalling.

I spend a few minutes jumping around the kitchen, between the table, the cupboards, and the sink, tidying up and putting things away.

It's taken three tracks-worth of relaxation and enjoyment – 20 minutes – to make 20 scones. Total cost, probably not more than £1. Even if you take the lowest definition of 'scone', something like Morrison's own at £1 or so for four, that's £5 for 20 minutes work; or a saving of ($[\pounds 5 - \pounds 1] \times [60 \text{ min.} / 20 \text{ min.}] =$) £12/hour deducting the costs.

That's about 50% more than minimum wage!

Disposable waste, minimal, certainly when compared to the packaging waste from shop-bought items. The oven is fired by natural gas, as would be the industrial bakery where these are made for the supermarket. But I have, and whenever I am able I love to cook and bake outdoors, using primarily small wind-fallen [sticks as a fuel](#).

If I had a small plot of land to live upon, not hemmed in by high flats all around, that would be eminently do-able as routine, not an exception – as it was for my ancestors from the outlying villages in the local area (the last of whom were corralled into the town by rural gentrification).

That's perhaps my own, and many other people's major obstacle to living a lower impact lifestyle...

Now tell me, where does that fit into the mainstream campaigns for climate action?

Ecotechnocracy & middle class voodoo

There is only one essential form of energy humans need: It's not electricity; or fossil fuels; or nuclear heat; or solar PV power; *it's food!*

Now tell me, in all the panoply of mainstream environmentalism's concern about 'saving the planet', where does ensuring a good, affordable food supply for everyone in the world fit in?

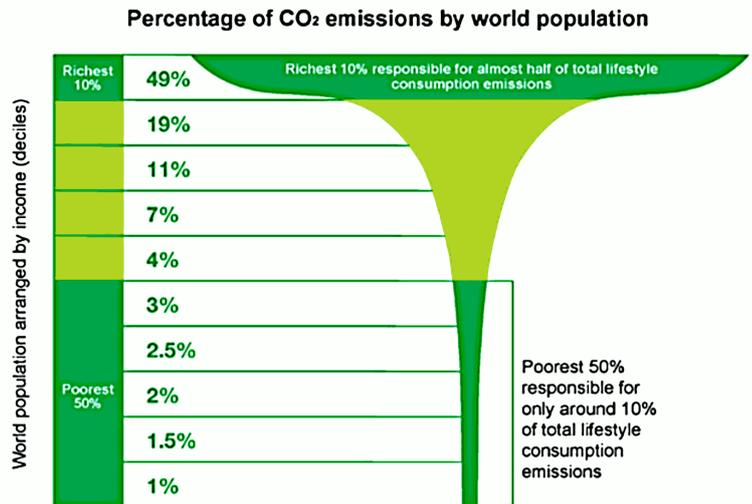
The predicate of mainstream environmentalism's concern about climate change is that it is the end of 'our way of life' – which practically represents some proxy for the middle class consumer lifestyle. The technocratic trap that creates in response, however, is that the solutions must confirm to the strictures of the affluent consumer lifestyle – not an open assessment of the simplest and least-cost options for positive change.

Environmentalism talks in terms of management, and technology, and planned transition, led by groups organised into technocratic hierarchies in business-like offices – because those are the innate factors which govern the middle class lifestyle.

That attitude is also a barrier to the kind of 'ecological' thinking which was an innate part of my growing up, based not in some abstract concern for the planet, but being able to live simply & resiliently.

Of course, now I'm a writer and a researcher, am I not part of that same 'middle class' pattern of existence?: The Office for National Statistics would say yes; the facts of my lifestyle would say no, because I do not engage in the same kinds of economic consumption (let alone income generation!) that entails.

George Monbiot is not simply wrong because his article relies upon erroneous statistical claims and nefarious quotes. He is wrong because he is trying to defend an approach to the ecological crisis that, at its heart, enshrines an *a priori* condition that the few percent of the



Today I still aspire to the 'traditional' lower working class lifestyle I was raised within, precisely because it's the most 'ecological' low impact lifestyle that English society has to offer. Thing is, I find increasingly that this same desire sets me apart from many within the environmental movement who want to employ technocratic solutions to the ecological crisis because, they hope, they can still live in relative affluence.

Reality, however, would say otherwise, irrespective if we start now or had started 30 years ago at the Rio Summit. The lifestyle that 10% of the world's population follow, whereby they generate half of the carbon emissions (see above), is not maintainable by technological means at those consumption levels – certainly not if we are to give the half of the people on the planet, who only emit only 10% of the emissions, a more secure lifestyle.

world's population must continue enjoy the fruits of technological progress – irrespective of whether that is possible, or fair, for all.

The mainstream 'green' project is reliant upon technocratic processes to change the nature of society, but not its structure. That comfortable, technocratic green vision is challenged by the Moore's film. No amount of protest by George or any other commentator can change that reality. What they must do instead is engage with that debate, not dismiss it with fallacious facts and fraudulent figures.