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Ecologizing the Imagination as a Key to Survival: Prof. Ewa Bińczyk on Changes in the Economy and Science

Ewa Bińczyk in an Interview with Magdalena Ochwat

Magdalena Ochwat: What is your understanding of the “ecological correction of the humanities”? In what ways can it also apply to education, schooling, and humanities education?

Ewa Bińczyk: As a philosopher of science, I have been studying the rhetoric of scientists concerned with the state of the Earth’s environment for several years. After 2010 this rhetoric has changed a lot, it has become more dramatic. The point is that entire planetary systems are now destabilizing, human impact and destruction has taken on a global dimension. The changes are irreversible and the processes of destruction set in motion by humans are very worrying. The environmental protection is no longer a question of fighting for a selected species – the lynx in Poland or the wolf in a certain region, or for the preservation of a specific ecosystem such as a biodiverse peat bog or a forest unique to Europe, such as the Białowieża Forest. The scale of human interference is colossal: the hydrosphere, atmosphere, biosphere, and lithosphere are on the brink of equilibrium. Industrial agriculture, artificial fertilizers, the destruction of fertile soils, animal husbandry and hunting, industrial fishing, industrialization, consumption, and the fact that we have no regard for planetary boundaries – the buoyancy of the Earth – are largely responsible for this. We have a whole catalogue of monstrous sins on our conscience. The collective behavior of humanity is extremely irrational and irresponsible.

This is our uncomfortable starting point, which is why researchers and experts in various fields are calling for a correction of all our thinking and

practices. The most important thing is to green politics and the economy quickly (it is too late to start with education and culture, although it is of course an interconnected system). This is what fuel tax projects, decarbonisation and the Green Deal are all about. New policies to cool down growth, new priorities for thinking about transport, heating, production, energy extraction, everyday practices.

Human imagination and even dreams need to be greened. For this, we need a correction of the humanities. Today cultural studies scholars, for example, are devising a whole arsenal of mass attacks on consumerism. We need to figure out how to put an end to the promotion of hyper-individualism with which culture in rich societies such as Poland is saturated. Instead of being enthralled by private superyachts, jets, laybys, or energy-guzzling SUVs, the current young generation should already see these devices only as harmful tinfoil. The media experts who will be creating twenty-first-century advertisements need to be ecologically sensitive enough to think many times before allowing ads such as “sustainable hamburger trip” or “eco-friendly *all-inclusive* holiday in warm countries.” A change in human attitudes towards nature is necessary if humanity is to survive – we are already damaging the planet so much. Numerous elements of the so-called common sense need to be rebuilt. To do this we need a new vocabulary, intellectual ambition, open imagination, courage, and persistence. We need to paste this into new ways of writing poetry, music, creating pop culture or literature. I hope that your generation will already regard consumerism or the pursuit of GDP growth as a moral scandal and an embarrassment of the past. This is why we need an ecological correction of the economy, politics, science, and academia, and in the further plan of schools and education.

Or perhaps other, new perspectives, other positive, hopeful concepts should enter the school: symbiocene, chtulucene, ecozoic? It seems that young people are particularly in need of a positive perspective that encourages action and causality.

I fully agree. One such promising perspective is offered by solarpunk. It may prove very attractive to the younger generation. In “A Solarpunk Manifesto” we read, among other things, that it is a trend that combines the ecological with the beautiful and well-designed. We do not need dystopias or more warnings, but solutions. The authors of the manifesto write: “We are solarpunks because optimism has been taken away from us and we are trying to take it back.” Isn’t that beautiful? It is about the enthusiasm for creating a post-capitalist, anti-corporate world of prosperity, about creative technologies improvised in conditions of limited resources. The manifesto includes the slogans: self-sufficiency, living within natural limits, creative reusing, and local energy grids.

For people making solarpunk, “science fiction is not entertainment but a form of activism” and I like it very much. I find it promising.

Imagine that a dictionary of “new words for new times” is being created, one of the entries for the dictionary you have already proposed is: “eco-verve”. What words and phrases should we start to promote and use, and build new meanings around them and new narratives based on them? My favorites are “collective” and “symbiocene,” and for deletion I propose “climate change” or “global warming,” giving the illusion of something positive over which we have control. What words/phrases would you propose, Professor?

In 2020, in the *Ex-centre* project of the Olga Tokarczuk Foundation and the Wrocław House of Literature, I proposed the notion of eco-verve or eco-animus. It was about a complex of profound, pro-environmental, socio-cultural changes concerning the very logic and foundations of the Earth’s management, in accordance with the principles of resource- and carbon-saving.

The eco-verve is the promotion of a culture of bio-balance, a society of well-being (*prosperity*), leisure time, and an economy of work, which guarantees the psychological feeling of flow – a state of concentration and total relaxation at the same time. Building a society of creativity and post-work, however, requires a gradual abandonment of the race of the economies of the rich North for endless GDP growth. The point is that the existing common sense of economics needs to be rebuilt. This is also where the need to painfully give up many harmful delusions comes in.

My new book contains an index of terms, which at the same time is just such an alternative dictionary of economics. There are more than 110 terms. Not all of them are positive. But my favorites (because they keep us hopeful and open our eyes to bold alternatives) are prosperity instead of growth, degrowth, planetary metabolism, resilient economies, planetary responsibility, post-work, flow, unconditional basic services, unconditional basic income, locking in wealth accumulation, divestment, circular economics, “luxury emissions,” essential workers, the climate Marshall Plan, dismantling consumer overconsumption, social tipping points, the symbiocene and the culture of moderation, whistleblowers of catastrophe and the university as a school of survival, the community of discord, anticipatory imagination and managing without growth. There are articles and interesting research around each of these words. They need to be looked at closely.

Have geologists reached a formal decision regarding the designation of the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch?

I would remind you that stratigraphers have been searching for 15 years for indisputable stratigraphic evidence (a global marker, the so-called “golden spike”) indicating the beginning of a new geological epoch, which would be the Anthropocene. The role of this marker was to be played by the sediments of Crawford Lake near Toronto, Canada, containing plutonium from hydrogen-bomb tests, indicating that the Anthropocene began in about 1952.

On 5 March this year (2024), The New York Times reported that the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy (by 12 votes against 4) voted against the formal acceptance of a new geological epoch, which was to be the Anthropocene. However, the matter still appears to be open. Indeed, the chairman of this very committee, together with his deputy, Jan Zalasiewicz, and Martin Head, asked on 6 March for the annulment of the said vote, questioning, among other things, the eligibility to vote. Zalasiewicz and Head emphasize that they have not been able to conclude the discussion and have not formulated an official position for the Subcommittee. The matter is yet to be decided by the International Union of Geological Sciences. Regardless of the formal decision of the stratigraphers, the concept of the Anthropocene has gained incredible cultural momentum and plays many roles. There has been a unique debate around it between many disciplines. I wrote about it in my 2018 book, *The Epoch of Man. The rhetoric and lethargy of the Anthropocene*.

You have two new publications coming out soon (“Socializing the Anthropocene” and a translation of Tim Jackson’s *Post-Growth*). Could you please briefly comment on them [What will these two items be about? Where did the idea for these publications come from?]

In my new book, *Socialising the Anthropocene. Eco-verve and the ecologisation of economics* I write about orchestrating survival in the face of environmental crisis, the ‘grammar’ of degrowth movement, ecological economics, resilient economies, and the mission of states in the face of decarbonization. I ask how to preserve the future, what the mission of experts is, and what planetary social thought might look like in the twenty-first century. In the final section, entitled, “Eco-verve and the boycott of lethargy,” I argue that without such ambitious dreams, the future simply will not happen at all. I write about pandemics as an opportunity to dismantle “business as usual.” I also ask about the future of the Anthropocene in times of war and marasmus.

“Socializing the Anthropocene” in my latest book has several meanings. “A nap or siesta instead of an air conditioner” is a slogan that rather neatly symbolizes one of them. It is about a conceptual shift – a kind of opening up

of the imagination to planned and socially accepted social change. I show that to do so requires the courage to denaturalize many of our assumptions about the *status quo* and to give up a host of harmful delusions. Clearly, the Anthropocene debate itself is riddled with flaws, reproducing many of the mental assumptions that block the possibility of boycotting lethargy and orchestrating survival – developing and implementing effective responses to the planetary environmental crisis. It is now clear that continuing with the practices we know as ‘business as usual’ (even when it comes to green growth or recycling) is simply counterproductive. We need to give up the delusion that it is possible to decouple GDP growth from increases in energy and resource intensity. Even green pro-climate policies such as efficiency upgrading or recycling only intensify humanity’s ecological and climate footprint. We therefore need a constructive alternative to what we know – a realistic and empirically grounded plan to halt the annihilation of the biosphere. It should be socially just and take into account the interests of the most vulnerable: humans and non-human agents, guaranteeing sustainability and ecosafety.

The socialization of the Anthropocene also requires the denaturalization of the *status quo*. Our everyday life and sanity are not given in advance, inevitable, or unmodifiable. The markets that define what pays off and the fossil fuel-based infrastructures we have created seem uncontrollable and unmodifiable. However, they are in fact our creations after all, and it is up to us to redesign them. Through re-naturalization, the reality of fossil fuels and the luxury consumption of the richest is shown to be irrational and simply immoral. This opens up the imagination, facilitating ambitious, widely accepted, planned social change. Natural scientists and engineers alone in the institutions building climate policy will not create them. They simply lack competence. As well as low-carbon technologies, on which someone is likely to make money, we need social innovations such as siesta along with reduced working hours. And also humanities experts who can design them. The contribution of the social sciences and humanities to mitigating the planetary environmental crisis needs to be greater. Decades of decisive decarbonization (understood broadly, including as a socio-cultural process) will be decades of experimenting with learning societies. Not just the production of electric cars, photovoltaic panels, or air conditioners. Social and cultural experimentation will be hindered by the pressure of climate emergencies, it is inevitable. Therefore, the socialization of the Anthropocene, like decarbonization, can no longer be postponed.

Tim Jackson, on the other hand, is a British economist, sustainability researcher, former Commissioner of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, policy advisor, and one of the most recognizable critics of the growth paradigm here. With Janusz Grygieńć, we translated his book *Post*

Growth. Life after Capitalism. Professor Jackson also wrote an introduction for the Polish reader. This is his second book in Polish, next to *Prosperity without Growth*.

In writing about post-growth, Jackson offers readers an unusual thought experiment. It is about daring to imagine life after capitalism. It is an existential journey into a world without the global pursuit of relentless GDP growth. It is, in a sense, a utopia, but a unique, workable utopia, built on the latest economic empirical findings and reports by natural scientists on the seriousness of contemporary environmental threats. Jackson's book is personal, well-written, and respectful of the basic tenets of economics. Each chapter is the story of the lives of fascinating heroines and protagonists; through the lens of their personal hardships and passions, the author dissects a succession of pernicious assumptions of growthism – the ideologized belief that economies must and can grow indefinitely on a planet with finite resources.

What is your current occupation, what are you working on?

This semester I am planning several meetings concerning the book; in April I will talk about it as part of the Thinkisko series at the Rothera Mills in Bydgoszcz, in June I have an author meeting combined with an exhibition by Toruń activist and artist Arek Pasożyt – author of the book cover – at the Copernicus Integration Centre at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. I will also be speaking about my book for the economists in Gdańsk and about *The Mission of the Academy towards the Challenges of the Anthropocene* at the XXXII Psychology Colloquia at UMK.

In July, I am scheduled for a discussion on degrowth at the Olga Tokarczuk Foundation's Mountains of Literature Festival. I would also like to visit the amazing Earth Settlement. It is a living experiment of intertwining the fates of humans and other beings in an ethical community in Drawsko Park. It is formed by people concerned about the state of the planet and the problem of arranging the future.

I look forward to all the meetings and regret that I cannot accept every invitation. There simply is not enough time and strength for everything, and I really enjoy my garden in the woods, especially from May to October, then I read a lot, work in the garden, and write on the terrace. The degrowth economists propose that instead of *all-inclusive* holidays in distant countries, we should pursue "staycations." I, as part of such staycations, am catching up on my reading and catching my breath for the new academic year. I strongly support this idea, certainly in spring, summer, and early autumn, when Poland is so beautiful. We still have magical places around us, let us fight to preserve them as much as we can.



Foto: Anna Rezulak

BIOGRAPHY OF EWA BIŃCZYK

Prof. dr hab. Ewa Bińczyk works at the Department of Practical Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. She deals with the rethoric of the Anthropocene, contemporary environmental philosophy, philosophical assumptions of the ecological economics of degrowth, philosophy of science, studies of science and technology, and scientific controversies. She is the member of the Council of Greenpeace Polska, the Forecast Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Council of Experts of the Climate Coalition in Poland and the Council of the Climate Education Foundation in Poland.

She is the author of the books: *Socializing the Anthropocene. Ecoverve and Ecologization of the Economics* (UMK 2024), *The Epoch of Man. The Rhetoric and Lethargy of the Anthropocene* (PWN 2018), *Technoscience in the Risk Society* (UMK 2012), *Image that Captivates Us* (Universitas 2007), and *Sociology of Knowledge in the Bible* (Nomos 2003).

The book *The Epoch of Man* in 2019 was nominated for the Długosz Prize in Poland and also indicated as one of the “20 books to read in the 21st century” (List of International Reading of the “Polityka” campaign and Studio Theater, September 2019). In January 2022, the book was published in Russian (The New Observer Publishing House), in 2023 also in Ukrainian.

Co-author of *Modeling Technoscience and Nanotechnology Assessment* (Peter Lang 2014), co-editor of *The Text Selection of Science and Technology Studies* (UMK 2014) and *Horizons of Constructivism. Inspirations, Perspectives, Future* (UMK 2015). Scholarship holder of the Foundation for Polish Science (2005), the Fulbright

Foundation (2006-2007), winner of a scholarship by the Polityka weekly “Stay with us” (2010). She was a visiting scholar at Harvard University (Department of History of Science) in the winter semester of 2016. In August 2021, co-host of the seminar at the European Forum in Alpbach.