Critical Dialogue

Treading Softly: Paths to Ecological Order. By Thomas Princen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010. 224p. $22.95.
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— Jane Bennett, *Johns Hopkins University*

When you are trying to get someone to embrace new habits of mind and body, like, say, those of ecological sustainability, it sometimes works to appeal to common sense. Thomas Princen employs this stragegy of persuasion—he also invokes enlightened self-interest, but I think he prefers to appeal to common sense—in his bold, tolerant, honest, and powerful short book. To be more specific, he invokes a set of minor or currently rather quiet "segments" (p. 171) inside the mixed bag that is American common sense. Common sense is not, after all, a stable block but a conglomeration of diverse parts, some of which do not fit at all well with the others. And it is the heterogeneity of the common store of wisdom that makes possible Princen's reorganization of it. He highlights some underutilized segments of the "old normal" and harnesses their power to the project of building a society that "takes infinite material growth as impossible," "embraces limits" (p. 187), and is devoted to "living well by living well within our means" (p. 124).

Princen does not preach to the ecologically converted, but, in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac,* he speaks to the average American consumer's personal-finance common sense. He invokes, for example, the (submerged) maxim that one must live within one's means, "spend the interest, not the principal" ("don't eat the seed corn"), and exercise the self-discipline needed to save for a rainy day (p. 194). He then points to the illogical fact that we do not apply these same sound principles when judging (or designing) the larger political economy. After all, an economy of endless "growth" on a finite planet makes no more sense than endless spending on a fixed income: "[A]ll the market forces and technological wizardry will not change some basic facts: we have one planet, one set of eco-systems, and one hydrologic cycle; and each of us has just one brain, one body, and one lifetime. Limits are real" (p. 52).[1]

How did it come to pass that we treat as normal and inevitable a system of excessive consumption, massive waste, and relentless extraction? Why do we stupidly continue to consume everything, including the material "foundations" (p. 23) of life itself?

Barbara Kingsolver has explained this as a "mass hallucinatory fantasy in which the megatons of waste we dump in our rivers and bays are *not* poisoning the water, the hydrocarbons we pump into the air are *not* changing the climate, overfishing is *not* depleting the oceans, fossil fuels will *never* run out, wars that kill masses of civilian *are* an appropriate way to keep our hands on what's left, we are *not* desperately overdrawn at the environmental bank, and, really, the kids are all right" ("A Good Farmer," *Nation* 3 [November 2003]: 7–11; my emphases). Princen, too, at times presents the problem as a fantasy to be unmasked—he calls us to wake up and see that this normal makes no sense. But he more often speaks of bad mental habits to be unlearned, of bad conceptual "framing": "The difficulty, I must stress, lies not in the complexity of the task, the vastness of the problems, or the uncertainty and risks of attempted solutions. Rather, the difficulty lies in the way problems have been framed in the old normal, in the worldviews that have . . . been fabulously successful . . . in extracting and manufacturing . . . in producing and consuming goods [and] in conflating those goods with the good life" (p. 18).

Our dysfunctional frames include the story that technology will save us, that endless growth is inevitable, that capitalism is by far the best we can do, and that the answer to any overconsumption would be "better consuming by better-informed consumers" (p. 116). Together, these stories foster a very short-term horizon for critical thinking. They function as what Aletta Norval and Michael Freeden describe as an ideology with its "decontested" terms.[2] The ideology of limitless growth is what enables us to elide, downplay, or deny the signs of stress in natural and cultural systems—signs that would confirm the truism that overconsumption *cannot* go on indefinitely.

Alongside his negative critique of the frames, Princen weaves a rich, detailed, and earnest positive vision of a sustainable political and psychic economy. Here, one of his bravest moves is to defend the "principle of intermittency," according to which "ecological services need not be continuous, let alone ever-abundant and cheap," but instead be allowed to "fluctuate with natural and social rhythms"(p. 71). In this model of the good life, people would do more and have less, and be "defined not by their

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shopping but by their producing," by their ability to buy as little as possible" (p. 95). Princen states confidently that we can be quite happy without a *continuous* stream of consumables and with patterns of resource use tuned in to the ebbs and flows of natural supplies. He states calmly that, yes, this will entail some "positive sacrifice" and inconvenience: We would dry our clothes outside, in accord with the intermittencies of sun and wind, eat seasonally in accord with the intermittencies of soil, geography, and weather, and so on.

This is pretty radical stuff for a population used to having everything "on demand" and for whom "inconvenience" would probably rank just below "taxes" on a list of unacceptables. (For the Tea Bag Party, frugality is for the government, not the consumer). And yet, Princen's rhetoric of common sense succeeds, I think, in presenting intermittency as really quite doable. Americans used to do it all the time, and much of the world's population still does. It is just that our natural "sense of enoughness and too-muchness" has gotten rusty from lack of use, living as we do in a society unhappily addicted to excess. It seems that the time has come again to build in some "down time for reproduction and recuperation" into our engagements with the environment.

If Princen's ideal of a political economy and a subjectivity organized around thrift, prudence, self-discipline, and greater self-sufficiency still feels untenable to the reader, he recommends a thought experiment: "Imagine that a century or so ago . . . someone came along and proposed a consumer economy [and attempted to sell] it for what it would actually become—a means of alienating work and enriching owners, of pursuing fleeting pleasures with objects soon to become obsolete, of breaking up the family and community, of becoming dependent on mobile capital, of accumulating debt (for self and nature), of mining resources . . . and filling waste sinks" (pp. 99–100). Would you *still* go for it? His point here is that while the new normal will call for inconvenience and sacrifice, so does the old normal: "[E]very day in the United States we sacrifice about one hundred people on the highways [and] eighteen thousand lives annually for lack of health insurances," not to mention the "military expense and lives lost to protect oil supplies" and the "disruptive effects of global warming." There are many, many "signs of a sacrificial consumer economy" if we open our eyes to them (p. 107).

The old normal presents itself not only as the best of all possible worlds but also as the *only* way things can be, as part of the inevitable logic of markets or technological development or modernization. Princen seems to offer two distinctive strategies to combat this: First, he names "adaptability" as the very essence of humanity, thus calling his readers to experience in themselves a stronger sense of their own capacity for change; and second, he calls our attention to slavery and smoking as examples of "recent transformations from what was perfectly normal to what is now perfectly abnormal. These shifts depended . . . on good research and gutsy people willing to take on some powerful actors, and to do so for many years. What's more, coordinated action made the difference, not changes in individual consumer choice, not technological gimmicks" (p. 180). Here, the author's reshuffling of the commonsense deck yields this head-nodding adage: "Fundamental change always seems impossible before it happens" (p. 189).

I like *Treading Softly*. If I had to name a criticism, it would be that his analysis focuses a bit too much on concepts and ideas and their power to set and reset practices and create new affects and effects. His case for sustainability proceeds, in other words, too much at the level of a transformation of "perceptions, beliefs, and values" (p. 163). Now I do not doubt for a minute that how one frames a problem shapes its range of conceivable solutions. (p. 177). Judith Butler makes the point eloquently in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2010, pp. xi–xiv): "The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality. It tries to do this, and its efforts are a powerful wager. Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalizing certain versions of reality. This means that the frame is always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimating alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version."

The focus on the power of framing, however, can also—as I think it does in Princen's case—lead the analyst to give too much to the power of human thought, to the detriment of a more "materialist" account of agency and efficacy. Here, I have in mind a specific kind of materialism, according to which natural-cultural bodies and forces—"things" and not just people—have a forceful presence and possess degrees of power to make things happen. This is a materialism more in the tradition of Lucretius and his "swerve" and Bruno Latour and his "actants" than in the tradition of historical materialism with its focus on human power structures. I agree that we are sucked into consumerism by a "belief" in endless growth, but we are also so inclined because our bodies have formed persistent assemblages with our consumables, with, that is, nonhuman bodies with which we mingle, compete, and which enable and constrain our range of action. These plants,[3] electric clothes dryers, and soon-to-be-landfill electronics have their own force, a forcefulness that includes but is not reducible to the ideological meanings invested in them by us. They possess, for example, the powers of texture, color, smell, sensuous vibrancy; on any given day, they call to us and make us behave in this way rather than that.

Princen's tendency to overcredit the role played by *human* effort in the overall effortfulness of the world manifests itself in the list he draws up of the different "worldviews" of the environment operative today. He lists four: The "naturist"

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views the environment as an overlapping set of physical systems to be analyzed and described; the "mechanist" pursues the more hubristic goal of intervention and management; the "agrarian" is also interventionist and managerial, but "its knowledge is acquired through practice and for the purpose of enhancing practice"; and the "economistic" worldview focuses more narrowly on the material world of "human exchange," on "products and services" rather than "atoms, molecules, and . . . living systems" (p. 167). It seems to me, however, that Princen's list leaves out another important worldview, a nonmechanistic materialism where natural and cultural bodies and forces exist as actants, rather than as the background "environment" for an exclusively human sphere of "action."

Here, I take inspiration from Henri Bergson's notion of a universe engaged in "creative evolution." This is a self-organizing system of vitalistic (rather than plastic or inert or even mechanistically dynamic) matter, an order of bodies (to which my composite body belongs) that proceeds in part by *invention*. This nature/culture itself engages in experimental action that makes a difference to the course of things. We live in a universe that is a nontotalizable sum—a "whole that is not given"—because as it evolves, it generates new elements and members and thus an ever-changing array of possibilities. According to this fifth worldview, every thing is a participant in *natura naturans,* a process where there is "radical contingency in progress, incommensurability between what goes before and what follows" (Bergson, *Creative Evolution,* 1944, p. 34)—where there is, in short, evolutionary change that is free, creative, and full of surprises.

Princen himself invokes something like this kind of material vibrancy in his chapter on "The Elm Stand," which gives an account of the give-and-take between man and wood in the process of creating a keyboard stand: The needed extension in our "time horizon" is to be found, he writes, "where humans directly engage nature in productive enterprise" (p. 90). But Princen stops short of acknowledging the wood as a bona fide participant in the process, preferring a rather more Heideggarian, anthropocentric account, one that focuses more on the human *experience* of the sacred "value" of the wood than upon the active presencing of the wood itself. He comes closer when he describes the elm wood as acting as "friend" (rather than resource). I think that more attention to the part played *by* "our" objects in the process of (re)forming both common sense and political economy could only strengthen this courageous and timely book.

Response to Jane Bennett's review of *Treading Softly: Paths to Ecological Order*

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— Thomas Princen

First, I offer a big thank you to Jane Bennett for an insightful and kind review. As authors know, it is hard looking back at one's work as a mere reader, let alone in a constructively critical vein. Often as not, my reaction is: I wrote that? Bennett helped me see this work with fresh eyes. And, having read and reviewed *Vibrant Matter* (kudos to editor Jeff Isaac), I can see my work through an entirely different lens—vibrant materiality. In this reply, I'd like to flag two points of convergence in our work and take up the notion of "common sense."

First, although I didn't realize it at the time, my elm story was very much about a tree once full of life, a chainsaw that took that life doing, as it were, what chainsaws do, and a keyboard stand that speaks to me—through its grain, the bark still on the back edge, the glow of the finished surface, its touch, and, yes, its history. As much as that whole incident moved me, I hadn't pushed my experienced sensibility to the fullest extent. The lesson I now take, and intend to impart, is that for the purpose of changing consciousness, extending the sensibility is key. And that extension is valuable whether it's all the way to vital materiality or just a few baby steps away from commodity.

At the same time, for the purpose of improving practice—the politics, management, institution building—I still believe a values framing is the most useful. The purveyors of commercialism and economism have so cornered the market on "value" that it is time to take it back, time to insist that every one of us (even the advertisers and economists) actually operate under a plurality of values, many incommensurate, and that, if anything, the commercial should be subordinate.

This, then, leads to a second point of convergence, what Bennett calls "the heterogeneity of the common store of wisdom" (a phrase I am hereby stealing) that makes possible a reorganization based on common sense. The "common store" metaphor, whether referring to storage or a retail store, is spot on. In previous work, the small communities I examined, each arguably sustainable on some dimension, all had some kind of general store. It was a focal point of the community, an institution that helped its members get from season to season, paycheck to paycheck. In that store was everything one needed, from bread and bait to stamps and popsicles. No single value reigned supreme. This is where the pragmatist ideal (it is right if it works, for self and others and other others) is embodied. This, to my read, is the model, not the "global commons" and its necessarily global carbon management regime, designed by confident elites and implemented by "incentivized" consumers.

Finally, Bennett interprets my approach as an "appeal to common sense." At one level, I agree. The personal attitudes and many of the collective norms for living within our means exist. Their expression and weightings may vary, but they are in the common store; they don't need to be created *de novo*. A nudge here, a jab there may be all it takes for people to switch from endless consumerism to,

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