Sacred Revolt: Why Reverence before Restraint Transforms the Limits-to-Growth Predicament

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that the ecological crisis cannot be understood adequately as a merely technological or economic problem requiring restraint alone, but must instead be recognised as a deeper spiritual and existential crisis rooted in the disenchantment and desacralisation of the modern world. While the limits-to-growth and degrowth traditions correctly diagnose the impossibility of infinite growth on a finite planet, the article contends that appeals to sacrifice, austerity, and reduced consumption often fail to generate widespread cultural transformation because industrial consumer civilisation has already organised desire, identity, and freedom around acquisition and perpetual expansion. Drawing on ecological philosophy, aesthetics, and Erich Fromm's distinction between the 'having' and 'being' modes of existence, the article develops the concept of reverence as an alternative existential orientation capable of grounding ecological restraint more deeply than fear, obligation, or technocratic management alone. It is argued that modern capitalism systematically desacralises reality by reducing nature, human beings, and existence itself to commodities and standing reserve for economic growth, thereby eroding experiences of intrinsic value and meaning. Against this metaphysics of industrial modernity, the article proposes a 'sacred revolt' grounded in reverence, simplicity, aesthetic reorientation, and ecological participation. Such a revolt does not reject science or technology, but seeks to reintegrate them within a broader civilisational framework capable of recognising the Earth as intrinsically meaningful rather than merely instrumentally useful. Ultimately, the article contends that ecological civilisation will remain politically fragile unless humanity rediscovers forms of sacredness through which restraint ceases to appear merely as sacrifice and instead becomes an expression of care, fidelity, and love for the living world.

Keywords: Limits to growth, degrowth, restraint, reverence, sacred revolt, ecological civilisation.

1. Introduction

Since the publication of *Limits to Growth* in 1972 (Meadows et al, 1972), a growing body of ecological scholarship has argued that infinite growth on a finite planet is impossible (see Kallis et al, 2018), and that industrial civilisation now confronts biophysical thresholds beyond which the conditions for human flourishing may begin to unravel (Ripple et al, 2019; Ripple et al, 2017; Homer-Dixon et al, 2015). Owing to this literature, the ecological crisis today is often framed as a problem of 'limits': limits to growth; limits to consumption and carbon emissions; limits to extraction, energy throughput, pollution, population, and resource use. Climate destabilisation, biodiversity collapse, soil degradation, freshwater depletion, ocean acidification, and resource exhaustion all suggest that the global economy has entered a condition of gross ecological overshoot (Turner, 2019; Friedrichs, 2013). This realisation has given rise to a range of social movements, some of which are explicitly rebelling against the coherent threats of societal collapse and the ongoing extinction of species (see Burkhart, Schmelzer, & Treu, 2020; Read and Alexander, 2020).

Despite the sophistication of this body of ecological science and theory, modern societies have largely failed to respond adequately to this predicament (Steffen et al, 2015; Turner, 2014;

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Bardi, 2011). Decades of international conferences, policy frameworks, sustainability discourse, technological innovation, and environmental activism have not altered the underlying trajectory of industrial consumer civilisation in any decisive way. Carbon emissions continue to rise globally (Deng et al, 2026). Consumption impacts increase as nations 'develop' (Wiedmann et al, 2015). Economic growth remains the overriding political imperative almost everywhere on Earth (Purdey, 2010).

The dominant response to this crisis has generally taken one of two forms. On the one hand are 'ecomodernists' who argue that technological innovation and 'green growth' will allow industrial societies to decouple economic expansion from ecological destruction (Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015; Hatfield-Dodds et al, 2015). Through renewable or nuclear energy, efficiency gains, electrification, carbon capture, artificial intelligence, geoengineering, and circular economies, it is hoped that growth can continue indefinitely while environmental harms are reduced or eliminated. On the other hand are those within the degrowth, sufficiency, and post-growth traditions who insist that genuine sustainability requires some form of material and energetic restraint, culturally, macroeconomically, and politically (D'Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015; Alexander and Gleeson, 2019). Humanity, according to this latter perspective, must consume less, produce less, travel less, extract less, and, in some ways, desire less.

This article argues that although the degrowth tradition correctly diagnoses the structural impossibility of endless growth (Weiss & Cattaneo, 2017), it often frames the crisis in strategically and existentially inadequate terms. In retrospect, I have come to see that some of my own scholarship in this space has contributed to this framing (Trainer & Alexander, 2019; Wiseman & Alexander, 2017). The problem is that calls for restraint, sacrifice, austerity, or voluntary simplicity – even when ecologically necessary – frequently fail to inspire broad cultural transformation because they are interpreted within the symbolic horizon of consumer civilisation itself. If a culture already assumes that happiness consists primarily in material acquisition, comfort, stimulation, and upward mobility, then appeals to consume less will predictably appear as forms of deprivation. Within the dominant imaginary of industrial modernity, restraint sounds like loss.

My central claim in this article is that the limits to growth problem cannot ultimately be resolved at the level of restraint alone because the ecological crisis is not merely an economic or technological crisis. It is, more fundamentally, a spiritual and existential crisis rooted in the desacralisation of the world (Alexander, 2026). Modern industrial civilisation increasingly encounters the Earth not as a sacred community to which humanity belongs, but as a stockpile of resources to be organised, extracted, commodified, and consumed. Nature appears primarily through the categories of utility, exchange-value, ecosystem services, and instrumental reason. Under such conditions, restraint becomes psychologically difficult because the world has already been stripped of intrinsic meaning and value.

This article therefore proposes a different starting point. Instead of beginning with restraint, limits, sacrifice, or moral obligation, I will propose that ecological transformation should begin with the cultivation of reverence (see Thoreau, 2004). To speak of reverence is not to invoke supernatural theology or a return to dogmatic religion. Sacredness, in the context developed by Thoreau, 'deep ecologists', and other ecological philosophers (see Sessions, 1995; Devall & Sessions, 1985; Armstrong, 2022), refers more broadly to a mode of perception and relation – a way of encountering existence aesthetically, ethically, and existentially. To experience something as sacred or worthy of reverence is to experience it as irreducible to utility. Sacredness interrupts instrumental reason. It invites humility, attentiveness, gratitude, restraint,

and care. My argument is not that reverence solves ecological overshoot technically or politically, nor that spiritual transformation alone can replace structural economic change. Rather, the claim is that when the world is encountered as sacred – as intrinsically meaningful, beautiful, alive, and worthy of care and wonder – the logic of restraint emerges more organically and less coercively. We do not desecrate what we genuinely revere.

In making this case, the article proceeds as follows. First, it examines how the limits to growth debate has typically framed ecological overshoot as a problem requiring restraint and why this framing has struggled to generate widespread existential motivation. Second, it analyses the desacralising tendencies of industrial modernity, showing how capitalism and instrumental rationality erode experiences of intrinsic value. Third, it develops the concept of reverence as an alternative existential orientation capable of grounding ecological restraint more deeply and organically. Finally, it explores the political and cultural implications of a 'sacred revolt' against the reduction of existence to commodity and utility.

I introduce the phrase 'sacred revolt' to signify a rebellion not only against ecological destruction but against the underlying metaphysics of industrial civilisation. It is a revolt against the assumption that the world is merely raw material for economic expansion. It is also a revolt against nihilism, disenchantment, and the reduction of human beings to consumers within systems of perpetual growth. To rediscover sacredness is not to escape finitude, suffering, or ecological limits. It is to encounter those limits differently. The problem of restraint changes fundamentally once existence itself is experienced as worthy of reverence. For if the Earth is not merely an object but a sacred inheritance; if rivers, forests, creatures, and communities are not simply resources but presences deserving care; if life itself is approached with humility and gratitude rather than entitlement and extraction – then restraint ceases to appear primarily as sacrifice. It begins instead to resemble something that academics are not supposed to discuss: a revolutionary expression of love.

The ecological question, therefore, is not merely: How can humanity restrain itself sufficiently to survive? The deeper question may be: How might humanity learn once again to love the world enough not to destroy it?

2. The Limits to Growth and the Politics of Restraint

Since the emergence of modern environmentalism, ecological overshoot has generally been framed through the language of limits, restraint, and reduction (see Meadows et al, 1972). The underlying argument is straightforward and difficult to refute intellectually: infinite material growth cannot continue indefinitely on a finite planet (Hickel and Kallis, 2019; Ward et al, 2016). Every ecosystem possesses carrying capacities. Every energy system confronts thermodynamic constraints. Every industrial process generates waste streams that eventually encounter ecological thresholds beyond which regeneration becomes impossible or dangerously destabilised. The Earth is materially bounded.

As noted, this insight achieved its most influential early expression in *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al, 1972), commissioned by the Club of Rome. Drawing upon systems dynamics modelling, the report warned that exponential economic and population growth could not continue indefinitely without precipitating severe ecological and social disruption. Although criticised and frequently misunderstood (see Bardi, 2011), the report proved prophetic in many

respects. Decades later, climate destabilisation, biodiversity collapse, resource depletion, and overshoot discourse have largely vindicated the broader thesis that industrial civilisation confronts biophysical limits (Wiedmann et al, 2020).

Subsequent ecological economists and degrowth theorists deepened and developed this critique. Thinkers such as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daly, Serge Latouche, Ted Trainer, Giorgos Kallis, Jason Hickel, and many others argued that mainstream economics systematically ignores thermodynamic realities and ecological dependence (Kallis et al, 2018; D'Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015). The economy is not an autonomous sphere capable of infinite expansion; it is a subsystem embedded within the larger biosphere (Purdey, 2010). Endless growth therefore becomes ecologically impossible (Ward et al, 2016; Hickel & Kallis, 2019).

From this diagnosis emerges the logic of restraint. If industrial societies are overshooting planetary boundaries, then affluent populations must reduce material throughput (Wiedmann et al, 2020). Energy consumption must decline (Alexander and Floyd, 2018). Waste generation must be curtailed. Carbon-intensive lifestyles must be transformed. Production and consumption patterns must contract toward ecological sufficiency (Princen, 2005). Degrowth, in this sense, names not recession within capitalism, but the planned downscaling of material and energetic throughput (Alexander, 2012) in order to achieve ecological sustainability, distributive justice, and improved quality of life (Hickel, 2019).

The moral and scientific force of this argument is considerable (see generally, D'Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015). Nevertheless, despite growing ecological awareness and increasingly alarming scientific evidence (Ripple et al, 2017), widespread cultural transformation has remained elusive. Modern societies continue to pursue economic growth as their overriding political and civilisational objective. Even many sustainability frameworks implicitly or explicitly assume that growth can and should continue indefinitely, provided it becomes technologically 'green' (e.g. Hatfield-Dodds et al, 2015). Calls for restraint remain politically marginal and culturally difficult.

Why? Part of the answer lies in structural political economy (Buch-Hansen, 2018; Sanne, 2002). Capitalist societies depend upon expansion to maintain employment, financial stability, investment returns, and social legitimacy (Harvey, 2011). Growth is not merely an economic preference but a systemic imperative (Blauwhof, 2012). Political leaders who openly advocate contraction risk electoral marginalisation. Entire industries depend upon stimulating perpetual consumption.

But structural analysis alone is insufficient. The difficulty also runs far deeper into the symbolic and existential architecture of modernity itself. The language of restraint often fails because it addresses populations whose deepest assumptions about the good life have already been colonised by consumer culture (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). Modern industrial civilisation has spent generations constructing identities organised around acquisition, mobility, novelty, convenience, stimulation, and material accumulation. Advertising industries do not merely sell products; they shape desires, aspirations, emotional atmospheres, and existential expectations. Economic growth becomes psychologically intertwined with notions of progress, success, even hope itself (Jackson, 2016).

Under such conditions, restraint appears primarily as negation. To consume less appears as deprivation. To travel less appears as confinement. To desire less appears as failure. To accept

limits appears as defeat. This helps explain why ecological discourse often oscillates between technocratic optimism and moralistic austerity. Mainstream environmentalism frequently attempts to reassure populations that sustainability will not require meaningful sacrifice because technological innovation will preserve affluent lifestyles indefinitely (see Alexander & Rutherford, 2019). Conversely, some degrowth and sufficiency discourses unintentionally reinforce the perception that ecological responsibility means giving things up within a civilisation that already equates freedom with consumption (e.g. Harris, Nowicki, White, 2023).

Both approaches encounter existential and cultural difficulties. The first risks denial by imagining that technological substitution alone can resolve ecological overshoot without confronting deeper patterns of desire, consumption, and economic expansion. The second often struggles to inspire because it frames ecological transition negatively, as restriction or descent rather than transformation. This problem is not merely rhetorical. Human beings are not exclusively rational actors responding mechanically to scientific evidence or moral injunction. People inhabit symbolic worlds structured through myths, metaphors, narratives, rituals, images, and affective atmospheres (Floyd, 2014). Civilisations organise desire aesthetically and existentially as much as economically (Alexander, 2017). Consequently, ecological transition cannot succeed through data alone because the crisis itself concerns how reality is perceived and valued.

My point here is that modern consumer societies do not simply consume excessively because individuals are selfish or ignorant. Rather, industrial civilisation systematically generates existential dissatisfaction and then offers consumption as compensation (Kasser, 2002). The economy depends psychologically upon cultivated restlessness. Advertising industries monetise insecurity, loneliness, status anxiety, boredom, sexual desire, and fear of insignificance (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). Under these conditions, consumption becomes not merely practical behaviour but symbolic self-construction.

The ecological implications are immense. If human beings seek meaning primarily through consumption because other sources of meaning have eroded, then appeals for restraint threaten not merely comfort but identity itself. A civilisation spiritually organised around expansion will interpret limits as existential diminishment. This reveals the deeper inadequacy of framing ecological overshoot solely through the language of restraint. Restraint, by itself, does not answer the question that industrial civilisation continually poses to consciousness: Why should human beings accept limits at all? Why renounce abundance, speed, convenience, and accumulation if these things are taken to constitute progress and freedom? Scientific warnings may explain necessity, but necessity alone rarely inspires cultural transformation.

Indeed, modern societies already experience many forms of restraint involuntarily through economic insecurity, precarity, stagnating wages, inflation, debt, and declining public services (Bauman, 1998). Under neoliberal conditions, calls for ‘living with less’ can easily become associated with imposed austerity rather than liberation. Ecological restraint then appears as yet another burden distributed unequally across populations already struggling within extractive systems. The problem, therefore, is not that restraint is unnecessary. Material contraction within affluent societies may well be ecologically unavoidable (Alexander & Floyd, 2018). The deeper issue is existential motivation.

Why would populations voluntarily embrace sufficiency rather than endless accumulation? The dominant responses generally fail because they appeal either to fear or obligation. Fear

alone rarely sustains long-term transformation. Human beings often respond to overwhelming crisis psychologically through denial, distraction, or paralysis. Likewise, moral obligation, while important, struggles against civilisational structures designed continuously to stimulate desire. What remains largely absent from much ecological discourse is a compelling account of why a materially restrained existence might nevertheless be meaningful, beautiful, fulfilling, or spiritually rich (see Kasser, 2017). The question is not simply how to consume less. The question is how to desire differently.

This marks the point at which the ecological crisis becomes inseparable from aesthetics, spirituality, and existential philosophy (Alexander, 2023; Alexander, 2017). For if industrial civilisation ultimately rests upon a desacralised vision of reality in which the world appears primarily as material for extraction and consumption, then no amount of scientific data alone can fully resolve the crisis. A civilisation organised around instrumental reason will continue seeking technological solutions to problems generated by instrumental reason itself (Harvey, 2011; Alexander & Rutherford, 2019). What is required, therefore, is not merely behavioural restraint but a transformation in the way existence is encountered and valued.

To better understand this logic, the next section examines the historical and philosophical origins of modern disenchantment and the desacralisation of the world that made the logic of limitless growth appear natural, rational, and inevitable.

3. Disenchantment and the Desacralised World

The ecological crisis cannot be understood adequately as a merely technological failure or economic miscalculation. It reflects a deeper transformation in humanity's mode of perceiving and inhabiting the world. Industrial civilisation did not simply develop new machines and energy systems; it cultivated a new metaphysics – a new understanding of reality itself (Purdey, 2010). The modern growth economy became possible not only because fossil fuels unlocked unprecedented energetic capacities, but because the world increasingly came to appear as something fundamentally available for manipulation, extraction, and instrumental control.

The historical process through which this transformation occurred is often described as 'disenchantment'. Max Weber (Weber, 1981) famously argued that modernity progressively dissolved the enchanted cosmologies of premodern societies through rationalisation, bureaucratisation, scientific explanation, and technological mastery. The world ceased to appear alive with intrinsic meanings, divine presences, sacred forces, and metaphysical depth (Eisenstein, 2011). Instead, reality increasingly appeared calculable, predictable, and mechanistic. Nature became intelligible primarily through quantitative analysis and instrumental reason (Kingsnorth, 2026).

This transformation generated extraordinary scientific and technological achievements. Modern medicine, industrial productivity, engineering, communications, and secular political institutions all emerged partly through the demystification of nature. Yet disenchantment also carried profound existential consequences. A desacralised world is not merely a world without gods. It is a world emptied of wonder, awe, and intrinsic significance (Bennett, 2001).

Under enchanted cosmologies, forests, rivers, mountains, animals, and celestial bodies were often embedded within symbolic systems that constrained human behaviour through reverence,

ritual, taboo, and spiritual imagination. Nature was not merely material; it was the source of spiritual and existential nourishment; it was home. Human beings encountered themselves as participants within a larger moral and cosmic order. Modern industrial civilisation progressively dismantled these symbolic constraints. Nature increasingly became 'environment'; forests became 'timber resources'; rivers became 'hydrological assets'; animals became 'protein units'; human beings themselves became 'human resources'.

The shift was not merely linguistic. Language reveals ontology (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Once reality is interpreted primarily through categories of utility and exchange-value, the world itself begins to appear differently. Instrumental reason colonises perception. This development was intensified through the emergence of capitalist modernity. Capitalism is not merely an economic system organised around markets and private ownership. It is a civilisational structure that continuously expands commodification into ever more dimensions of existence (Polanyi, 2001). Under capitalism, value increasingly becomes synonymous with market value. Things matter to the extent they can be exchanged, monetised, optimised, or consumed.

This logic gradually extends beyond material goods into culture, identity, time, relationships, attention, and even consciousness itself. The result is a civilisation uniquely predisposed toward limitless growth. In premodern societies, material expansion was often constrained not only technologically but symbolically (Alexander & McLeod, 2014). Religious traditions, seasonal rhythms, local customs, communal obligations, and metaphysical cosmologies imposed limits upon accumulation and desire. Modernity progressively dissolved many of these inherited boundaries while simultaneously unleashing industrial productivity powered by fossil energy. Desire itself became economised.

Consumer capitalism depends structurally upon perpetual dissatisfaction because economies organised around growth require continuously expanding consumption (Jackson, 2016; Hamilton, 2003). Advertising, branding, and media systems therefore function not merely to inform but to cultivate longing, insecurity, aspiration, envy, and restlessness. Human beings are encouraged to experience themselves perpetually as incomplete. The ecological implications are profound. A civilisation grounded in metaphysical dissatisfaction will struggle to accept limits because limits appear as existential diminishment. If meaning, status, identity, and freedom are sought primarily through accumulation and consumption, then restraint threatens the symbolic foundations of the self.

This reveals why the logic of endless growth increasingly came to appear natural and inevitable within modernity. Growth became more than economic policy. It became civilisational destiny. Progress itself came to be interpreted quantitatively through rising production, increasing consumption, technological acceleration, and expanding control over nature (Purdey, 2010). The future was imagined primarily as material amplification. To move 'forward' meant more: more energy, more commodities, more mobility, more speed, more extraction, more convenience, more stimulation.

The metaphysical assumptions embedded within this worldview are rarely interrogated because they have become culturally atmospheric. Modern subjects are born into systems that normalise endless expansion as common sense. Economic growth appears synonymous with wellbeing. Technological innovation appears synonymous with progress. Consumption appears synonymous with freedom. Yet beneath this ideology lies a profound spiritual vacuum (Myers, 2000). Disenchantment removed many of the symbolic structures that once grounded experiences of meaning, belonging, transcendence, and sacred order (Bennett, 2001;

Eisenstein, 2011). Industrial modernity achieved extraordinary material abundance while simultaneously intensifying alienation, loneliness, anxiety, and existential fragmentation. Human beings increasingly inhabit technologically saturated societies while struggling to answer fundamental questions concerning purpose, value, and the good life.

This vacuum helps explain why consumer culture becomes psychologically addictive (see Jackson, 2016, Ch. 6). Consumption compensates temporarily for the absence of deeper forms of existential orientation. Commodities become symbolic substitutes for meaning. Novelty substitutes for transcendence. Stimulation substitutes for presence. Under such conditions, ecological overshoot is not merely the result of greed or ignorance but an expression of civilisational metaphysics. The problem is not simply that industrial societies consume too much. The deeper problem is that they no longer know what enough means. They do not even ask the question. It is unthinkable.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger identified something essential in this regard through his critique of modern technology (Heidegger, 1977). According to Heidegger, technological modernity does not merely produce machines; it enframes reality itself as 'standing-reserve' (1977, p. 298) – a stockpile of resources awaiting extraction and use. Under this mode of revealing, beings lose their independent mystery and become available primarily through utility. The danger of modern technology, therefore, is not only environmental destruction but ontological reduction. Reality itself becomes flattened (Marcuse, 1964).

This flattening is ecological, spiritual, and aesthetic simultaneously. The modern world often struggles to experience forests except as carbon sinks, landscapes except as property, oceans except as resources, and human beings except as economic actors. Even time becomes commodified and optimised. Existence is increasingly subordinated to productivity. Within such a civilisation, the idea of restraint appears irrational because instrumental reason recognises few limits beyond technical feasibility and market profitability. If nature possesses no intrinsic sacredness, then why should humanity refrain from exploiting it whenever technologically possible?

This question reveals the ultimate inadequacy of purely technocratic environmentalism. Scientific data can describe ecological breakdown with extraordinary precision, but science alone cannot generate reverence. Quantification may reveal planetary boundaries while remaining silent concerning why existence ought to be approached with humility, gratitude, or care. Facts alone do not necessarily transform desire. Indeed, modern societies often respond to ecological crisis through intensified technological management rather than deeper philosophical reflection. The same instrumental rationality that contributed to ecological overshoot is repeatedly tasked with solving it. Geoengineering, artificial intelligence, nuclear energy, and endless efficiency gains promise to sustain industrial civilisation without requiring meaningful transformation in humanity's relationship to the world.

Yet if the ecological crisis emerges partly from a desacralised mode of perception, then technical solutions alone may prove insufficient because they leave the underlying metaphysics untouched. This is not an argument against science or technology. The challenge is not to abandon modern knowledge but to situate it within a broader existential orientation capable of recognising intrinsic value beyond utility. The problem is not rationality itself but rationality detached from reverence.

What industrial modernity systematically obscures is the possibility that existence might possess meanings irreducible to consumption, production, and exchange. Sacredness names precisely this dimension of irreducibility. To encounter something as sacred is to encounter it as exceeding instrumental calculation (Eisenstein, 2011). A sacred forest is not merely biomass; a sacred river is not merely water supply; a sacred life is not merely economic productivity. In other words, sacredness interrupts the logic of limitless growth because it places moral, existential, and aesthetic boundaries around what can be commodified or exploited legitimately.

Modernity largely dissolved such boundaries (Kingsnorth, 2026). The result has been unprecedented power accompanied by profound disorientation. The ecological crisis, therefore, is inseparable from the spiritual consequences of disenchantment (Alexander and Gleeson, 2020). A civilisation that no longer experiences the world as sacred will inevitably struggle to justify restraint except through fear, utility, or technocratic management. What is required is not simply ecological policy reform or 'better evidence', but a reconfiguration of perception itself; it requires the cultivation of new ways of seeing and feeling.

4. Reverence, Being, and the Recovery of the Sacred

This section develops the concept of reverence as an alternative existential orientation capable of grounding ecological restraint more deeply than obligation or fear alone. I have been arguing that if the ecological crisis reflects not merely technological failure but a deeper civilisational condition of disenchantment, then the task of ecological transformation cannot be reduced to policy reform, carbon accounting, or behavioural adjustment alone. What is ultimately at stake is humanity's mode of being-in-the-world. The problem is existential before it is technical, and in developing this diagnosis, I turn now to the work of psychoanalyst Erich Fromm.

Modern industrial civilisation has largely organised itself around what Fromm called the 'having' mode of existence. In his influential work *To Have or To Be?*, Fromm (1976) argued that modern societies increasingly define human flourishing through possession, acquisition, accumulation, and control. Identity becomes grounded not in what one experiences, creates, contemplates, or loves, but in what one owns, consumes, displays, and commands. The having mode transforms existence into property. Under this orientation, the self becomes a project of accumulation. Happiness is sought through acquisition and fame. Security is sought through possession. Status is measured quantitatively through wealth, productivity, and consumption. Human beings increasingly experience themselves as isolated egos attempting to establish permanence through ownership within a world of perpetual anxiety and competition.

This mode of existence aligns seamlessly with capitalist modernity. A civilisation organised around economic growth depends structurally upon expanding consumption, which in turn depends psychologically upon cultivating identities rooted in lack and acquisition. Individuals are encouraged to experience themselves as perpetually incomplete consumers whose fulfilment always lies one purchase, experience, enhancement, or achievement away. The ecological consequences are obvious. If fulfilment is sought primarily through having, then no amount of material expansion will ever prove sufficient because desire itself becomes structurally insatiable (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). The growth economy therefore depends not merely upon satisfying needs but upon reproducing dissatisfaction continuously (see Jackson, 2016, Ch. 6).

Yet Fromm (1976) contrasted the having mode with another possibility: the being mode. To exist in the mode of being is not to renounce material existence entirely or reject all forms of possession. Rather, it means grounding identity and fulfilment primarily in lived experience, meaningful activity, presence, relationship, creativity, contemplation, love, participation, and aliveness itself. The distinction is crucial – although 'having' and 'being' are best understood as different ends of a spectrum rather than mutually exclusive modes of existence that a person inhabits 'either/or'. In the having mode, a forest matters insofar as it can be owned, harvested, monetised, or consumed. In the being mode, a forest matters because one can dwell within it, experience its beauty, breathe its air, walk beneath its canopy, and encounter oneself differently in its presence. The difference is not merely ethical. It is ontological. The having mode approaches reality instrumentally. The being mode approaches reality reverentially.

This mode of being-in-the-world has ancient roots. Many premodern cultures related to the Earth through cosmologies of sacred interdependence that constrained exploitation through ritual, taboo, reverence, and metaphysical orientation. Modernity largely dissolved those symbolic structures through scientific rationalisation, secularisation, industrialisation, and capitalism. The result has been both unprecedented material power and profound existential dislocation. The world has become increasingly mediated technologically while becoming spiritually opaque.

This is why reverence becomes ecologically decisive (see Thoreau, 2004; Devall & Sessions, 1985; Armstrong, 2022). Reverence names a form of existential attention in which beings are encountered not primarily as objects of utility but as presences possessing intrinsic significance beyond their usefulness. Reverence does not necessarily require supernatural belief or adherence to formal religion. It is, more fundamentally, a mode of perception and relation. To approach existence reverentially is to recognise that not everything valuable can be quantified, possessed, commodified, or optimised. A child sleeping, an ancient forest, a dying parent, the night sky, silence, birdsong at dawn: these experiences matter precisely because they exceed instrumental calculation. The ecological implications of reverence are profound because reverence naturally moderates exploitation without requiring perpetual coercion. We do not desecrate casually what we genuinely experience as sacred.

This line of reasoning helps illuminate why modern environmental discourse often struggles to inspire deep transformation. Appeals to restraint framed solely through obligation, sacrifice, fear, or scientific necessity remain psychologically fragile because they do not necessarily transform the underlying structure of desire. Individuals may acknowledge ecological limits intellectually while continuing to experience consumer abundance as the primary horizon of fulfilment. Reverence changes the existential terrain. When the world is experienced as intrinsically meaningful rather than merely materially useful, restraint ceases to appear purely negative. It becomes an expression of care, fidelity, gratitude, and participation within a larger order of existence. One does not refrain from clear-cutting an ancient forest merely because ecological models predict carbon instability decades hence. One refrains because the forest appears worthy of love and protection in itself. Importantly, this perspective would remain even in the absence of an 'ecological crisis'.

I propose that this perspective offers a first step beyond the current civilisational predicament. Fear-based ecological politics may produce temporary behavioural adaptation under conditions of immediate crisis, but fear alone rarely sustains cultural renewal. Likewise, guilt and moralism often provoke defensiveness, denial, or exhaustion. Reverence, by contrast, invites affection rather than merely compliance. The challenge, however, is that reverence cannot

simply be legislated into existence. It emerges through forms of life; through (re)connection with the more-than-human world. Human beings learn reverence aesthetically, culturally, spiritually, and phenomenologically. Experiences of sacredness are cultivated through ritual, story, art, contemplation, community, silence, and direct encounter with the more-than-human world. Reverence arises when instrumental consciousness loosens sufficiently for reality to appear once again as presence rather than inventory.

This is why the ecological crisis is inseparable from the crisis of attention characteristic of late modernity. Contemporary societies increasingly fragment consciousness through perpetual stimulation, distraction, acceleration, and commodified entertainment. Consumer capitalism colonises attention itself. Under such conditions, the contemplative capacities required for reverence gradually erode. One cannot revere what one no longer truly perceives.

The acceleration of modern life therefore intensifies ecological destruction not merely materially but existentially. Constant distraction prevents the depth of encounter from which reverence emerges. Forests become scenery glimpsed through windshields. Landscapes become tourism commodities curated for social media consumption. Even experiences of nature increasingly become instrumentalised as forms of self-optimisation or lifestyle branding. Against this fragmentation, reverence requires a recovery of presence.

This recovery often involves forms of simplicity. Voluntary simplicity, understood properly, is not merely reduced consumption (see Alexander, 2009). It is an existential practice that attempts to shift life from having toward being. Simplicity creates space for attention. By loosening the compulsive pursuit of accumulation, speed, and stimulation, individuals may rediscover dimensions of experience obscured by consumer modernity. This explains why many traditions of spiritual and philosophical wisdom – from Buddhism and Christian monasticism to Indigenous cosmologies and Daoist thought – have often associated simplicity with depth rather than deprivation (Alexander and McLeod, 2014). The point is not ascetic denial for its own sake but liberation from forms of craving that undermine flourishing.

The ecological significance of such traditions, including ‘deep ecology’, lies not primarily in moral purity but in existential reorientation (Sessions, 1995). A person grounded primarily in being rather than having may still use technology, inhabit modern institutions, and participate in economic systems. Yet their orientation toward existence changes fundamentally. The world ceases to appear primarily as material for consumption and begins to appear as a field of relationship and participation (see Armstrong, 2022).

At this point aesthetics becomes politically important (Alexander, 2023; Sartwell, 2010). Modern industrial civilisation possesses immense aesthetic power. Advertising, architecture, media, entertainment systems, and digital technologies continuously shape perception, desire, and emotional atmosphere. Consumer capitalism does not merely organise economies; it organises imagination (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Consequently, ecological civilisation requires more than scientific argumentation. It requires alternative aesthetic and symbolic worlds capable of making sufficiency appear desirable, meaningful, and beautiful. To borrow a phrase from philosopher-poet, Friedrich Schiller, what is needed is an ‘aesthetic education’ (Schiller, 2005).

This is not superficial romanticism. It is anthropological realism (Dissanayake, 1995). Human beings are not purely rational utility-maximisers. We are meaning-seeking, sense-making creatures shaped profoundly by beauty, ritual, atmosphere, story, and symbolic orientation

(Floyd, 2014). If ecological restraint is to become culturally durable, it must become existentially attractive rather than merely morally obligatory. Reverence offers precisely such a possibility. Unlike consumerism, reverence does not depend upon endless novelty because its orientation is qualitative rather than quantitative (Eisenstein, 2011). Reverence deepens rather than expands. It discovers richness through attentiveness rather than accumulation.

This mode of being does not abolish suffering or ecological limits. Nor does it guarantee political transformation automatically. Reverence can coexist with hierarchy, exclusion, or reactionary forms of spirituality if detached from justice and critical reflection. The point is not to romanticise sacredness naïvely. Nevertheless, without some recovery of reverence, ecological politics risks remaining trapped within the metaphysical assumptions of the civilisation it opposes. The ecological question cannot ultimately be separated from the question of what human beings consider sacred. If nothing is sacred, then everything becomes available for commodification. If everything becomes commodity, then limitless growth appears rational. If limitless growth appears rational, ecological overshoot becomes inevitable.

Reverence interrupts this sequence. It reminds humanity that the world is not merely raw material for economic expansion but a mysterious and finite field of existence within which human life unfolds temporarily and dependently. To rediscover sacredness, therefore, is not to retreat from ecological reality. It is to encounter ecological limits differently. Limits cease to appear solely as external constraints imposed upon desire. They become invitations to dwell more carefully, attentively, and beautifully within the conditions of earthly existence.

In order to complete this argument, the final section explores the political implications of this existential reorientation and develops the idea of a ‘sacred revolt’ against the metaphysics of industrial consumer civilisation.

5. Sacred Revolt and the Politics of Ecological Civilisation

If the ecological crisis is rooted partly in the desacralisation of the world and the domination of the having mode of existence, then ecological transformation cannot be understood merely as a managerial project of technological transition. It must also become a cultural, existential, and political revolt against the metaphysics of industrial consumer civilisation itself. This revolt is not simply economic. It concerns the meaning of human life.

Modern industrial societies have normalised a conception of freedom grounded primarily in consumption, mobility, technological expansion, and the continual amplification of material power. Political legitimacy increasingly depends upon sustaining economic growth because growth functions not merely as policy but as collective mythology (Hamilton, 2003). Citizens are promised that more production, more innovation, more connectivity, and more consumption will eventually deliver security, happiness, and fulfilment. Yet the ecological crisis increasingly exposes the bankruptcy of this imaginary. Industrial civilisation has generated extraordinary material capacities while simultaneously intensifying loneliness, anxiety, alienation, ecological devastation, and spiritual exhaustion (see Lane, 2000; Myers, 2000). Humanity possesses unprecedented technological power while confronting a growing inability to answer the simplest existential questions: What is enough? What is prosperity for? What constitutes a good life? What deserves reverence?

The inability to answer these questions politically is not accidental. A civilisation organised around limitless growth cannot easily tolerate the idea of sufficiency (Princen, 2005; Alexander, 2015). Sufficiency interrupts accumulation. Reverence interrupts commodification. Sacredness interrupts instrumental rationality. For this reason, the transition toward ecological civilisation necessarily entails a conflict between rival metaphysical or mythopoetic visions of reality. On one side stands the dominant logic of industrial consumer modernity: a desacralised world interpreted primarily as standing reserve for economic expansion (Heidegger, 1971). Here freedom is identified with consumption, progress with technological acceleration, and nature with resource extraction. On the other side emerges the possibility of an ecological civilisation grounded more deeply in participation, restraint, reverence, sufficiency, and the intrinsic value of the more-than-human world (Alexander, 2023).

The conflict between these visions is not merely technical. It is civilisational. The phrase ‘sacred revolt’ names this deeper struggle. Sacred revolt is not a call for theocratic politics, dogmatic religion, or nostalgic return to premodern cosmologies. Nor is it a rejection of science, reason, or technological knowledge. Rather, sacred revolt refers to a cultural and existential rebellion against the reduction of existence to commodity, utility, and exchange-value. It is a revolt against the assumption that everything meaningful can be quantified. A revolt against the colonisation of attention by consumer capitalism. A revolt against the transformation of forests into inventory, communities into markets, and persons into economic units. Most fundamentally, sacred revolt rejects the idea that the Earth exists primarily to fuel industrial accumulation.

This revolt must occur simultaneously at multiple levels. Politically, sacred revolt implies the construction of institutions and economies oriented toward sufficiency rather than perpetual growth (Alexander, 2015). Ecological democracy, commons-based systems, local resilience, cooperative economies, regenerative agriculture, public goods, reduced working hours, and post-consumerist forms of prosperity all become politically significant (Alexander, Chandrashekeran, & Gleeson, 2022). Such transformations are essential if societies are to remain within ecological limits while preserving dignity and justice (O’Neill et al, 2018).

Yet structural change alone remains insufficient. No ecological civilisation can endure if populations continue interpreting freedom primarily through accumulation and consumption. Economic systems are sustained not only institutionally but imaginatively. Consequently, sacred revolt must also become aesthetic and cultural. Modern capitalism possesses immense power because it continuously shapes desire (Fong, 2018; Zaretsky, 2017). Advertising industries, entertainment systems, digital platforms, architecture, and media infrastructures generate emotional atmospheres that normalise speed, novelty, stimulation, and acquisitive identity. Consumer culture succeeds because it seduces consciousness aesthetically.

Ecological civilisation therefore requires counter-aesthetics. It requires forms of life capable of making sufficiency appear not merely necessary but beautiful (Alexander, 2026). This may involve recovering practices and sensibilities largely marginalised by industrial modernity: shared meals, ritual, local belonging, craft, slowness, contemplation, public beauty, seasonality, music, storytelling, walking, gardening, communal festivals, attention to place, and forms of education that cultivate reverence rather than merely technical competence. Such practices matter politically because they reconfigure desire itself. They reshape perception.

A population capable of experiencing fulfilment through participation, relationship, creativity, and contemplative depth becomes less vulnerable to the compulsions of consumer capitalism.

The logic of endless growth weakens once human flourishing is detached from perpetual accumulation. Again, the political significance of aesthetics should be clear. Human beings are not motivated solely through rational calculation or legal obligation. We are moved by beauty, atmosphere, symbolism, myth, and existential orientation. Every civilisation therefore rests upon an aesthetic order shaping what people experience as desirable, meaningful, and normal. Industrial modernity created an aesthetic regime organised around speed, spectacle, novelty, and abundance. An ecological civilisation would require another aesthetic horizon entirely.

This is why sacred revolt must ultimately become educational. Modern education systems largely prepare individuals to function within growth economies as workers, consumers, and technological operators (Trainer, 2012). Ecological civilisation requires broader forms of formation capable of cultivating ethical imagination, contemplative awareness, ecological literacy, aesthetic sensitivity, and existential reflection. The question is not merely how to produce sustainable technologies. The deeper question is how to cultivate human beings – ecological citizens – capable of dwelling sustainably.

Such transformation cannot be imposed entirely from above. Indeed, one danger of ecological politics is authoritarian technocracy justified through planetary emergency. Climate crisis and ecological destabilisation may tempt governments toward increasingly centralised systems of surveillance, behavioural control, and technocratic management. Sacred revolt resists this tendency precisely because it insists that ecological transformation must remain connected to freedom, dignity, participation, and interior life. A world ecologically stabilised through total technocratic domination would still represent a spiritual catastrophe. The goal is not merely survival. The goal is meaningful survival.

This distinction deserves contemplation. Industrial civilisation increasingly imagines salvation technologically: geoengineering, artificial intelligence, planetary optimisation systems, synthetic biology, total electrification, automated efficiency. While many technological developments may prove necessary, the notion of sacred revolt warns against the illusion that technical power alone can resolve crises rooted fundamentally in civilisation's metaphysical orientation. The danger is not technology itself but technological consciousness detached from reverence. *Without reverence, technological civilisation risks becoming infinitely efficient at organising meaninglessness*.

The ecological crisis therefore confronts humanity with a spiritual threshold. Will the Earth continue appearing primarily as standing reserve for economic expansion? Or can humanity recover experiences of sacredness capable of grounding restraint voluntarily and meaningfully? This recovery cannot simply recreate premodern forms of enchantment. Modernity's achievements – scientific knowledge, democratic aspirations, human rights traditions, medical advances, and critical reason – cannot and should not be abandoned. The challenge is not regression but integration.

An ecological civilisation worthy of the name would unite scientific understanding with existential depth, technological capacity with humility, and material sufficiency with spiritual richness. Such a civilisation would recognise that human beings flourish not through limitless consumption but through meaningful participation within living communities and finite ecosystems. It would understand that restraint need not signify impoverishment (Kasser, 2017; Soper, 2008). Restraint can become a form of fidelity and love: love of place; care of future generations; acknowledgement of beauty; and openness to the mysterious fact of existence itself.

The phrase ‘reverence before restraint’ therefore names a strategic and philosophical inversion of the conventional limits-to-growth discourse. If ecological politics begins primarily by demanding sacrifice from populations already spiritually exhausted by consumer modernity, resistance is predictable. But if ecological civilisation emerges from a rediscovery of sacredness – from renewed capacities for wonder, gratitude, belonging, contemplation, and love for the living world – then restraint may no longer appear merely as external limitation. It may instead become the natural but revolutionary expression of humility, care, and love.

Ultimately, the ecological crisis forces humanity to confront questions modern industrial civilisation has long attempted to avoid: What is the Earth for? What are people for? And what is the economy for? If the Earth exists merely as raw material for economic expansion, then no final limit will ever appear morally binding. Every boundary will eventually become another obstacle to overcome technologically. But if the Earth is understood as sacred – as a finite, mysterious, and intrinsically meaningful community of life to which humanity belongs – then the logic of endless growth loses its metaphysical legitimacy. The door opens to transcendence.

The future of ecological civilisation may therefore depend less upon whether humanity can discover new technologies than upon whether humanity can rediscover reverence. This is not because reverence alone solves ecological overshoot. It is because without reverence, restraint will always feel like punishment imposed upon desire. Only when existence itself becomes worthy of love does limitation cease to appear merely as loss. Then, perhaps, humanity may finally learn not simply how to survive on Earth, but how to dwell here beautifully.

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