

Reinhard Hennig (Kristiansand) about:

## Knowing the Right Thing, but Not Doing It

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### Knut Hamsun's *Markens grøde* in the Anthropocene

#### Abstract

Knut Hamsun's novel *Markens grøde* has been interpreted as advocating a simple and sustainable life in harmony with nature. However, when read retrospectively against the background of human-made environmental changes that have brought the planet into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, *Markens grøde* cannot be considered an ecological text. What the novel actually delivers is a narrative of constant progress and growth, without consideration of potential limits or unintended detrimental side-effects. In *Markens grøde*, human nature is assumed to create desires that can only be fulfilled through permanent increases in production and consumption, irrespective of material environmental restraints. In combination with an ideology of human population growth, the novel, instead of conveying »green values«, constitutes a literary expression of precisely the ideas and processes that led to the transition into the Anthropocene.

#### Zusammenfassung

Knut Hamsuns Roman *Markens grøde* ist als ein Manifest für ein einfaches und nachhaltiges Leben in Harmonie mit der Natur interpretiert worden. Vor dem Hintergrund menschengemachter Umweltveränderungen, die den Planeten in eine neue geologische Epoche, das Anthropozän, geführt haben, kann *Markens grøde* jedoch nicht als ökologischer Text gelten. Der Roman basiert auf einem Fortschritts- und Wachstumsnarrativ, das mögliche Grenzen und unbeabsichtigte Nebeneffekte ignoriert. In *Markens grøde* wird angenommen, die menschliche Natur erzeuge Begehrlichkeiten, die nur durch permanentes Wachstum von Produktion und Konsum, ungeachtet materieller und umweltbezogener Begrenzungen, erfüllt werden können. In Kombination mit einer Ideologie menschlichen Bevölkerungswachstums vermittelt der Roman daher keine »grünen Werte«, sondern liefert eine literarische Darstellung genau jener Ideen und Vorgänge, die den Übergang ins Anthropozän bewirkt haben.

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## Introduction

A hundred and one years ago, in 1917, Knut Hamsun published what was probably his most influential and at the same time most controversial novel: *Markens grøde* (translated into English as *Growth of the Soil*).<sup>1</sup> This story about the colonization of new farmland in northern Norway by the pioneer Isak and his wife Inger attained immense popularity in Hamsun's home country and abroad, and earned its author the Nobel Prize in literature. In later years, it has often been criticized for, among other things, postulated parallels to Nazi »blood and soil« ideology,<sup>2</sup> for its racist and colonialist portrayal of the Sami,<sup>3</sup> and for its antagonism towards female self-determination.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, however, attempts have been made to rehabilitate the novel as a carrier of ecological values that can lead the way into a more sustainable future. According to Peter Mortensen, *Markens grøde* »implicitly encourages readers to follow Isak's example and work toward a reversal of industrial civilization's self-destructive momentum« by supporting a more »humane, place-sensitive and sustainable version of modernity«.<sup>5</sup> Henning Howlid Wærp claims that, with this novel, »Hamsun delivered the recipe for the »simple life.«<sup>6</sup> Among »the green values«<sup>7</sup> that Wærp sees expressed in *Markens grøde* is an endorsement of the idea of sustainability through the depiction of a rural economy in which natural resources are preserved rather than being depleted.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, by exemplifying a worldview in which nature is not considered solely as a resource, but as having intrinsic value, Wærp argues, the novel can make its readers imagine alternative ways of living on Earth, and possibly even have a positive influence on their environmental behavior.<sup>9</sup>

I will, in the following, take a different ecocritical approach to *Markens grøde*. I will argue that, when read against the background of contemporary environmental and climatic change on a global scale, the novel cannot be seen as a manifesto for sustainability that points out alternative pathways to »greener« ways of living. Instead, it constitutes a literary expression of precisely the thoughts and processes that form the background to the highly problematic transformation the planet is undergoing today.

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<sup>1</sup> The novel was originally published in two parts, referred to here as Hamsun 1917a and Hamsun 1917b. It has been translated into English by W. W. Worster (Hamsun 1921) and, more recently, by Sverre Lyngstad (Hamsun 2007). These translations are useful for conveying an impression of the novel's content. However, in many of the passages relevant for this article, they deviate so much from the original wording that, for the purpose of the analysis provided here, it would not be suitable to quote from them. All translations from the Norwegian in this article are therefore my own.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Giersing, Thobo-Carlsen & Westergaard-Nielsen 1975, pp. 162–164.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jernsletten 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Andersen 2011, pp. 112–118.

<sup>5</sup> Mortensen 2009, pp. 6 and 22.

<sup>6</sup> »Hamsun ga oppskriften på »det enkle liv« (Wærp 2017, p. 6).

<sup>7</sup> »de grønne verdiene« (Wærp 2010, p. 107).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wærp 2010, p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Wærp 2010, pp. 109 and 121.

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Much has changed since the publication of *Markens grøde*. The planet's human population has almost quadrupled, from fewer than two billion in 1917 to more than seven billion now, and is estimated to reach ten to eleven billion before the end of this century.<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously, human-made changes to the Earth's ecosystems and climate have reached an unprecedented scale. While levels of consumption vary greatly from one country to another and between different social classes, there can be no doubt that globally, the use of both renewable and non-renewable resources has risen immensely during the last hundred years. This development began, of course, long before 1917, with the Industrial Revolution constituting an important premise. However, it was not until after the end of the Second World War that the human transformation of the planet began to advance with such enormous speed that the time since then is now often referred to as the Great Acceleration.<sup>11</sup>

The rapid increase in anthropogenic (i.e. human-made) changes to the planet has proven to be immensely problematic. As far back as 1972, a study titled *The Limits to Growth* (the first one to use computer-based models of the Earth System) warned that, unless the exponential growth of the planet's human population, of resource depletion, and of environmental degradation and pollution was halted, absolute limits to the capacity of the world's ecosystems would be reached, with major ecological and social collapse as an inevitable consequence.<sup>12</sup> Some of the report's forecasts, for example concerning the depletion of non-renewable resources, have proven not to be entirely accurate. However, the fact that especially fossil fuels have turned out to be globally available in amounts far greater than assumed in *The Limits to Growth* cannot be considered comforting, since, as is well known today, the burning of these fossil fuel reserves will inevitably lead to catastrophic global warming. During the past four decades, advances in Earth System science have made it possible to gain an ever-clearer picture of the scale of human influence on the planet's ecosystems and climate. According to recent studies, humanity has already crossed several planetary boundaries for key Earth System processes (for example, concerning the carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, and the rate of biodiversity loss), while it is rapidly approaching other boundaries concerning, among other things, land system change, global freshwater use, the phosphorus cycle, and ocean acidification.<sup>13</sup>

In view of such immense, human-made changes to the Earth System, the atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer suggested in 2000 that human activity had transformed the global environment and climate to such an extent that the planet has entered a new geological epoch, for which they proposed the name *Anthropocene*.<sup>14</sup> This proposition has since found broad acknowledgement, and it has repeatedly been

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Steffen et al. 2015, pp. 86 and 89.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. McNeill & Engelke 2014; Steffen et al. 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Meadows et al. 1972.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rockström et al. 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Crutzen & Stoermer 2000.

confirmed that humans indeed have evolved into a geological force that has ended the Holocene and brought the planet into a new and much less stable state.<sup>15</sup>

The Holocene, as the epoch that started with the end of the last Ice Age roughly 12,000 years ago, was, from a geological perspective, characterized by an extraordinary climatic stability that formed the precondition for the development of agriculture and of all human civilizations. That the Holocene has been brought to an end by the human species itself has far-reaching implications. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, the Anthropocene radically challenges not only the conventional distinction between human culture and non-human nature, with all ecosystems and the atmosphere now being altered directly or indirectly by human influence. The evolution of humanity into a geological force also makes obsolete the common notion that geological change is occurring far more slowly and on an entirely different scale than human-induced changes.<sup>16</sup> According to Chakrabarty, the Anthropocene requires us to imagine humanity as a biological species on scales of time and space that are much larger than what has hitherto been customary. The end of the Holocene means that recorded history needs to be set in relation to »deep history« (meaning the entire history of the evolution and existence of *homo sapiens* as a species), and the planetary effects of human activity require that we view individual, local choices from a global perspective.<sup>17</sup> The latter also means asking how the ideas of human freedom and of rational human choices can be brought into accord with the usually unintended consequences of human action when seen on the »species level«; that is, the level at which individual or cultural agency is transformed into biological and eventually geological agency. According to Timothy Clark, »the Anthropocene challenges us to think counter-intuitive relations of scale, effect, perception, knowledge, representation and calculability«,<sup>18</sup> and it requires a retrospective reevaluation of many developments that are commonly considered as desirable achievements, such as technological progress and personal freedom, since these always have to be thought about in connection with their potentially detrimental environmental side-effects.<sup>19</sup> As Clark expresses it: »The Anthropocene brings to an unavoidable point of stress the question of the nature of Nature and of the human. It represents, for the first time, the demand made upon a species consciously to consider its impact as a totality upon the whole planet, the advent of a kind of new reflexivity as a species.«<sup>20</sup>

### **Literary Fiction in the Anthropocene: Re-Reading *Markens grøde***

In recent years, first attempts have been made within the field of ecocriticism (that is, literary and cultural studies focusing on environmental questions) to assess what the advent of the Anthropocene may imply with regard to literature. Central questions are in which ways literary texts can facilitate thinking at the extremely large scales

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Zalasiewicz et al. 2008; Steffen et al. 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Chakrabarty 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Clark 2015, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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required by the Anthropocene, and how literature may have to change to better meet the challenges posed by the radically different conditions of the new geological epoch.<sup>21</sup> The focus of research so far, however, has mainly been on so-called climate change fiction (or »cli-fi«), a term mostly used to refer to novels presenting environmental catastrophe scenarios set in a more or less distant future.<sup>22</sup>

An as yet largely unexplored question is how the Anthropocene retrospectively changes the interpretation of older literary texts – of works written before the Great Acceleration and before consciousness of humanity as a geological force began to spread. As Clark makes clear, »[n]o real precedents exist for reading at the scale required by the Anthropocene.«<sup>23</sup> Yet it may be worthwhile attempting to re-interpret even older works of literature against the background of the new geological epoch and its implications, not least since »any literary representation of environmental issues – and which issues now are not in the end? – over the past century at least, must be a representation in part of this emergent human or planetary reality.«<sup>24</sup> In a reading informed by this new reality, many aspects of older literary texts will acquire a meaning that differs greatly from the ways in which these texts have been understood hitherto. As Clark puts it: »Critical reading in relation to the Anthropocene becomes a measure of an irreversible break in consciousness and understanding between the past and the present.«<sup>25</sup>

As I will argue in the following, this break also necessitates a radically different assessment of *Markens grøde*. In a reading that takes the Anthropocene and its implications as a point of departure, this novel appears in a very different light than in earlier ecocritical interpretations. My analysis of Hamsun's novel focuses first on how the text frames human-environment interactions in relation to different forms of environmental change. I then attempt a reading of the text against the large scales required by the Anthropocene, setting the novel in relation to deep history and the species level. I argue that, if the implications of the new geological epoch are taken seriously, *Markens grøde* cannot be considered a guide to alternative and sustainable ways of living, based on principles such as simplicity and harmony between humans and non-human nature. What the novel actually delivers is a narrative of constant progress and growth, without any consideration of potential limits or unintended detrimental side-effects. In *Markens grøde*, human nature is assumed to create desires that can only be fulfilled through permanent increases in production and consumption, irrespective of any material environmental restraints. In combination with an ideology of human population growth, the novel, instead of conveying »green values«, constitutes a literary expression of precisely the ideas and processes that led to the Great Acceleration and the transition into the Anthropocene.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ghosh 2016, p. 84; Trexler 2015, p. 118.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent book-length study of contemporary climate change fiction, see Trexler 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Clark 2015, p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

## Humans, Nature, and Environmental Change

Interaction between humans and the non-human environment are at the core of the settler narrative that makes up *Markens grøde*.<sup>26</sup> Wærp asserts that in the novel, »nature and civilization are not opposite poles«,<sup>27</sup> and that humans and non-human nature at Sellanraa instead live in harmony with each other. I will argue that this is an interpretation based on the narrator's comments as well as on Geissler's<sup>28</sup> statements, but that a focus on the human-environment interactions that are actually described in the novel creates a very different picture.

First, as has often been observed, the main demarcation line in *Markens grøde* runs not between humans and nature, but between the country and the city.<sup>29</sup> The former is considered »natural« in a positive sense, while the latter signifies culture or civilization in a negative sense. In *Markens grøde*, people in the countryside feel a strong connection to the place where they live, while the urban dwellers are, so to speak, cosmopolitan and nowhere at home. About Isak, the reader is told that virtually immediately after deciding on the place where he wanted to establish his farm, »he had become so at home here«. <sup>30</sup> In contrast, his son Eleseus has become alienated through a stay in Trondheim, so that »he basically started feeling homeless everywhere«. <sup>31</sup> The narrator calls the farm Sellanraa Isak's »natural place on Earth«<sup>32</sup> and contrasts it with the »artificial air«<sup>33</sup> of the city that negatively affects Inger's character during her imprisonment in Trondheim, and the »artificial conditions«<sup>34</sup> of the urban environment that he blames for the fact that Eleseus »got his roots cut off and fared badly«. <sup>35</sup> Farm work is described as »natural doings«,<sup>36</sup> and the closeness of humans, non-human animals and of the non-human environment at Sellanraa is emphasized again and again by such means as comparisons of Isak, Inger, and their second son Sivert with animals,<sup>37</sup> and through mystic experiences of unity with non-human nature that these characters have in the surroundings of their farm.<sup>38</sup>

This appraisal of »nature« and »naturalness« is linked to representations of non-human nature as characterized by a friendliness towards humans that expresses itself in the form of resource abundance and of favorable environmental and climatic conditions. One aspect determining Isak's choice of place for his farm is that there is

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<sup>26</sup> On *Markens grøde* as a settler narrative, cf. Storfjell 2009; Heitmann 2008.

<sup>27</sup> »Natur og sivilisasjon er ikke motpoler« (Wærp 2010, p. 116).

<sup>28</sup> The views of the somewhat obscure figure of Geissler are usually similar to those expressed by the narrator, and Geissler has often been interpreted as a literary representative of Hamsun himself; see, for example, Rumbke 1983, p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Rumbke 1983, pp. 145–146; Andersen 2011, pp. 108–112.

<sup>30</sup> »han er blit saa hjemme her« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 7).

<sup>31</sup> »han begyndte i Grunden at føle sig hjemløs alle Steder« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 15).

<sup>32</sup> »naturlige Plass paa Jorden« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 192).

<sup>33</sup> »kunstig Luft« (ibid.).

<sup>34</sup> »kunstige Forhold« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 202).

<sup>35</sup> »fik vel Røtterne avslitt og fôr ilde« (ibid., p. 209).

<sup>36</sup> »naturlige Gjærninger« (ibid., p. 163).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Hamsun 1917a, pp. 86, 153, 195; Hamsun 1917b, pp. 170, 171.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Hamsun 1917a, pp. 149–50, 210–11; Hamsun 1917b, p. 160. Cf. also Brøgger 2008 for a discussion of human-nature relations in *Markens grøde*.

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»a pleasant river«, »of pleasant appearance«,<sup>39</sup> and also the forest there is »huge and friendly«. <sup>40</sup> The weather in the novel is usually also »friendly« in the meaning of beneficial to agriculture, allowing rich harvests and the further development and expansion of the farm.<sup>41</sup> As Geissler puts it, the people at Sellanraa are »surrounded by the great friendliness. ... You lie in a bosom and play with a warm mother's hand and suckle«,<sup>42</sup> and thus nature is represented as a nurturing mother. According to Geissler, the relation between humans and non-human nature at Sellanraa is characterized by harmony and cooperation: »See, there lies nature, it belongs to you and yours! Humans and nature do not attack each other, they agree with each other; they do not compete, they do not run a race for something, they accompany each other.«<sup>43</sup>

The rejection of urban life and the idealization of rural »nature« were, of course, nothing new at the time when *Markens grøde* was published, building as they do upon a long tradition stretching back at least to the Romantic period. A dualistic view of urban and rural spaces initially even dominated the research field of ecocriticism, with a focus on place and bonding with local »nature« (usually imagined as rural or »wild«) which, for a long time, prevented the development of more global ecocritical perspectives on environmental questions.<sup>44</sup> However, the narrator's and Geissler's view of the relation between the rural and the urban sphere is problematic for a variety of reasons. It lays itself open to arbitrary definitions of what is »natural« and thus good, and of what is »artificial« or »unnatural« and thus bad, and in this way ignores that such categories are culturally constructed. What is even more problematic, at least from an Anthropocene perspective, is that the idealization of non-human nature as friendly, welcoming and cooperating in human resource-utilization can favor a denial of negative consequences of anthropogenic environmental change.

Environmental change features prominently in the novel – indeed, it is one of the main themes of *Markens grøde*. Deforestation, the drainage of wetlands, and changes in the local species composition (and thus of biodiversity) are recurring motives throughout the novel. Yet while such transformations of the non-human environment tend to arouse negative associations today, in the novel they appear as inevitable and indeed highly desirable.

As soon as Isak arrives at the place where he wishes to establish his farm, he starts utilizing available resources and changing the environment: »He was just an undaunted worker; he harvested winter fodder for his goats, started to clear land, to break ground, to carry away stones, to build enclosures of stone.«<sup>45</sup> In the novel's first

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<sup>39</sup> »en hyggelig Elv«, «hyggelig av Utseende» (Hamsun 1917a, p. 13).

<sup>40</sup> »stor og venlig« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 134).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Hamsun 1917a, pp. 24, 37, 68, 82 and 190; Hamsun 1917b, p. 227.

<sup>42</sup> »omsluttet av den store Venlighet. ... Dere ligger ved en Barm og leker med en varm Morshaand og patter« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 221).

<sup>43</sup> »Se, der ligger Naturen, den er din og dines! Mennesket og Naturen bombarderer ikke hverandre, de gir hverandre Ret, de konkurrerer ikke, kapløper ikke efter noget, de følges ad« (ibid., p. 220).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Heise 2008, pp. 28, 41, and 51.

<sup>45</sup> »Han var bare en ufortrøden Arbeider, han slog Vinterfor til sine Gjeiter, begyndte at rydde Mark, at bryte Aker, at bære Sten bort, mure Gjærder av Sten« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 8).

part, Isak's clearing of the primeval forests with the aim of creating arable farmland and hay meadows is emphasized especially. In the beginning, there is »old and tall primeval forest standing right up to the houses«<sup>46</sup> but through Isak's constant work, soon »a huge wide hillside lay open for cultivation and he no longer cared about clear-cutting, but from then on only felled the oldest trees with dry tops«,<sup>47</sup> which is more convenient for selling the wood in the village. This deforestation process is recounted in exclusively positive terms, since it forms the precondition for the establishment of Isak's and Inger's farm. From Isak's point of view, what he does is not destructive at all, but simply a matter of »turning decayed forest into firewood«<sup>48</sup> and thus utilizing »waste«. Neither does he seem inclined towards sustainable long-term thinking concerning the utilization of forests. When asked to sell logs for the building of the telegraph line, Isak refuses to do that: »If he now sold poles, he would only get a little bit more money, a few more thalers, but he would have no forest, what was the advantage of that?«<sup>49</sup> What at first may seem like a sparing of trees out of a concern for sustainability is explained shortly thereafter by Isak's plan to build a sawmill at his farm, with which he intends to produce his own planks for the raising of further farm buildings.<sup>50</sup> Instead of reducing his use of timber, he later even resorts to buying logs himself, thus contributing to an even greater reduction of the primeval forest in the wider region.<sup>51</sup>

It is, however, not only through deforestation that farmland is created in *Markens grøde*. Drainage of wetlands also features prominently, and is described as necessary and laudable work. While one of the settlers, the indolent Brede, complains that he cannot get the wetlands on his property dry, others, such as Isak's neighbor Aksel, work harder and succeed through what in Isak's (and apparently also the narrator's) perspective is »the right way: digging, plowing, sowing«. <sup>52</sup> Isak says once about Brede's place, Breidablik, that it »could become something ... if the wetland is drained and dug up«<sup>53</sup> – which a brother of Aksel does after having bought Breidablik from Brede.<sup>54</sup> Isak and Sivert even drain wetlands that are not on their own ground, in an attempt to improve the track leading up to Sellanraa for horse-drawn carriages.<sup>55</sup>

Anthropogenic changes to the local species composition are described in similar terms as an improvement of the environment. Isak and Inger introduce many new species, both animals and plants, to the place of their settlement. Gradually, domesticated animals such as goats, sheep, cattle, horses, pigs, and chickens, and crops such as

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<sup>46</sup> »gammel og diger Urskog like ind paa Husene« (ibid., p. 26).

<sup>47</sup> »en stor vid Li laa alt aapen for Dyrking og han agtet ikke at snauhugge Marken mere, men herefter bare fælde de ældste Trær med tør Top« (ibid., p. 46).

<sup>48</sup> »gjøre forfalden Skog op i Favnved« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 56).

<sup>49</sup> »Om han nu solgte Stolper saa fik han bare litt mere Penger, nogen flere Daler, men han hadde ingen Skog, hvad var Fordelen ved det?« (ibid., p. 152).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. ibid., 213.

<sup>52</sup> »den rette Maaten: grøfte, pløie, saa« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 180). See also ibid., p. 181.

<sup>53</sup> »kunde bli til noget. ... Naar at myren blev grøftet og snudd« (ibid., p. 223).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Hamsun 1917b, p. 94.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 103.



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potatoes, grain, and turnips are brought to Sellanraa from the outside. This process, however, is not portrayed as detrimental to the species present at the place before the establishment of the farm. On the contrary – even wild species are described as appreciating the human-made changes and being attracted by them:

Now grass grew on the roof of the house, and even the barn's roof which was several years younger stood green. The forest's native, the field mouse, had long since moved into the shed. Tits and other small birds buzzed around on the settlement; there was blackcock up on the hillside, yes, magpie and crow had come here. But the strangest thing happened last summer, that seagulls came up from the coast, came up many miles from the coast and sat themselves on this ground in the wilderness. So famous had the settlement become among all creation!<sup>56</sup>

As is well known today, logging and the conversion of old-growth forests and wetlands into farmland are among the main drivers of species extinction, and the resulting greenhouse gas emissions contribute significantly to global warming, which in turn puts ecosystems under pressure.<sup>57</sup> In *Markens grøde*, however, the profound environmental change caused by humans never appears as potentially problematic. On the contrary – the narrator frequently expresses enthusiasm over it. He calls Isak and Inger »a benefit for each other, for the animals and for the Earth«,<sup>58</sup> and sees their work as an improvement of the land, benefiting both humans and non-humans: »The wilderness had become unrecognizable and inhabited, a blessing had come over it.«<sup>59</sup> Towards the end of the novel's first part, the narrator again praises the human-made transformation of the land: »Huge changes at Sellanraa. Yes, nothing was recognizable from the first time; here were now all kinds of houses and a sawmill and a grain mill, and the wilderness had become a land of humans. And more was lying ahead.«<sup>60</sup> The narrator thus acknowledges again that the man-made environment of Sellanraa is very different from what was there before Isak's arrival. In the Norwegian original, this passage includes a pun on the novel's title, calling the environment before human influence *Marken øde* (literally »the desolate land«), which is contrasted with its new status as a *Menneskeland* (»land of humans«). This phrasing leaves no doubt that the latter state is preferable by far to the former; that is, that a human-made environment is very much desirable.

Yet despite this acknowledgement (and approval) of profound anthropogenic environmental change, somewhat paradoxically the narrator also emphasizes the immutability of the »natural« environment: »In the wilderness, every season has its wonders, but always and unchangeable are the heavy, enormous sound of sky and earth, the

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<sup>56</sup> »Nu var det grodd Græs paa Stuetaket, ja endog Løetaket som var flere Aar yngre stod grønt. Skogens Indfødte Markmusen var for længe siden kommet i Skjaaen. Det svirret av Meiser og anden Smaafugl paa Nybygget, her var Orre opi Lien, ja her var kommet Skjur og Kraake. Men det forunderligste skete siste Sommer at det kom Maase op fra Kysten, kom mange Mil op fra Kysten og satte sig paa dette Jorde i Ødemarken. Saa kjendt var Nybygget blit blandt al Skapningen!« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 114).

<sup>57</sup> In the twentieth century alone, 60 to 90 percent of European wetlands were drained, and forest loss especially in the tropics increased tremendously; see McNeill 2000, pp. 183–189 and 229–236.

<sup>58</sup> »et Gode for hverandre, for Dyrene og for Jorden« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 27).

<sup>59</sup> »Ødemarken var blit ukjendelig og beboet, en Velsignelse hadde lagt sig over den« (ibid., p. 133).

<sup>60</sup> »Store Forandringer paa Sellanraa. Ja intet var at kjende igjen fra den første Tid, her var nu alskens Huser og Sag og Kværn, og Marken øde var blit et Menneskeland. Og mere forestod« (ibid., p. 209).

being surrounded on all sides, the forests' darkness, the trees' friendliness.«<sup>61</sup> The same contradictory view of constancy and change appears in the novel's second part. When the merchant Aronsen moves away from his trading post Storborg, his employee Andresen stays behind, and the narrator explains that Andresen somehow must have begun to bind himself to the place: »It must be Andresen who had changed, the wilderness had not.«<sup>62</sup> Yet despite this postulated unchanged character of the environment, only ten pages later, Isak reflects on the aspect of change in the following way: »Nothing was like before, the entire wilderness had changed.«<sup>63</sup> One explanation for this apparent contradiction may be that the narrator differentiates between anthropogenic environmental change (which he acknowledges and welcomes), and the environment at large (exemplified by sky, earth, and forests), which he perceives of as being in essence unchangeable. That anthropogenic changes take place on an entirely different scale than geological change is, of course, precisely one of the conventional notions of the environment that, according to Chakrabarty, cannot be maintained in the Anthropocene. The view that human changes to the non-human environment cannot affect the latter in detrimental ways may not be surprising in a more than a hundred-year-old novel that is organized around a settler narrative. However, in retrospect, it is precisely this view that appears as one of the ideological foundations for the development that brought the planet into the Anthropocene, with its highly problematic forms of environmental and climatic change on a global scale.<sup>64</sup> The non-human environment appears in *Markens grøde* as infinitely customizable to human needs. Contrary to what Wærp claims, therefore, *Markens grøde* does not open up »a different view of nature«<sup>65</sup> so much as precisely the one that led humanity into the predicament of the Anthropocene.

### Environmental Risk and Detrimental Change

To be sure, there are forms of environmental risks and of detrimental change mentioned in the novel. Yet their narrative function is mainly to confirm the beneficial or at least unproblematic character of human-made changes to the non-human environment. The surroundings of Sellanraa seem to be basically free from any non-desirable aspects. Once a sheep disappears and Isak wonders what may have happened to it: »Is the bear out? Has the wolf come over the mountains from Sweden and Finland? None of this; when Isak finds the sheep, it is stuck in a cleft with a broken leg and the udder torn open.«<sup>66</sup> Isak eradicates even this minor risk by filling the cleft with stones, again modifying the environment to serve the needs of humans and farm animals (throughout the novel, no predatory animals come to Sellanraa, with bears and wolves thus remaining an imagined, not a real risk). The only other environmental risk featured in *Markens grøde* is connected to forest work and the weather. One winter,

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<sup>61</sup> »I Marken har hver Aarstid sine Undere, men altid og uforanderlig den tunge, umaatelige Lyd fra Himmel og Jord, Omringelsen til alle Kanter, Skogmørket, Trærnes Venlighed« (ibid.).

<sup>62</sup> »Det maatte være Andresen som hadde forandret sig, Marken var det ikke« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 159).

<sup>63</sup> »Intet var som før, hele Marken var forandret« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 169).

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Morton 2016, p. 58.

<sup>65</sup> »et annet syn på naturen« (Wærp 2010, p. 122).

<sup>66</sup> »Er Bjørnen ute? Er Vargen kommet over Fjældet fra Sverige og Finland? Ingen av Delene, da Isak finder Sauen staar den fast i en Bergklype med et brukket Ben og oprevet Jur« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 69).

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when Aksel is felling trees, a storm rises: »A large pine stands and sways on its roots; man wants to have it one way, the storm another, man loses.«<sup>67</sup> Aksel gets stuck under the trunk (with his one leg, like that of the sheep in the novel's first part, stuck in a cleft), and almost freezes to death before Oline finds him hours later. It is, however, rather clear in this episode that the risk for Aksel would have been much lower had his housekeeper, Brede's daughter Barbro, been at home (instead of travelling to Bergen against his wish), since she would have noticed his absence and found him, whereas it is only luck that Oline comes by on precisely that day. There are thus only very few environmental risks for the settlers, and these can easily be mitigated.

The only detrimental forms of environmental change mentioned in *Markens grøde* are droughts and the damage wrought by the mining activity in the mountains close to Sellanraa. During one of their first years on their new farm, Isak and Inger already experience a drought that ruins the entire grain harvest and seriously diminishes the hay harvest: »The drought had now lasted for seven weeks and the heat was heavy ... Where was an end to all this?«<sup>68</sup> However, this does not put an end to the new settlement: »Capable people surely survived one bad year in the wilderness. And moreover – when nine weeks had passed, plenty of rain came.«<sup>69</sup> The potato harvest turns out to be quite good, and a second year of drought does not cause serious problems either: »It was bad enough, but it was not hardship.«<sup>70</sup> No scarcity occurs, and the new settlement proves to be resilient against weather-related fluctuation. What is more, whereas in these two first years of drought, Isak has no actual means of mitigating the detrimental effects, when another drought occurs several years later, it is counteracted through the use of technology: Geissler, seeing that »the meadows started to turn gray«<sup>71</sup>, installs an irrigation system that ensures »that the harvest was saved on Sellanraa.«<sup>72</sup> In this way, human technology masters problematic weather, and the modified, enhanced farm environment remains »friendly« and profitable. The only »natural« form of detrimental environmental or climatic change in *Markens grøde* thus appears to be easily controllable through human ingenuity, and does not pose any limit to human economic endeavor.<sup>73</sup> However, the belief that, through modern technological means, any forms of problematic change can be mastered is increasingly proving to be wrong in light of the manifold unintended environmental and climatic changes resulting from human activity in the Anthropocene.<sup>74</sup>

While the weather fluctuation in *Markens grøde* (unlike the global warming that contemporary »cli-fi« novels focus on) is not caused by humans, the environmental damage left by the mining activity in the mountains above

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<sup>67</sup> »En Tømmerfuru staar og svaier paa Roten, Mennesket vil ha den en Vei, Stormen en anden, Mennesket taper« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 45).

<sup>68</sup> »Tørken hadde nu varet i syv Uker og Varmen var svær ... Hvor var Enden paa alt dette?« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 41).

<sup>69</sup> »ett Uaar overlevet nok dyktige Mennesker i Marken. Og desuten – da ni Uker var gaat saa kom det rigtig velsignet med Regn« (ibid., p. 43).

<sup>70</sup> »det var altsaa galt nok, men det var ikke Nød« (ibid., p. 53).

<sup>71</sup> »Engene de begyndte at bli graa« (ibid., p. 193).

<sup>72</sup> »at Avlingen blev berget paa Sellanraa« (ibid., p. 197).

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Bär 2016, p. 183.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Clark 2015, p. 15.

## Reinhard Hennig

Sellanraa is entirely man-made, and described in rather negative terms as »the mere misery and devastation on the abandoned mountains: machines lying around and rusting, material, vehicles, much of it under the open sky, everything was desolate.«<sup>75</sup> The landscape there is now characterized by »huge holes in the ground«; it is »a wilderness of abandoned pits«,<sup>76</sup> and the mountains are »shot to pieces«.<sup>77</sup> Geissler calls the remains of the mining activity »a city ruin« and states that »humans have raised this right against themselves«.<sup>78</sup>

However, despite this negative judgement, it is clear from the story that the entire mining project would never have started had Isak not himself collected copper-bearing stones in the mountains, thus drawing attention to the metal deposit, and had Geissler not taken the initiative by buying the mountain area from Isak and then selling it to speculators. Isak and Geissler are thus themselves responsible for the start of the mining activity, and they both profit financially from it. As Geissler himself seems to interpret the failing of the copper mine, the entire enterprise was just a game that he himself has won, making it possible for him to mock the owners of the mine who had been hoping for enormous revenues. The entire mining episode appears to mainly fulfill the narrative function of demonstrating the futility of speculative investments in forms of resource extraction that have nothing to do with agriculture.<sup>79</sup>

Notably, however, the mining, although leaving a visibly destroyed landscape, does not affect Isak and his family negatively in any way – a highly unrealistic scenario, considering what residents living in the vicinity of mines usually experience. In the novel, the mine is finally abandoned because it is outcompeted by new mines in Montana.<sup>80</sup> If this short remark in *Markens grøde* is set in the context of environmental history, then it cannot go unnoticed that the remainders of the copper mining in Montana, started in the second half of the nineteenth century, still pose immense environmental problems today. The mining waste that inevitably accumulated at every mine has left a toxic legacy containing substances such as arsenic, lead, and cadmium, which leak into the groundwater and rivers, and are poisonous for fish, farm animals and humans alike.<sup>81</sup>

Those responsible for the mining in the mountains above Isak's and Inger's farm, like the companies that operated the historical mines in Montana, do not perform any form of cleanup – they simply abandon both mining waste and equipment. As becomes clear from the novel, the copper mine is located *above* the mountain lake from which Isak and Sivert regularly catch fish, and from which a river runs down to Sellanraa. Unknowingly, therefore, the people at Sellanraa are likely to have become victims of what Rob Nixon calls slow violence – »a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and

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<sup>75</sup> »den bare Elendighet og Ødelæggelse paa det forlatte Fjæld: Maskiner som laa og rustet, Materiel, Kjøredoninger, meget av det under aapen Himmel, alt var trøstesløst« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 142).

<sup>76</sup> »store Huller i Jorden«, «en ødemark av forlatte Gruver« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 215).

<sup>77</sup> »skutt sønder og sammen« (ibid., p. 169).

<sup>78</sup> »en Byruin«; »Dette har nu Menneskene reist op stik imot sig selv« (ibid., p. 219).

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Storfjell 2009, p. 276; Bär 2016, pp. 117–123 and 194–197.

<sup>80</sup> Hamsun 1917b, p. 224.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Diamond 2005, pp. 35–41.

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space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.«<sup>82</sup> The mine has left a toxic legacy that endangers important food resources at Sellanraa, and that will continuously and invisibly affect the farmers there and all of their descendants. Geissler may thus be right in his assertion that the mining activity goes against humans themselves, but neither he, nor Isak, nor the narrator is aware that, at least from a long-term perspective, the actual victims are the farmers and the indigenous population living in the area, not the mining company or those who lost money on speculation. The way in which the mining activity is narratively framed in *Markens grøde* therefore contributes to ignorance of the detrimental long-term consequences of anthropogenic environmental change. The mining episode confirms the view in *Markens grøde* that human transformation of the environment occurs at levels that are insignificant and cannot lead to any forms of unintended, problematic changes at larger scales of space and time. Irrespective of what humans do in *Markens grøde*, the non-human environment at large remains »friendly« and »welcoming«. If anything, this is a view that would make it possible for humans to continue with »business as usual«, rather than provide incentives for rethinking their relation towards the non-human environment. It is also a view that becomes especially problematic when it is linked to questions of scale – that is, to deep history and to the species level.

### **Deep History**

At least two different forms of perceiving and experiencing time are narratively represented in *Markens grøde*. The social and technological context in which the plot of *Markens grøde* unfolds makes it possible to identify its temporal setting as the second half of the nineteenth century. Contrary to the narrator's statement that Isak and Inger are living »in the age of the wooden spoon«,<sup>83</sup> industrialization and modernization feature throughout *Markens grøde* as processes that are not only changing society and human-environment interrelations, but also the human relation to time. Geissler, talking depreciatingly about his own son who works in industry, calls him »the lightning, the swift contemporary human«. <sup>84</sup> Geissler rejects this sort of mentality, using as another example people such as the engineer leading the work at the copper mine: »The problem is that they do not want to walk in step with life, they want to walk faster than it.«<sup>85</sup>

This acceleration that makes humans lose their »natural« relation to time and »life« is contrasted in the novel with the farmers' way of life. The latter appears timeless, as it were, and Geissler, talking to Sivert, even sets it into the context of geological time by relating it to mountains: »You look every day at some blue mountains ... They stand deeply sunken in prehistory, but you have them as comrades.«<sup>86</sup> According to Geissler, it is the farmers who »sustain life. From generation to generation, you exist in sheer breeding, and when you die, the new brood takes

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<sup>82</sup> Nixon 2011, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> »i Træskeens Tidsalder« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 20).

<sup>84</sup> »Lynet, det snare Nutidsmenneske« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 220).

<sup>85</sup> »Feilen er at de vil ikke gaa i Takt med Livet, de vil gaa fortere end det« (ibid., p. 222).

<sup>86</sup> »dere ser hver Dag paa nogen blaa Fjæld ... de staar dypt nedsunkne i Fortid; men dere har dem til Kamerater« (ibid., p. 220).

over. This is what is meant by the eternal life.«<sup>87</sup> In accordance with Geissler's claims, the narrator describes the life of farmers as following the rhythms of nature and as not being subject to any change. About Isak, he states that »Isak trampled his booming tread and cultivated his soil; nothing interrupted him«,<sup>88</sup> and that »his life went from one work to another according to the seasons; from the soil to the forest and from the forest to the soil again.«<sup>89</sup>

In addition, the narrator repeatedly makes it clear that, although Isak as a person exists at a particular point of time (the nineteenth century), his way of life reaches far back into the distant past, and will (or should) also be the way of the future: »He is a dweller in the wilderness through and through, and a merciless tiller of the soil. Someone risen from prehistory who leads the way to the future, a man from the first agriculture, a man of the settlement period, nine hundred years old and again the man of the day.«<sup>90</sup> The narrator thus links Isak's agricultural work both to a distant past and to the future, as is also indicated by his comment that »his [Isak's] ancestors had surely sown crops for several hundreds of years«,<sup>91</sup> and by calling Isak's purchase of farmland from the state »this important deal ..., crucial for their descendants maybe for uncounted generations.«<sup>92</sup> Thus, obviously, any long-term perspective in *Markens grøde* is connected to agriculture.<sup>93</sup>

Isak appears as the exemplary farmer – something that is clearly expressed when the narrator describes Isak sowing his field: »See, now these grains will surely sprout and turn into ears and more grain, and such it is over the entire earth when grain is sown. In Palestine, in America, in Gudbrandsdalen – oh, how wide the world is, and the tiny little square in which Isak went and sowed was in the middle of everything.«<sup>94</sup> In this way, farming appears as a phenomenon that is both global and eternal, in contrast to the volatility of mining and industry. Indeed, agriculture is portrayed as the precondition for human life in general: »The yield of the soil ... was the origin of everything, the only source.«<sup>95</sup> This belief even leads the narrator to deny any human existence *before* agriculture. Right in the beginning of the novel, the question of who has made the long path through the wetlands and the woods is answered by »the man, the human being, the first one who was here«.<sup>96</sup> This man is likely to be

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<sup>87</sup> »opholder Livet. Fra Slægt til Slægt er dere til i lutter Avl, og naar dere dør tar den nye Avl fat. Det er dette som menes med det evige Liv« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 221).

<sup>88</sup> »Isak trampet sin dundrende Gang og dyrket sin Jord, intet forstyrret ham« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 68).

<sup>89</sup> »Hans Liv gik fra ett Arbeide til et andet efter Aarstiderne, fra Jorden til Skogen og fra Skogen til Jorden igjen« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 89).

<sup>90</sup> »Han er Markbo i Sind og Skind og Jordbruker uten Naade. En Gjenopstanden fra Fortiden som peker Fremtiden ut, en Mand fra det første Jordbruk, Landnamsmann, ni Hundrede Aar gammel og igjen Dagens Mand« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 228).

<sup>91</sup> »I flere Hundrede Aar hadde vel hans Forfædre saadd Korn« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 36).

<sup>92</sup> »den viktige Handel ..., avgjørende for deres Efterkommere kanskje i utallige Slægtled« (ibid., p. 57).

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Andersen 2011, p. 104.

<sup>94</sup> »Se nu spirer nok disse Kornøiene og blir til Aks og mere Korn, og slik er det over hele Jorden naar at Korn saaes. I Jødeland, i Amerika, i Gudbrandsdalen – aa hvor Verden den er vid, og den ørlille Ruten Isak gik og saadde paa den var i Midten av alt« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 37).

<sup>95</sup> »Markens Grøde ... var Altings Ophav, den eneste Kilde« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 160).

<sup>96</sup> »Manden, Mennesket, den første som var her« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 5).

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identified with Isak, and thus with the first farmer in the area, while Sami reindeer herders are said to have come only *after* him. In this way, a reversal of cultural history takes place, in which the sedentary lifestyle of the farmer evolved prior to nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles.

Agriculture is, however, only a very recent phenomenon when seen in the context of deep history and from a species perspective. Modern humans (the species of *homo sapiens*) evolved at least 200,000 years ago, or, as recent finds indicate, possibly even more than 300,000 years ago,<sup>97</sup> and thus during the geological epoch of the Pleistocene, often called the Ice Age. The precondition for the replacement of hunting and gathering by farming (the so-called Agricultural Revolution) was, however, the transition from the Pleistocene to the much warmer and climatically relatively stable epoch of the Holocene roughly 12,000 years ago. In Norway, farming only evolved gradually from around 4000 B.C., while during the 5,000 years of human presence before that, hunting and gathering characterized the life of the human population there.<sup>98</sup>

It cannot be expected, of course, that a novel such as *Markens grøde* would contain a long-term perspective covering thousands or even hundreds of thousands of years. Representing such geological timescales constitutes a narrative challenge that even contemporary novels struggle with.<sup>99</sup> But in *Markens grøde*, the narrator and Geissler claim to apply such a long-term view on humanity, which results, however, in the untenable assertion that the original (and thus »natural«) human way of life is that of the farmer. To consider such an assertion problematic, one does not need to go as far as Timothy Morton and claim that the invention of agriculture in the Neolithic Period necessarily resulted in the transition into the Anthropocene.<sup>100</sup> As Chakrabarty emphasizes, the development that led to the current environmental and climatic crisis was not inevitable or already preprogrammed in the first human civilizations.<sup>101</sup> Yet to depict farming as the only »natural« human way of life and indeed as the origin of humanity in general, as is done in *Markens grøde*, constitutes a denial of the deep history of the human species. Moreover, this idealization of farming appears as rather shortsighted when it is seen in the context of the novel's simultaneous endorsement of both economic and population growth.

### **Accelerating Growth at Sellanraa**

As the discussion of *Markens grøde* in relation to deep history has shown, the narrator and Geissler see in Isak the archetypical farmer, and indeed the archetypical human being. Isak is only one single farmer, cultivating land on a relatively large but, from a global perspective, insignificant area of land. Yet he is to be considered as exemplary – as representing the standard for the entire species of *homo sapiens*. This gives his individual actions a much wider, collective and indeed planetary significance. As Clark puts it: »The Anthropocene is itself an

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<sup>97</sup> Cf. Callaway 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Myhre & Øye 2002, p. 16.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Gosh 2016, p. 59–62.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Morton 2016, p. 54.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Chakrabarty 2009, p. 216.

emergent ›scale effect‹. That is, at a certain, indeterminate threshold, numerous human actions, insignificant in themselves ... come together to form a new, imponderable physical event, altering the basic ecological cycles of the planet.«<sup>102</sup> This also means that if Isak was a dropout from society trying to live on the lowest material level possible, the implications would be different than they are when Isak is the main driving power in a narrative focused on development that takes the form of accelerating growth and occurs in tight interconnection with an industrialized market economy.

In a settler narrative such as *Markens grøde*, it may not be surprising that resource colonization and following economic growth form central elements from the beginning. As soon as Isak has decided about the place for his future farm, he starts collecting bark, which he dries and sells in the village in exchange for food and tools.<sup>103</sup> This is the beginning of a constant further development and extension of the farm, of farming-related activities, and of an exchange of goods between the farm and the market. The narrator emphasizes throughout the novel how Isak permanently buys new tools, raises new buildings, clears more forest, ploughs more soil, enlarges and diversifies his livestock, improves infrastructure, and increases production at his farm. There can be no doubt that *Markens grøde* is a progress narrative,<sup>104</sup> in which, through hard work and target-oriented resource utilization, at a previously uninhabited and unused place, a huge farm develops that soon even surpasses older farms in the wider region. For far from limiting himself to traditional modes of land use, Isak actively advances a profound modernization of agriculture at Sellanraa, which he primarily achieves through mechanization, using machines that he receives from urban industrial production sites: The blades for his sawmill, his harrow, his hay tedder, and not least his mowing machine are, unlike the smaller tools he acquires in the beginning, not made by the blacksmith in the nearby village, but products of an urban industry. Therefore, contrary to the narrator's claim that Isak and Inger live ›in the age of the wooden spoon‹ and that Sellanraa is nearly self-sufficient,<sup>105</sup> the farm is part of a modern, industry-based market economy, without which its development would be impossible.<sup>106</sup>

The probably most central motif throughout *Markens grøde* is economic growth. ›Sellanraa lies highest up in the common land and just grows, grows in buildings and farmland.«<sup>107</sup> Interestingly, it becomes clear relatively early in the novel that there is no upper limit to this growth: The farm and its output grow without any end in sight to their development and extension. This is made explicitly clear by the narrator, in an explanation of why Isak has started employing workers from abroad, who extract stones for a new shed: ›The turf hut was getting both too small and too poor for the livestock, a stone shed with a double wall and a proper manure pit were due. But there

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<sup>102</sup> Clark 2015, p. 72.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Hamsun 1917a, p. 7.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Svensen 1999, pp. 244–249.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Hamsun 1917b, p. 43.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Eglinger 2010, p. 95–97.

<sup>107</sup> ›Sellanraa ligger da øverst opi Almeningen og bare vokser, vokser i Huser og i Jorde« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 63).



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was so much that was due, one thing led to another all the time, there was in any case never an end to the construction work.«<sup>108</sup> The latter statement is repeated almost word for word at a later point.<sup>109</sup>

Contrary to what might be expected if *Markens grøde* were indeed supposed to deliver »the recipe for the »simple life«<sup>110</sup> in the novel this constant growth appears not as problematic, but rather as highly desirable. The only character who ever asks about potential limits to growth is Oline: »What are you building? Don't you have enough?«<sup>111</sup> she already asks, early in the novel's first part, and a little later, when she is shown how much the livestock at Sellanraa has multiplied, she exclaims: »Where shall this end?«<sup>112</sup> Later on, when the farm has grown even more, she remarks, »Here you've got so much of everything and a heavenly host of animals in the stable, but you don't have enough!«<sup>113</sup>

To be sure, there are some hints that Isak himself is slightly concerned about such questions. When, one winter, Isak is sitting in the vicinity of his farm and contemplating further expansion of the agricultural area, he sees a mystic being that he assumes to be the Devil. For a short moment, Isak is bewildered, but then reassures himself that he has done nothing sinful: »What did he [the Devil] want here? What had he surprised Isak doing? To sit and cultivate soil in one's thought, and it was impossible that that would have offended him.«<sup>114</sup> Isak brushes away any doubts and, after this encounter, continues the expansion of his farm even more resolutely than before. In the novel's second part, when Sellanraa is already a huge farmstead, Isak vindicates another addition to his farm:

He had a sawmill and a grain mill and a shieling, should he not have a smithy? Just a small smithy, as a relief, as an emergency relief; it was such a long way to the village when the sledge hammer curled at the edge or a pair of horseshoes needed grinding. Just so much that he could help himself: a forge and a smithy, should he not have that?<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> »Gammen til Dyrene blev baade for liten og for daarlig, et Stenfjøs av dobbelt Mur og med ordentlig Gjødelskjælder forestod. Men det var saa meget som forestod, det ene drog det andre efter sig hele Tiden, det blev ialfald aldrig Slut med Byggingen« (ibid., pp. 62–63).

<sup>109</sup> »I Grunden saa blev det jo aldrig Slut med Byggingen paa Sellanraa« (ibid., p. 163).

<sup>110</sup> »oppskriften på »det enkle liv«« (Wærp 2017, p. 6).

<sup>111</sup> »Hvad dokker bygger? Har dokker ikke nok?« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 32).

<sup>112</sup> »Hvor skal det ende!« (ibid., p. 74).

<sup>113</sup> »Her har du fuldt op av alt Slag og en Himlens Stjernehær av Dyr i Fjøset, men du har ikke nok!« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 122). That this criticism of economic growth is expressed by Oline, who shows a marked closeness to the Sami and may even have a Sami background herself, could, in line with Kristin Jernsletten (2003), be interpreted as a shining through of the voice of the indigenous population whose land is being colonized against the in *Markens grøde* otherwise dominant settler narrative that, being based on the »myth of the empty lands« (Nixon 2011, p. 236) serves to obliterate the history of the colonized people's earlier presence and land use.

<sup>114</sup> »hvad vilde han her? Hvad hadde han netop grepet Isak i? At sitte og dyrke Jord i Tankerne og det kunde umulig ha forarget ham« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 215).

<sup>115</sup> »Han hadde Sag og Kværn og Sommerfjøs, skulde han ikke ha Smie? Bare en liten Smie, til Hjælp, til Nødhjælp, det var saa langt til Bygden naar Slæggen kruset sig eller et Par Hesteko skulde kvæsses. Altsaa bare saavidt han kunde berge sig: en Avl og et Smiested, skulde han ikke ha det?« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 63).

This long, apologetic explanation for another desired upgrade to the farm only makes sense if Isak, at least subconsciously, is wondering about possible limits to the growth of Sellanraa. However, if he indeed has any doubts related to this, these are brushed away immediately when he is given a mobile forge from the copper mine, the same day as Geissler presents him with a hay turning machine.<sup>116</sup>

The acquisition of material possessions and the purchase and consumption of goods, which feature frequently as motifs in *Markens grøde*, are indeed often connected to a moral assessment of »how much is enough«. Tellingly, however, there is never any clear answer to this question. On the contrary: Every statement (usually by the narrator) that Isak and Inger now have reached a state at which all their needs are satisfied is ironically disproved immediately afterwards by accounts of further plans, projects, and purchases. Even very early after they have moved in together, it is stated that »there was, in short, nothing lacking! ... They were frugal, they were living in the age of the wooden spoon and thrived.«<sup>117</sup> What seems like an idealization of a simple life with few material possessions, is, however, proven wrong by a subsequent description of an expansion of the farm and its buildings. This basic pattern of postulated modesty and its following narrative contradiction is repeated many times throughout *Markens grøde*. A listing of tools for farm work purchased by Isak, for example, is concluded with the statement »Splendid, oh, complete equipment, now nothing was lacking any more«,<sup>118</sup> only to be followed by the mention of a plan for purchasing a loom as well as by a description of a further extension of the fields at Sellanraa.

To be sure, in *Markens grøde* forms of unnecessary consumption are in most cases discursively linked to the city and its allegedly detrimental influence on human morals and behavior. The narrator leaves no doubt, for example, that even in the village, consumption levels are higher than at the farm, while consumption is portrayed as being even more excessive in cities such as Bergen and Trondheim, where both Elseus and Barbro get used to unnecessary luxuries that serve to evoke admiration from others.<sup>119</sup> This wasteful and ostentatious urban mentality is explicitly contrasted with the peasant's definition of basic needs:

The farmer did not grieve over the treasures he did not get: Art, newspapers, luxuries, politics were all worth precisely what people were ready to pay for them, not more; the produce of the soil, on the other hand, that had to be obtained at whatsoever price; it was the beginning of everything, the only source.<sup>120</sup>

According to the narrator, the abandonment of the mining activity in the region therefore does not mean any real loss for the farmers, since they still have agriculture: »There was not so much money in it, no, but all of life's

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<sup>116</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 80 and 85.

<sup>117</sup> »det var snart sagt ikke den Ting som manglet! ... de var nøisomme, de levte i Træskeens Tidsalder og hadde det godt« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 20).

<sup>118</sup> »Storartet, aa fuld Utrustning, nu manglet intet mere« (*ibid.*, p. 35).

<sup>119</sup> Cf., for example, *ibid.*, pp. 160, 174 and 258.

<sup>120</sup> »Markboen gjorde sig ikke ondt av de Herligheter han ikke fik: Kunst, Aviser, Luksus, Politik var værd nøiagtig det som Menneskene vilde betale for det, ikke mere; Markens Grøde derimot den maatte skaffes til hvilkensomhelst Pris, den var Altings Ophav, den eneste Kilde« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 160).

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necessities, absolutely all.«<sup>121</sup> Geissler also affirms contentedness and modesty as the basic principles of rural life in his speech to Sivert towards the end of the novel's second part.<sup>122</sup>

Yet what are these necessities of life? The phrase is reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden. Or, Life in the Woods* (1854), in which the narrator moves to a small cabin away from town, living »a primitive and frontier life ... to learn what are the gross necessities of life«.<sup>123</sup> The criticism levelled at modern luxury consumption in *Walden* certainly shows some parallels to that in *Markens grøde*. Yet while in *Walden*, a simple life with as few possessions as possible is indeed idealized, in *Markens grøde*, it is not.

It needs to be said that the discourse about needs and consumption in *Markens grøde* is very ambivalent, vague, and often ironic, and therefore invites widely differing interpretations. The narrator's repeated condemnation of urban luxury consumption, and the postulated modesty of rural life do not fit at all with what actually occurs on the story level. An example is coffee consumption: Isak often shows himself to be skeptical towards it; he considers coffee a foreign commodity that one can do without,<sup>124</sup> and he gets mad at Oline when she asks him for coffee, which for him is »a dream and a fairy tale ..., a rainbow!«<sup>125</sup> Coffee consumption is often associated in the novel with idleness and a questionable character (it is, for example, certainly no coincidence that Brede and his family have a special affinity for coffee drinking). But looked at more closely, it turns out that Inger actually brings coffee with her to her very first encounter with Isak, and they enjoy drinking it together without even the slightest hint of criticism on either Isak's or the narrator's part.<sup>126</sup> Also, when Inger brings coffee with her on her return from Trondheim, this is not condemned at all.<sup>127</sup>

It could, of course, be argued that it is not Isak himself who buys the coffee, and that its function as a motif is to expose »affected behavior and vanity from the woman's side«,<sup>128</sup> in a similar way as when Inger expresses regret that Oline has not seen all the new things that Isak has bought in the village. Yet Isak feels exactly the same desire to show off his material possessions: »Oh, but he would certainly not have had anything against it if Oline had seen the splendor.«<sup>129</sup> This directs attention to a very important aspect: Isak, despite his permanently emphasized »naturalness«, is himself very keen on being admired, and he is more than willing to evoke this admiration through ostentatious behavior involving the purchase and consumption of material goods. Isak loves to impress Inger, which is why, when she returns home from prison, he boasts about the growth of their livestock and the riches he has managed to accumulate during the years when she was away: »It was truly a pleasure to

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<sup>121</sup> »Det var ikke saa meget med Penger nei, men det var med alle Livets Nødvendigheter, med absolut alle« (ibid., p. 159).

<sup>122</sup> Cf. ibid., pp. 220–221.

<sup>123</sup> Thoreau 1995 [1854], p. 7.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Hamsun 1917a, p. 40.

<sup>125</sup> »en Drøm og et Æventyr ..., en Regnbue!« (ibid., pp. 118–119).

<sup>126</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 12.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 142.

<sup>128</sup> »Idel Fjas og Forfængelighet fra Kvindens Side« (ibid., p. 35).

<sup>129</sup> »Aa men han hadde visst intet hat imot at Oline hadde set Herligheten« (ibid., pp. 35–36).

amaze Inger and to turn her into a rich woman.«<sup>130</sup> A lament about the expenses connected to Eleseus' and Sivert's school attendance in the village is directly followed by an account of how Isak walks to the merchant, stating that »I have become so vain that I want to give my wife a ring.«<sup>131</sup> It takes the merchant no effort to convince Isak that a silver ring would not suffice and that only gold would do, for Isak »had surely himself at heart been thinking of a golden ring.«<sup>132</sup> Likewise, Isak's endless construction work at Sellanraa does not primarily serve the fulfillment of pressing needs, but rather to cause »amazement for Inger and the children«<sup>133</sup> and to create news »for Oline to run with [and spread] again«,<sup>134</sup> thus even evoking admiration (and possibly envy) in wider society. Impressing others and being admired by them thus appear as the main motivation behind Isak's hard work, his never-ending construction activity, and his permanent expansion of the farm.

Interestingly, while the narrator condemns such vanity when it appears in an urban context, he humorously accepts it when it is displayed by Isak himself. This is nowhere clearer than towards the end of the novel's first part, when the narrator states that Isak, in contrast to urban dwellers, is protected by his rural life from all forms of vanity:

Had Isak been living down in the village, maybe the wider world would have somewhat influenced even him; there was so much splendor, such elegant circumstances; he would have bought unnecessary things and worn red Sunday best on working days. Here in the countryside he was protected from all forms of exaggeration, he lived in clean air.<sup>135</sup>

Only a little later, however, this claim by the narrator is proven to have been wrong (or meant ironically), when Isak demonstrates his newly bought mowing machine at the farm: »Oh, how powerful and truly proud Isak now is, sitting freely high up, in Sunday best and fully dressed up.«<sup>136</sup> Isak is, thus, not only showing precisely the sort of affected behavior that the narrator previously ascribed to alienated, decadent city dwellers (including dressing in his best clothes on a workday). He is even explicitly said to be longing for the neighbors to come up so that he can show them his new machine and boast how expensive it was.<sup>137</sup> In this way, Isak, despite being portrayed as the most »rooted« and untainted character in the novel, displays precisely the sort of vanity and exaggeration that he is said to be immune from.

This, then, also means that, despite the way it may seem at first glance, in *Markens grøde* consumption going far beyond the fulfillment of basic human needs is not something that is limited to the urban sphere, or that affects

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<sup>130</sup> »Det var i Sandhet trøisomt at gjøre Inger forundret og gjøre hende til en rik Kone« (ibid., p. 143).

<sup>131</sup> »Jeg er blit saa hoffærdig at jeg vil gi Konen min en Fingerring« (ibid., p. 160).

<sup>132</sup> »hadde visst inderst inde selv tænkt paa en Guldring« (ibid., p. 161).

<sup>133</sup> »en Forundring paa Inger og Børnene« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 213).

<sup>134</sup> »noget for Oline at rænde med igjen« (ibid., p. 221).

<sup>135</sup> »Hadde Isak levet nede i Bygden vilde kanske den store Verden ha indvirket litt endog paa ham, der var saa meget gildt, saa fine Forhold, han vilde ha kjøpt Unødvendigheter og gaat med rød Helgeskjorte til Hverdag. Her i Marken var han værnet mot alle Overdrivelser, han levet i klar Luft« (ibid., p. 266).

<sup>136</sup> »Aa hvor Isak nu er mægtig og rigtig stolt, sittende frit høit oppe, i Helgeklær og fuld Puds« (ibid., p. 276).

<sup>137</sup> See ibid., pp. 277–278.

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only those who at some point in their life have come under the influence of urban culture and thus become »uprooted« and »unnatural«. On the contrary: The desire to be admired by others appears as an inherent trait even in those who are most »natural« and »rooted« in the countryside, and thus, in *Markens grøde*, can only be interpreted as being a part of *human nature* – as something that exists in every human being. It does not originate from urban centers, as the narrator would have the reader believe, but is something that is already there in every human individual, irrespective of whether he or she is living in the countryside or in the city.

Human nature, then, is also the explanation for why there can be no end to the pursuit of growth at Sellanraa: The characters in *Markens grøde* obviously do not see any other way to fulfill their desire to be admired than to display ostentatious behavior, which again necessitates constant economic growth and consumption that far exceeds the fulfillment of basic human needs. The pursuit of human happiness thus goes along with a constant increase in production and consumption, and necessarily also in resource use, environmental pollution and degradation. *Markens grøde* can therefore be said to provide one possible explanation for why and how the Great Acceleration started: It was not technological innovation or the transition to fossil fuels that set the stage for it, but rather competition among humans for admiration and appreciation that necessitated limitless growth. If one accepts these premises, then the logical conclusion is that what brought us into the Anthropocene was human nature, and that the transition to this new and highly problematic geological epoch was indeed unavoidable, at least with humans behaving in a »natural« way – which, of course, is posited as an ideal in *Markens grøde*.

### **Human Population Growth and Unintended Consequences**

Although the postulated human inclination towards ostentatious consumption is judged in ambiguous ways in *Markens grøde*, another aspect connected to human nature and leading to acceleration is not: human population growth. There can be no doubt that in *Markens grøde*, growth at least of the *rural* population is solely framed as »natural« and desirable.<sup>138</sup> The narrator celebrates how both the livestock and the humans at Sellanraa multiply, emphasizing that Inger »was so fertile«.<sup>139</sup> When, after her imprisonment for infanticide, she gets pregnant again, this is called »the greatest mercy after the crimes she had committed«.<sup>140</sup> Isak himself considers every new child a gift of God.<sup>141</sup> In accordance with this view, the central characters in *Markens grøde* have far more children than would be needed to sustain the status quo of the human population. Inger and Isak have five children (of which only four grow up). However, it is likely that they would have had considerably more offspring, had Inger not already been relatively old when they met each other, and had she not spent five years in prison. Oline is a mother of seven (all of whom have grown up), and Brede and his wife have at least six or seven children.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> For a discussion of this aspect in relation to the nationalistic biopolitical discourses of the time when Hamsun wrote *Markens grøde*, see Andersen 2011, pp. 93–129.

<sup>139</sup> »var saa frodig« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 49).

<sup>140</sup> »det største Miskund efter alt hun hadde forbrutt« (ibid., p. 218).

<sup>141</sup> Cf. ibid., pp. 30 and 221.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. ibid., pp. 77 and 265; Hamsun 1917b, pp. 11 and 200.

The ideology of population growth in *Markens grøde* goes along with a condemnation of abortion and child murder,<sup>143</sup> with the latter being called »so unnatural, so impossible«<sup>144</sup> in the context of Inger's infanticide. The wife of the *lensmann*, Mrs. Heyerdahl, is ridiculed for her commitment to female self-determination and birth control; for instance, by means of repeated derogatory comments on her failure to live up to her intention not to have any children.<sup>145</sup> The novel also associates abortion and child murder especially with urban dwellers, who, according to Barbro »did not want to have more than one child or two at most«,<sup>146</sup> and who therefore do not consider pregnancy termination or infanticide to be morally problematic. Considering the narrator's general anti-urban stance, it is clear that such views and behavior are to be condemned from his perspective.

The most avid advocate of human population growth in the countryside is Geissler, who actively supports the colonization of new land for farming, among other things by giving modern agricultural machines to both Isak and Axel. Geissler repeatedly makes favorable comments on the establishment of new farms, and hopes that »in the end here will be a densely settled hamlet.«<sup>147</sup> When he learns, late in the novel's second part, that ten farms have now been established there, he says to Sivert: »I nod in approval to this, I'm pleased! There should be thirty-two thousand such men as your father in the country! ... I've figured it out.«<sup>148</sup> Isak is thus held up as a role model by Geissler, and the colonization of new land for farming is depicted as highly desirable. Even in this respect, there is never a consideration of possible limits to growth, and with regard to land as a resource to be appropriated by new settlers, the narrator states that »there was enough to take from.«<sup>149</sup> At the end of the novel, the narrator explicitly celebrates economic growth and growth of the human (rural) population in connection to each other: »Does nothing grow here? Here everything grows, humans, animals, and yields.«<sup>150</sup>

This ideology of growth is short-sighted in several respects. Even if Geissler assumes enough »unused« potential farmland for thirty-two thousand male farmers to be available in Norway, Geissler's own and the narrator's endorsement of human population growth would mean that these men would preferably be married and have children. With a fertility rate as high as that in *Markens grøde*, and, say six to eight children per family, already the second generation would be several times as numerous as the first, with this multiplication continuing in every new generation. Since most of these children, once grown up, could not remain on their parents' farm without splitting the property among them, demand for new farmland would rise accordingly, and it would only be a very short time before there was no land left to colonize. The process of acceleration initiated by the first

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<sup>143</sup> Cf. Markussen 2011.

<sup>144</sup> »saa unaturlig, saa umulig« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 66).

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Hamsun 1917a, pp. 93 and 265; Hamsun 1917b, p. 116.

<sup>146</sup> »vilde ikke ha mere end som ett Barn eller i Høiden to Børn« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 38).

<sup>147</sup> »Her blir tilslut en tæbygd Grænd« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 194).

<sup>148</sup> »Det nikker jeg til, jeg er tilfreds! Det skal være 32 Tusen slike Karer i Landet som din Far! ... jeg har regnet det ut« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 218). The same statement is made by Geissler already in the novel's first part; cf. Hamsun 1917a, p. 59.

<sup>149</sup> »det var nok at ta av« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 58).

<sup>150</sup> »Vokser her intet? Her vokser alt, Mennesker, Dyr og Grøde« (ibid., p. 228).

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generation would thus mean that the »limits to growth« with regard to the establishment of new farmsteads would be reached very quickly.<sup>151</sup>

But this is not the only unintended effect of human population growth. As the example of Eleseus shows, another side-effect is rising consumption of »unnecessary« goods, as well as urbanization and migration. To keep his son in the countryside, Isak buys Storborg for him, the former abode of the merchant Aronsen and a potential farmstead (Isak's other son, Sivert, is supposed to take over Sellanraa once Isak and Inger retire). Isak also sponsors Eleseus' lifestyle, which includes many journeys to cities farther south, where Eleseus indulges in urban modes of consumption: »He himself came home from his excursions a little bit more elegant and greater every time; last time he came home with galoshes on his feet.«<sup>152</sup> In the store at Storborg, Eleseus tries to sell »unnecessary« things such as »cotton gear and diverse silk ribbons for christening robes and black-and-white straw hats and long pipes«,<sup>153</sup> and even »small birds that stood on steel wire and that said ›peep‹ when they were pressed in the right spot.«<sup>154</sup> He also allows generous credit to the villagers who desire such things. Isak incurs »enormous costs for Eleseus and his trade and his travels«,<sup>155</sup> money which, as the reader is explicitly told, stems from the selling of land to the operators of the copper mine. It can thus be said that in *Markens grøde*, money from speculation and from environmentally damaging resource extraction is used by a local farmer to provide for one of his surplus sons, and this money generates more production of »unnecessary« goods in urban industrial centers and more »unnecessary« consumption in the countryside. Resource use and waste thus increase, and go far beyond the basic human needs of »Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel«<sup>156</sup> that Thoreau had identified in *Walden*.

The appraisal of human population growth in *Markens grøde* is, however, even more preposterous when seen in the context of the modernization and mechanization of agriculture that is part of the novel's progress narrative. As already mentioned, Isak is not only open to technological innovation, but actively advances the abandonment of traditional agriculture through the use of industrially produced machines. He is the first farmer in the entire region to use a mowing machine.<sup>157</sup> As Isak himself points out, this machine delivers results that are qualitatively much better than those of human work,<sup>158</sup> and Oline, although possibly exaggerating, claims that it »cuts faster

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<sup>151</sup> This is precisely the development shown by the so-called Great Acceleration graphs for the period from 1950 to 2010: While the world population continued to grow rapidly throughout this time, the increase in domesticated land bottomed out due to a lack of potential new farmland; see Steffen et al. 2015, pp. 86–87 and 90.

<sup>152</sup> »Selv kom han jo hjem fra sine Utflugter litt finere og større for hver Gang, sist kom han hjem med Galoscher paa Føtterne« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 157).

<sup>153</sup> »Bomuldstøi og forskjellige Silkebaand til Daapsluer og sorte og hvite Halmhatter og lange Tobakspiper« (ibid., p. 172).

<sup>154</sup> »smaa Fugler som stod paa Staaltraad og som sa Pip naar de blev klemt paa rette Sted« (ibid., p. 214).

<sup>155</sup> »store Penger for Eleseus og hans Handel og hans Reiser« (ibid., p. 173).

<sup>156</sup> Thoreau 1995 [1854], p. 7.

<sup>157</sup> Cf. Hamsun 1917a, p. 274.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 277–278.

than a hundred scythes«. <sup>159</sup> That machines are indeed replacing human work at Sellanraa is expressed, albeit jokingly, by Sivert in a remark to Eleseus, while both watch Isak using the mowing machine for the first time: »No, come on, now we go home and burn our scythes. Father is cutting for us!« <sup>160</sup> The acceleration of production achieved through the modernization of agriculture means that far less human work is needed than in traditional farming. In combination with human population growth, the inevitable result must be that most of the human workforce in the countryside becomes superfluous. This is, of course, precisely what happened historically, leading to increased migration to urban centers and to other parts of the world. <sup>161</sup> This process is in a way exemplified by Eleseus, who first moves to the city and, having become superfluous in the region where he grew up, finally emigrates to America. <sup>162</sup>

Thus, paradoxically, the combination of a modernization of agriculture with human population growth, both of which are portrayed as welcomed developments in *Markens grøde*, leads to the precise opposite of what Geissler desires: namely, to increasing acceleration of production and consumption, and hence also of resource use, and consequently to urbanization, emigration, and the depopulation of the countryside.

## Conclusion

*Markens grøde* is not a text that propagates a »return to nature« or a simple and sustainable lifestyle. Such a reading of the novel means taking at face value the narrator's and Geissler's claim that the people at Sellanraa are characterized by modesty, and that they live in complete harmony with their environment. A closer look at the human-environment interactions that are actually represented in *Markens grøde* reveals that these interactions consist of a profound anthropogenic transformation of non-human nature, based on the assumption that environmental and climatic conditions at large are stable and cannot be changed in detrimental ways by humans. This is a notion that stands in fundamental contrast with the transition of the planet into a new geological epoch due to human action. With humanity having acquired geological agency, human action can no longer be viewed as separate from its larger ecological and climatic consequences. When it comes to resource use, Geissler's and the narrator's two central ideological convictions, that farming is the only »natural« and thus acceptable way of life, and that human population growth is absolutely desirable, do not go well together. In fact, they fundamentally contradict each other on a planet with limited resources.

In *Markens grøde*, modesty in the sense of avoiding unnecessary consumption may indeed figure as an ideal. Yet right from the beginning of the novel, this ideal itself is described as unattainable, and even reduced to absurdity through its constant ironic negation. A desire to be admired that necessarily leads to forms of consumption going

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<sup>159</sup> »skaar fortere end som Hundrede Ljaaer« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 8).

<sup>160</sup> »Nei kom nu, saa gaar vi hjem og brænder op Ljaaerne vore; han Far slaar for os!« (Hamsun 1917a, p. 278).

<sup>161</sup> Today, more than half of the world's population is living in cities, and the trend of urbanization will in all likelihood continue throughout the coming decades; cf. Steffen et al. 2015, p. 89.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Hamsun 1917b, p. 212.



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far beyond the fulfillment of basic needs appears in *Markens grøde* as an essential part of human nature. Therefore, rather than providing guidance for a simple life, the novel can be read as an illustration of the impossibility of remaining in such a state, however desirable it might be in principle. Taken seriously, the novel's development narrative would mean that accepting limits to growth and voluntarily living at a low material level goes against human nature. *Markens grøde* implies that human nature always generates a desire for admiration that only can be fulfilled through the purchase of material objects and through ostentatious behavior. This, of course, requires permanent growth in production and consumption, and thus leads to accelerated resource use and environmental degradation.

However, if one follows the novel in assuming that human nature is inherently geared towards excessive resource use (with all its unintended environmental and climatic consequences), then contemporary attempts at reducing the environmental and climatic footprint of humanity are doomed to fail. Much of contemporary environmental thinking revolves around the question of how a high quality of living and human happiness can be achieved without increases in consumption.<sup>163</sup> Attempts in this direction are usually based on rationality: on the assumption that humans, knowing that in a world of finite resources, limitless growth is impossible, will indeed try to bring their behavior into line with planetary boundaries. However, the portrayal of human nature in *Markens grøde* suggests that, as Clark expresses it, one may »need to think environmental destruction at some sort of species level, as latent in the sort of thing humanity is.«<sup>164</sup> If we accept this basic premise, any hope that humans are capable of using resources in a sustainable way would be futile. We would all be like Geissler, who describes himself as »a man who knows the right thing, but doesn't do it«.<sup>165</sup>

Given the anthropogenic environmental and climatic changes characterizing the Anthropocene and humanity's seeming inability to effectively counteract them, one may be inclined to accept the assumptions in *Markens grøde* about human nature as true. But since on a planet with limited resources, consumption cannot continue to increase indefinitely, it is, as Chakrabarty expresses it, »clear that for humans any thought of the way out of our current predicament cannot but refer to the idea of deploying reason in global, collective life.«<sup>166</sup> There may therefore be no other option than to at least try to prove *Markens grøde* wrong, and to demonstrate that rationality and a sense of responsibility can overrule primitive desires. This may be no easy endeavor. Yet as Thoreau puts it: »Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome.«<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> A prominent example is Tim Jackson's book *Prosperity without Growth. Economics for a Finite Planet* (Jackson 2009).

<sup>164</sup> Clark 2015, p. 59.

<sup>165</sup> »en Mand som vet det rette, men gjør det ikke« (Hamsun 1917b, p. 223).

<sup>166</sup> Chakrabarty 2009, p. 210.

<sup>167</sup> Thoreau 1995 [1854], p. 143.

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