

‘Green Capitalism’ or Environmental Justice? A Critique of the Sustainability Discourse

The sustainability discourse has been appropriated by neo-liberal capitalism. It is driving a key feature of capital's response to the ecological crisis: the commodification of nature. This involves the transformation of nature and all social relations into economic relations, subordinated to the logic of the market and the imperatives of profit. The immediate outcome is the deepening of both social and environmental injustice.

Green capitalism

The ecological crisis is not some future and indeterminate event. It is now generally acknowledged that we are in the first stages of ecological collapse. Capital's response to the ecological crisis is that the system can continue to expand by creating a new 'sustainable' or 'green capitalism', bringing the efficiency of the market to bear on nature and its reproduction.

These visions amount to little more than "a renewed strategy for profiting from planetary destruction"¹. The business of 'sustainability', in this view, is simply "a new frontier for accumulation in which carbon trading is the model scheme"².

The two pillars on which 'green capitalism' rests are technological innovation and expanding markets while keeping the existing institutions of capitalism intact. This is Thomas Friedman's 'green revolution' which relies on linking the two. As he insists, green technology represents "the mother of all markets"³.

More specifically, 'green capitalism' involves:

- appeals to nature (and even the crisis) as a marketing tool;
- developing largely untested clean coal technology through Carbon Capture and Storage, which involves installing equipment that captures carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases and then pumping the gas underground;
- the development of new sources of energy such as solar, nuclear and wind, thereby creating new markets;
- the massive development of biofuels, which involves diverting land from food production;
- the carbon trading regime enshrined in the Kyoto Protocols.

Many of these strategies put the onus of solving climate change on changing individual life styles. This *individualizing* is illustrated by Al Gore's documentary

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An Inconvenient Truth and relies heavily on manipulative advertising – ‘greenwash’ – to persuade us of the efficacy of these strategies.

Greenwash is also evident in much corporate sustainability reporting as part of their presentation of a benign image of themselves.

The current emphasis is on how sustainability can increase profitability or, in the sanitized language of capital, “can add value to a company”.

‘Sustainability’: the ideological anchor of green capitalism.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, there has been a steep growth in the number of companies producing sustainability reports, and in the emergence of various corporate indicators and guidelines. Media coverage is growing with, in 2010 alone, a *Financial Times Special Report on Sustainability*, the publication of the quarterly *Dialogue Sustainability Review* as a supplement to the *Financial Mail*, and the *Earth* supplement to the daily newspaper, *Business Day*.

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In 2004, the Johannesburg Stock Exchange introduced the Socially Responsible Investment Index (SRI) to “help crystallize good triple-bottom line and governance policy and practices”. Companies apply to be listed – in 2008, 61 companies made it onto the index, from 105 companies that were reviewed for inclusion⁴. According to an asset manager, “Very important is that [social responsibility] should not mean lower returns. In fact it should sometimes mean higher returns as the profile of some of these investments can be higher risk and lower liquidity”⁵.

Chris Laszio’s *Sustainable Value: How the world’s leading companies are doing well by doing good* emphasizes the importance of a company’s reputation, goodwill and stakeholder relationships. Based on this assumption, Laszio develops a strong business case for taking a systematic approach to building stakeholder value, including shareholder value, through the integration of sustainability in all aspects of a business⁶.

The cynicism involved is also illustrated by a statement from a Santam executive, “Even if you don’t believe in climate change, it makes financial sense”. In similar terms it has been claimed that the climate crisis represents “a lucrative entrepreneurial opportunity”⁷. This is congruent with the treatment of disasters (often ecological) as exciting market opportunities, described by Klein as ‘disaster capitalism’⁸.

Similarly, for the JSE, “[I]nvesting in sustainability makes sense”⁹. From July 2010 all companies listed on the JSE are required to publish an integrated sustainability report. Thus the worst corporate polluters in South Africa all now produce lengthy sustainability reports.

ArcelorMittal SA’s 2009 sustainability report claims that “[o]ver the last year, we made an even greater commitment to engagement with all stakeholder groups by accelerating interactions with communities, employees, regulators, government and advocacy groups”. This claim, however, is hotly disputed by Phineas Malapela, the chair of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance¹⁰.

Other major polluters show a total neglect of environmental factors in their definition of sustainable development. For example, BHP Billiton, “the world’s leading diversified natural resources company,” describes “the company’s vision of Sustainable Development” as follows: “to be the company of choice – creating sustainable value for shareholders, employees, contractors, suppliers, customers, business partners and host communities.”¹¹

The main concern of the corporations remains profitability: the awareness that shrinking natural resources could damage it, while measures such as energy efficiency could reduce costs, reduce risks and enhance a company’s public image. The former CEO of Walmart recently described sustainability as “the single biggest business opportunity of the 21st century and the next main source of competitive advantage”¹². Hence the opening claim: the sustainability discourse has been appropriated by neo-liberal capitalism.

Critiques of green capitalism

Critiques of ‘green capitalism’ are rooted in the understanding that it is capital’s logic of accumulation that is destroying the ecological conditions that sustain life: through the pollution and consumption of natural resources, destruction of habitats and biodiversity, and global warming.

The expansionist logic of the capitalist system means it is not sustainable. As Barbara Harris-White claims, “sustainable capitalism is a fiction”¹³. She writes, “sustainability has never been given a testable definition... it has been watered down to ‘resources sustainably available in the environment’ and even leached into mere ‘growth’”¹⁴.

Joel Kovel stresses that the cause of the ecological crisis is the expansionist logic of the capitalist system, and in similar terms, Vandana Shiva stresses, “the same corporate interests that have created the crisis try to offer the disease as the cure – more fossil fuel based chemical fertilizers”¹⁵.

If capitalism continues, the future looks grim. If capitalism remains the dominant social order we can expect unbearable climate conditions, an intensification of social and ecological crises and, as Ian Angus writes, “the spread of the most barbaric forms of class rule, as the imperialist powers fight among themselves and with the global south for continued control of the world’s diminishing resources. At worst human life may not survive”¹⁶.

But – at least in the short run – as ecological breakdown accelerates, the dominant classes will survive, living in protected enclaves in what Foster calls a fortress world. “Fortress World is a planetary apartheid system, gated and maintained by force, in which the gap between global rich and global poor constantly widens and the differential access to environmental resources and amenities increases sharply. It consists of bubbles of privilege amidst oceans of misery”¹⁷. This retreat into fortified enclaves already exists in South Africa – now the most unequal society in the world – as the powerful and the privileged move into the growing number of gated communities and golf estates.

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However, the argument that the discourse of sustainability is the ideological anchor of green capitalism does not mean we should throw the baby out with the bathwater: the immediate challenge is to reclaim the notion of sustainability by linking it to considerations of justice.

Critique of the concept of sustainable development

When the concept of sustainable development was launched at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, it held out great potential. By the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, the concept had become vacuous and was largely about sustaining economic growth at virtually any ecological cost.

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The concept of sustainable development says nothing about justice and has been extensively criticised for the vagueness which has enabled it to be incorporated into neo-liberal approaches. It allows environmentalism to be voided of political content and “be defined as a public concern with environmental deterioration – a concern, not necessarily the object of a social struggle, a cause without conflict¹⁸.” Giddens writes, “‘Sustainable development’ is more of a slogan than an analytical concept¹⁹ and dismisses it as “something of an oxymoron²⁰.”

The discourse of sustainable development is, of course, an advance on earlier protectionist models of environmentalism in that it is concerned with ‘human needs’. But it is generally marked by technicist, pragmatic and reformist attempts to bring environmental externalities into the marketplace through ecological modernisation. The discourse of environmental justice provides a radical alternative. As the leading US anti-toxics activist, Louis Gibbs, has argued, “the growing environmental justice movement asks the question, ‘What is morally correct?’ instead of ‘What is legally, scientifically and pragmatically possible?’”

This is very relevant for us in South Africa. During the apartheid regime, environmentalism effectively operated as a conservation strategy that neglected social needs. The notion of environmental justice represents an important shift away from this traditional authoritarian concept of environmentalism which was mainly concerned with the conservation of threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas, to include urban, health, labour and development issues²¹. Environmental justice is linked to social justice as an all-encompassing notion that affirms the value of life – all forms of life – against the interests of wealth, power and technology.

Linking this broadened notion of justice to sustainability means that we have to rethink the notion of economic growth. Growth has come to mean “primarily growth in profits and wealth for a relative few²².” A transition to sustainability poses profound challenges to capital. There are simply not enough resources for all to enjoy the intensely consumerist and waste-creating lifestyles of the advanced industrial nations. As George Monbiot writes, “The continuous growth prescribed by modern economics, whether informed by Marx or Keynes or Hayek, depends on the notion that the planet has an infinite capacity to supply us with wealth and absorb our pollution. In a finite world this is impossible. Pull this rug from under the dominant economic theories and the whole system of thought collapses²³.”



The key concern of ecological sustainability is not only to protect limited resources but to ensure that resources are used for the benefit of all, not the privileged few. This means linking sustainability to justice. However, the post-apartheid state's overall commitment to neo-liberal principles means the prioritizing of sustainability and efficiency over justice, and a preoccupation with cost-recovery over high levels of cross-subsidisation and equity.

Water

Domestic consumption makes up about 12% of South Africa's water usage. More than half of this goes to the largely white, affluent suburbs with their gardens, swimming pools and golf courses.

Meanwhile, in the name of sustainability and cost recovery, pre-paid water meters have been installed in many South African townships. The logic of these technological tools is to restrain use in the context of scarcity. The basic need for water (a right in terms of our post-apartheid constitution) becomes a commodity to be bought and sold. They have had devastating impacts on the poor.

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The growing numbers of golf courses use an average of one million litres of water a day. For example, the Pecanwood Golf Estate near Johannesburg uses the average amount of 1.5 million litres of water a day²⁵. A sight visit in 2009 confirmed that some of the Pecanwood workers, who live in a nearby informal settlement, have to walk 5 km to buy water at R3 for 20 litres. The township residents with pre-paid water meters are fortunate by comparison.



Linking justice and sustainability would involve a higher free component funded through a sharply rising block tariff – in other words, a much higher level of cross-subsidisation from the wealthy to the poor.

The outcome for the poor is deprivation either in the form of the harsh restrictions imposed by pre-paid meters or the service disconnections for the many households that have fallen into arrears.

Energy

In South Africa almost a quarter of households lack adequate access to electricity, either due to the lack of infrastructure or unaffordable pre-paid meters. They have to rely on dangerous paraffin stoves and candles, or the time consuming collection of firewood. The outcome is shack fires that sweep through informal settlements in South Africa almost every weekend. These are fires in which the poorest of the poor lose all

their possessions and sometimes even their lives.

Justice demands the provision of affordable energy for all. Instead, the post-apartheid state is prioritising corporate interests: thus the revelation the parastatal, Eskom, has been supplying electricity to multinationals such as BHP Billiton at 12c a kilowatt hour – below the cost of electricity production. Meanwhile, the free allowance of 70 kilowatt hours per household per month is grossly inadequate. Linking justice and sustainability demands that energy takes the form of not only affordable but clean and safe energy – which means renewable energy.

Access to both energy and water should involve linking sustainability and justice. The problem is the logic of commodification in the form of the cost recovery policies that constitute the foundation of neo-liberal capitalism. The outcome for the poor is deprivation either in the form of the harsh restrictions imposed by pre-paid meters or the service disconnections for the many households that have fallen into arrears.

Conclusion

We are living in a period when our relationship to nature is being dramatically transformed through this process of commodification. More and more of nature is being framed in terms of exchange value and mediated through the market. According to Burawoy this commodification of nature is the “central feature” of the contemporary period of “third wave marketisation” or neo-liberal capitalism²⁶.

The outcome is a world in which billions are chronically malnourished, lacking access to clean water and electricity. This is surely not a world we want to sustain. For all these reasons, Joel Kovel prefers the term *sufficiency*.

“Sufficiency makes more sense, building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lacks health care or succor in old age... Sufficiency is a better term than... sustainability, as the latter leaves ambiguous the question of whether what is to be sustained is the existing system or not.”²⁷

The threat of ecological collapse means that there is an urgent need for debate and, at least, a questioning of the appropriation of the sustainability discourse by capital, as well as the economic bias which ignores how the emphasis on growth furthers negative distributional and environmental impacts. This involves challenging what Jane Goodall has termed the ‘dark forces’, particularly the vested interests involved in the fossil fuel industry²⁸.

The paradigmatic ‘dark force’ at the moment is BP. This is what the ‘prince of darkness’, the CEO of BP, had to say recently about the transition to a low carbon economy:

“...we have before us a period of economic transition as great as, if not greater than, the Industrial Revolution”²⁹.

Our survival depends on how we act now.

NOTES

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