**Environmental Sustainability. A Pillar of Sustainable Capitalism**

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Sustainability is a potentially confusing concept. It is an aspirational approach to anthropocenic survival with an imbedded environmental strategy. Environmental sustainability is viewed here as a socio, economic, political and legal scaffolding of today’s capitalist society. However, if sustainable capitalism – understood as more purpose- than profit- driven (Midttun, 2022) - is questionable outside an environmental strategy, the reverse in not necessarily true. Environmental sustainability manifests itself as a socio-economic-political and legal strategy, but it does not need capitalism for its realization – any governing structure as long as it provides the resources for its goal attainment is sufficient. On the other hand, environmental stability is a necessary pillar for sustainable capitalism. And its success within todays’ liberal capitalist democratic governments demands a comprehensive educational and communicative overhaul of how today’s climate crisis is analyzed, comprehended and engaged with.

Thus, here I promote a progressive implementation of solutions both at the macro and micro levels. This includes incremental solutions, such as the student-led initiative described towards the end. The student-led initiative is an interactive, local map which identifies specific climate issues, and imagines their solutions. It offers ease of access and transparency to educational resources as well as information to identify ways to hold accountable those entities whose public or private funding is conditional to finding solutions. Local projects which monitor how resources are spent is one vital approach to environmental sustainability – because it emphasizes that we all have a stake in it.

1. Capitalism – briefly noted

Capitalism is often referenced without a generally-accepted definition. When authors describe it, their explanation is highly politicized, even when focused on its economic aspect. The absence of a generally accepted definition of capitalism is further hampered by the reality of capitalism, by its historical and geopolitical variances as well as social and economic disparities within the same region or country.  In other words, conceptually, what differentiates capitalism from what came before? And more importantly what is necessary for capitalism to continue? Is it the economic model? Is it the political and legal scaffolding? Is it the social structure? Is the technical progress associated with capitalism? Is there a particular type of culture associated with capitalism? In other words, what makes capitalism, capitalism?

Gertrude Stein’s definition of a rose: “A rose is a rose is a rose[[1]](#footnote-1)” (1913) cannot suffice in a scientific work. To say “Capitalism is capitalism is capitalism” does not help from an ontological nor epistemological perspective. Similarly, a workable definition cannot rely on empirical observations of the type: “I know it when I see it,” implying that we all know capitalism when we go to the market and see it in action.

What makes capitalism inherently capitalism is hard to pinpoint; it is not just private property, nor is it just a marketplace. Nor is it defined by reference to democracy or democratic ideals. Today, the democratic perspective seems outdated as capitalism seems to survive in such politically and legally inhospitable places as Russia or China. Russia is capitalist because it values private property though it is not a democracy relying on periodically changed political leaders (Solongo, 2001). China is similarly living its capitalist dream (Li, 2020) while governed by a single-party, autocratic political system. Furthermore, profit is a defining element of every capitalist economy, and while technology ensures its success, it is the legal system that enables and protects private property, profit, and capital (Pistor, 2019). In sum, it appears that capitalism is an economic, social, political, legal, and cultural system, with each element contributing to various degrees. The winning formula appears to be as dynamic as the system itself.

For Marx, capitalism represented a particular stage in human history. Capitalism was the production and reproduction of material life, of the means to survive physically, of ways to create new needs which, in combination with early social relationships provided the structure of the actual life processes. In *German Ideology,* Marx concluded:

The production of life, both of one’s own in labor and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social, relationship … the multitude of productive forces accessible to man determines the nature of society, hence, that the “history of humanity” must always be studied in relation to the history of industry and exchange… Thus it is quite obvious from the start that there exists a materialistic connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men themselves (Marx, [1845-6] 1970, p.50).

Marx defined capitalism also in terms of the conflict between that which was natural and that which was social (Neacsu, 2020). Marx viewed the procreation of life in terms of labor, social procreation, as well as biologically. It had an inner duality, with facets coexisting and manifesting themselves differently in different societies. These facets contained some general assumptions about the nature of human existence such as that neither the natural nor the social had a greater or more fundamental significance than the other. Each society promoted a particular solution, and under capitalism, nature is not winning. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), Marx wrote that the resolution of the conflict between Man and nature, and between Man and Man, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species, would only be resolved with equanimity in a non-capitalist society. That prediction remains to be proven false. For that an overhaul of how the climate crisis is communicated, comprehended and addressed is still waiting to be imagined and implemented.

For Marx, capitalism represented the only society where the individual was able to manifest their humanity. For him, Man existed individually only as a result of the development of the productive power of labor (Engels, 1876[[2]](#footnote-2)). Man “has risen beyond a low stage, and when, therefore, the social relations within the sphere of material life, between man and man, and between man and nature,” have reached a particular level of development (Marx, [1857-8] 1973, p. 497). From a legal point of view, it is very interesting to note that the emerging forms of private property were crucial for the development of individuation. For instance, in the *Communist Manifesto*, the bourgeoisie, the vilified social exploiter, is presented as having played the most important part in history, because capitalists at least in this early stage are progressive and express human qualities of creativity and drive and inculcated others those powers (Marx, [1847] 1968, p37).

Thus, it is more than a mere mode of production. It is history, and it is a particular type of human interaction when Man quits pursuing his aims aimlessly, “as, say, the whims of fashion” ([1844] 1975, p 379). Dangerously, perhaps, in Marx’s capitalism, Man develops a conquering nature in a continuous manner within capitalist exploitation.

Subjection of nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what early century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap social labor (ibid., p. 40)

Capitalism, rapacious and unethical, seems bent on destroying everything that stands in the path to profit, but it is still more than that. Capitalism is behind our view of Man as heroic for subjugating nature.

Perhaps, that explains its present global reach: the combined economies of the United States, China, Japan, and the United Kingdom represent about half of the global economic output since 1960.

60%

50%

40%

30%

20%

10%

0%

1960 1965 1970 1975 1980 1985 1990 1995 2000 2005 2010 2015

United Kingdom; United States; Japan; China

*Figure 1* Share of gross world product (current US dollars, 1960–2018) (Li, 2020)[[3]](#footnote-3)

In its quest for boundless profit, capitalism has reached most of the planet and is encroaching into the digital (metaverse[[4]](#footnote-4)) and outer space. The question becomes whether its endless capital/profit race is sustainable. Additionally, is profit at all cost what capitalism is all about? Can environmentalism – understood not as a successful social movement (Dunlap & Mertig, 1991, Neacsu, 2021) but also as a necessary pillar of capitalism change the profit-driven nature of capitalism or at least the meaning of profit? Can our knowledge paradigm (Neacsu, 2020), our religious tenets, the stories we tell ourselves, change our views of what it means to be a hero in a capitalist society?

Environmental capitalism has become the existential question of the day, Yorick’s inspired soliloquy “to be or not to be[[5]](#footnote-5)”.

1. The Pillars of Sustainable Capitalism

Conceptual ambiguity aside, capitalism stands on particular institutional foundations. These are economic, legal, social, political, and cultural institutions. Environmental policy, justice, and citizenship are dependent on them, as are their creation and implementation. Within a capitalist society, they all have to converge and face the goal of capitalism, currently of immediate profit irrespective consequences.

Global or local, capitalism relies on mobilizing and allocating access to resources, competing against nature (part of the environment). This competition happens within a particular public law system—governed by the laws of a particular state—or outside all public law systems—within the private legal realms manufactured by powerful law firms (Pistor, 2019), and endorsed non-governmental entities, such as the International Monetary Fund (Id.).

Perhaps then the answer to sustainable capitalism becomes first and foremost an economic and legal question, about the compatibility of capitalist competition with rules and regulatory decisions whose purpose is not unlimited profit for fewer monopolies, but the opposite. Sustainable capitalism seems to be about dismantling monopolies, changing corporate and individual expectations and their enabling behavior for the larger, societal purpose of common interest.

In part due to the publication of the Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future[[6]](#footnote-6)* - under the leadership of Gro Harlem Bruntland - within the political rhetoric of the 1980s, scholars defined the concept of sustainability in terms of sustainable development. It was related to particular projects: economic, political, social, and even cultural and communication. (Dixon & Fallon, 2019). In time, the pillars of sustainability have centered on three pillars: the social, economic and the environmental, as best visually imagined by Purvis, Mao and Robinson (Purvis et al., 2019). Sustainability is clearly seen as the result, the intersectionality or the confluence of the social, economic and the environmental, of course, as intermediated by law and politics. The latter are missing from the Fig.2 below.

 Fig. 2 from Purvis et al. (2019)

Yet few have connected it to its obvious Benthamist roots. In the second paragraph of the preface to “A Fragment on Government” (1776), Bentham wrote: "...it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong.... (or "the most happiness for the largest amount of people”). Sustainability satisfies both the utility and the happiness tenet of Bentham’s, as well as the pragmatist requirements of James and Dewey. So, why is it that a concept so Anglo-American eludes the elite appeal needed to change individual and corporate greed?

Capitalist sustainability is both about maintaining the power structure in place, as well as conservation, preservation of the anthropocenic environment. Whether sustainable capitalism (society and economy) is a possible project remains to be seen. But irrespective of what decision-making approach the powers to come choose, the environmental pillar of all capitalist democracies needs strengthening for everyone’s survival.

This paper’s optimistic note comes from the fact that originally, capitalism appeared as the most progressive system humanity had known: it relied on human freedom and agency. However, it needed individual agency to become the most efficient profit-making machine. Its self-destructive nature soon emerged. While not visible when geographical markets had the ability to absorb the increasingly nefarious consequences of the oppositional relationship between Man and Nature, today, in full climate crisis, capitalism is facing the guillotine.

Capitalism does not need to emulate itself in Marie Antoinette[[7]](#footnote-7), it can turn things around and become revolutionary, meaning, sustainable. Sustainable capitalism actually thrives on being conservative. It is tantamount with self-containment, which requires a new mode of defining profit and prosperity. Some believe this is oxymoronic (Redclift 2005; Johnston et al. 2007; Brand 2012). It might be, but new technologies, and sustainable innovations (Voinea et al) ensure some version of unlimited profit-making. There are new markets in the making: The metaverse is imagined as one of the new profit-making markets. But it is the legal system which would ultimately decide what constitutes private property, and profit. It already defines capital (Pistor, 2019).

Furthermore, through media and communication, the allure of capitalism can change. Instead of unlimited profit, the new heroism could be the heavily taxed billionaire who acknowledges the truth that their wealth has been amassed on the shoulders of all, and it is time for the natural environment to receive full billing in the much-taunted individual success.

Social and environmental justice at the local, national and planetary level can become as much a source of individual satisfaction for the successful capitalist (corporatist or not) as any immeasurable amount of money – especially if Hollywood portrays a new version of heroism and religious leaders do it to (Taylor, 2019). Scholarship, religion, art, and mass media communication thus face the uphill battle to win the hearts of both the elites and the masses. We all need to engage honestly with the truism that there is no individual progress without social progress, and there is no social progress without a Planet. This Planet. Our climate crisis will not wait for another disaster as obvious as Hiroshima to wake us up. We need to be able to educate ourselves, empathize, and imagine it so we can prevent it.

1. Sustainable Environmentalism and Environmental Sustainability

Conceptually, environmentalism and environmental activity converge towards conservation. While everything around us - buildings, people, plants, animals, and toxic-waste dumps are all part of the environment - buildings and (toxic) waste are not part of nature. Sustainability concerns the entire environment – natural and man-made. The good news is that all environmentalists are interested in both (Damon et al, 2017). The less optimistic point out that the Anthropocene, and especially since the human capitalist predominance, that of the Man vs. Nature, the man-made environment with its toxic waste and carbon dioxide has been destabilizing the natural environment to disastrous consequences.

This is why we need environmental stability.

Many have recognized that one reason why environmental stability seems so hard to achieve is ideatic. We have not been able to grasp the magnitude of our crisis. So, here I am paraphrasing Bill McKibben’s alarm call, turning it on its head – though for the same purpose of raising awareness. In *End of Nature* (1989), McKibben bemoaned the fact that yes, ideas too die, just like an animal or plant, go extinct:

An idea, a relationship, can go extinct, just like an animal or a plant. The idea in this case is “nature,” the separate and wild province, the world apart from man to which he adapted, under whose rules he was born and died. In the past, we spoiled and polluted parts of that nature, inflicted environmental “damage.” But that was like stabbing a man with toothpicks: though it hurt, annoyed, degraded, it did not touch vital organs, block the path of the lymph or blood. We never thought that we had wrecked nature. Deep down, we never really thought we could: it was too big and too old; its forces—the wind, the rain, the sun—were too strong, too elemental (Damon et al, 5, 2017).

But, what about ideas that have held us back? Let’s not mourn them. Let’s rejoice in their passing. Let’s imagine others.

Our climate strategy needs reimagination. Looking back at the past 30 years not enough has been achieved to contain the damage of the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010), and to contain the nefarious human impact on climate. For instance, we remain limited to the Paris Agreement’s goals, and they are insufficient (Greenstone (2015). In terms of containment, we need new systemic and local goals to achieve and implement as a global society. Though reality shows that we are not yet ready to do so, for lack of political leadership, or too much corporate greed, and even for lack of ideas. While “emission reduction ranges to meet the 1.5°C temperature goal of the Paris Agreement should be around -45% in 2030 compared to 2010[[8]](#footnote-8),” the fossil fuel industry remain on track to using its reserves and engage in fracking, which would bring the temperature to levels potentially up to 16°C[[9]](#footnote-9), making life as we know it today, extinct. Miracles may happen, though Christianity is one of the religions opposed to solving our climate crisis as it would impede the final war requested by the second advent (Zechariah 14:2, 3; Revelation 9:18, etc.). Change becomes a condition to survival. A duty and choice in the battle done for the consciousness of each one of us. We need to imagine new ideas and communicate them through every means available.

National politics may change and global leaders may turn environmentalists. But we can reinvent the politics locally. We can piggyback on the politics of commons originally imagined by Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom (1990). While Ostrom investigated the commons, both in the form of common pool resources and common pool property (Id.), other researchers have introduced the concepts of the common and anti-commons to discuss property rights to knowledge (Wall, 2014). The common refers not to one particular resource or its property system but a broad category, which can be shared widely, rather than by a particular limited community. In addition to her theoretical work, Ostrom helped create a Digital Library of the Commons[[10]](#footnote-10) for free access by all to voluntarily contributed research (Wall, 2014). The Digital Library was a partial antidote to the enclosure of knowledge. Thus, the commons, or the common, includes something that is often shared by all such as an alphabet, periodic table or a language, as well as the air (beyond a certain point above the land), public parks, or the high sea,[[11]](#footnote-11) and as of now the digital universe. It requires a concerted action from legislators, voters, institutions and the judiciary to conserve and sustain them, and especially to preserve them as public commons (Neacsu 2021). They are ours.

1. Convergence of imagination and action to enable sustainability

Of course, the international community needs to act. Of course, governments need to act. Of course, corporations need to adjust their profit, and reconfigure their index of happiness in an environmentally centric manner. Corporation’s results will come when profit is produced by sustainable innovation (Voinea et al., 2021). And universities are attempting to teach the next generation of business and law professionals how to promote profit-making with an eye towards the environment, as does Columbia University’s recently created (2021) School of Climate, or Michael Gerrard’s Sabin Center at Columbia Law School’s for instance, does.

Nothing is too big, and no solution is too small. In the same vein of small steps is also the next example of a student-lead project. Using Social Explorer, this digital project - <https://mappingenvironmentalinjustice.org/> - aims to map points of environmental injustice and connect those affected by the environmental issues with entities whose public or private funding is assisting individuals suffering from poor environmental conditions. The goal is to create a map that assists researchers and individuals looking for local legal help related to environmental inequalities. It started with a group of seven Barnard students in 2021. We presented our then pilot project to academic conferences[[12]](#footnote-12) and unsuccessfully submitted grant requests. Today it is the work of the original Barnard student leader, with my coordinating and minimal financial support (purchasing the domain and renting the digital housing space), until we have a clearer pilot to use for fundraising. Two more students, one from Duquesne Law School, and another from Nottingham have shown interest. The project needs more volunteers to provide content – primary and secondary sources, such as the relevant laws, as well as news, scholarly articles. Additionally, it seeks to identify the local entities charged with solving each specific environmental problem. The project is meant to provide transparency and informational support to those who are interested in researching the link between environmental issues and social injustice, but also to those who need help locating those entities and hold them accountable if they fail to provide the promised help.

In its pilot version, the project is limited to flooding zones in West Virginia and the organizations designated to address and redress these issues, whether governmental, academic, or non-governmental, or voluntary associations. We choose to highlight West Virginia because the state, its location within the Appalachian region, its challenges, and its promise exemplifies many of this project’s purposes and hopes. One, the state’s long-standing flooding problems that have worsened in the past decades provide a distinct example of how climate change (increased rainfall) affects a specific place and its people. Two, as much as the state is a place of incredible natural beauty and unique ecology, West Virginia is also known for its socio-economic disparity and extractive industries that have generated environmental controversy and damage, with climate change exacerbating the state’s already existing environmental justice problems. Three, despite these challenges, we spotlight individuals and groups dedicated to environmental and social justice as a resource for those affected by flooding or other environmental problems, as well as examples of how others can take action.

1. Conclusion

There is no yellow brick road to reach environmental stability. There are instead many different paths. All are long and full of obstacles. Much needs to be done at so many levels: macro and micro, whether socially, legally, politically, economically, educationally, or mere mass media entertainment. At each level, the aimed target is moving constantly, because the more inertia the more work needs to be done to achieve each goal. Perhaps, paramount to environmental stability, this is a test in resilience and common understanding and adjustment of lifestyle – much less for the affluent, and not much more for those who already have little – whether individuals, corporations, or national states. Even more demanding is the adjustment of capitalist values and standards: of what it is and of what it stands for. Hopefully the adjustment will not come from curtailing civic freedoms, but from embracing limited greed and increased responsibility toward each other’s welfare and the surrounding environment.

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1. G. Stein, "Sacred Emily", in *Geography and Plays (1922).* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Labour is the source of all wealth, the political economists assert. And it really is the source – next to nature, which supplies it with the material that it converts into wealth. But it is even infinitely more than this. It is the prime basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labour created man himself.

Frederick Engels, The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man (1876) http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/quotes/index.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Source: World Bank (2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/home>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more see, Patrice Adam (2021). Metaverse. Droit Social 12:961-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. William Shakespeare (1599-1601), The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Act 3, Scene 1. http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future(1987). <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on her fate, see, e.g., Jules Michelet (1847) L'histoire de la Révolution française https://www.google.com/books/edition/Histoire\_de\_la\_r%C3%A9volution\_fran%C3%A7aise/GkAvAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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10. http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Juliana v. United States (2016) talks about res publica, as another concept similar to the commons. For more on that issue, see, e.g., Dana Neacsu (2021) The aesthetic ideology of Juliana v. United States and its impact on environmentally engaged citizenship.2021 Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13412-021-00731-z>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/e1a5-ye76>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)