



# NEGATIVE DIALECTICS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY AND SOCIAL ECOLOGY: CONTRASTING MAINSTREAM NEOLIBERAL AND CRITICAL ECOSOCIALIST PARADIGMS OF SUSTAINABILITY

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## Dialectics of Political Economy and Social Ecology: Mainstream Neoliberal and Critical Ecosocialist Paradigms of Sustainability

**Background:** In the Anthropocene, defined by negative human impact, reorienting the global capitalist system is recognized as necessary to contain its self-destructive tendencies and preserve life on the planet. Yet, little agreement, how ecological sustainability can be achieved.

**Project:** Exploratory review of key publications in the social science literature on environmental and social sustainability, contrasting conventional mainstream (functionalist, normative) "neoliberal" perspective vs. emerging radically critical (antagonistic, structuralist) "ecosocialist" paradigm.

**Results:** Paradigm of critical sustainability advocates degrowth, decommodification, democratization, and redistribution. Identified causes of unsustainability converge with the Marxist ecosocialist critique of exploitative accumulation / growth logic of the capitalism (systemic greed).

**Implications:** Criticalizing sustainability discourse to re-appropriate ecological ideas against degeneration into economic ideology; practical value of sustainability goals as vehicles for real-world improvements and a more radical social critique needs to be reassessed from a dialectic perspective.

**Application:** Sustainability discourses increasingly shape organizational science, prescribing paradigm shifts from managerialist to critical ontologies, pursuing interdisciplinarity, adopting relational epistemologies, and new forms of engaged scholarship and academic activism.

## Critical Perspectives: Focus on Contradictions, Conflicts, Tensions, Antagonisms or Dialectics



## Dialectics of (Un-)Sustainability

### Rhetoric of Sustainability vs. Reality of Unsustainability



## Exploratory Review: Key Publications on Ecocritical Concepts: Conventional Neoliberal Concepts: Radical Ecocritical Antipodes:

- a) Sustainable Development
- b) Green Growth / Green Capitalism
- c) Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

- a) Critical Sustainability
- b) Economic Degrowth
- c) Responsibility to Socialize Corporations (RSC)

Conventional neoliberal understandings contrasted with radical ecocritical antipodes

For each, a limited number (typically three) of selected key publications will be reviewed

Aim of this dialectic exploration of elements of Marxist ecology was to demonstrate the critical potential of ecosocialist perspectives as antipodes to neoliberal, market-based conceptions

Core to all three concepts are structures and processes of direct democracy and participation as well as fundamental rejection of the capitalist profit and growth imperatives

A final step explores, how critical conceptions of sustainability and degrowth shape current discourse in organizational science, highlighting exemplary recent contributions to the debate

## Exploratory Review: Key Publications on Ecocritical Concepts:

**Critical Sustainability**  
Castro (2004). Critical Essay: Sustainable Development: Mainstream and Critical Perspectives. *Organ & Environ*, 17(2), 195-225  
Fuchs (2017). Critical Social Theory and Sustainable Development: The Role of Class, Capitalism and Domination in a Dialectical Analysis of Un/Sustainability. *Sustainable Development*, 25, 443-458  
Rose & Cachelin (2018). Critical Sustainability: Incorporating Critical Theories into Contested Sustainable. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 8, 518-525

**Economic Degrowth**  
Cock (2011). Green Capitalism or Environmental Justice: A Critique of the Sustainability Discourse. *Focus*, 63, 45-51  
Sandberg, Klockars & Wilen (2019). Green Growth or Degrowth? Assessing the Normative Justifications for Environmental Sustainability and Economic Growth Through Critical Social Theory. *J of Cleaner Production* 206, 133-141  
Cosme, Santos & O'Neill (2017). Assessing the Degrowth Discourse: A Review and Analysis of Academic Degrowth Policy Proposals. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 149, 321-334

**Responsibility to Socialize Corporations (RSC)**  
Schneider (2020). Bound to Fail? Exploring the Systemic Pathologies of CSR and Their Implications for CSR Research. *Business & Society*, 59(7), 1303-1338  
Sandoval (2015). From CSR to RSC: A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy of Corporate Social Responsibility. *Review of Radical Political Economics* 47(4), 608-624

**Paradigm Shifts Towards Sustainability**  
Ergene, Banerjee & Hoffman (2020). (Un)Sustainability and Organization Studies: Towards a Radical Engagement. *Organization Studies*, 42, 1319-1335  
Feola (2020). Capitalism in Sustainability Transitions Research: Time for a Critical Turn? *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 35, 241-250

## Critical Essay: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT Organization & Environment, 17(2), 2004, 195-225

Carlos J. Castro (University of Oregon) (Modified quote: Castro, 2004)

Sustainable development has become one of the most ubiquitous, contested, and indispensable concepts of our time. Introduced in response to environmental concerns, it has been defined primarily by the mainstream tradition of economic thinking, neglecting ecological sustainability itself. Driven by the rapid accumulation requirements of the capitalist economy, the goal is sustaining economic development rather than developing ecological sustainability.

More critical perspectives are needed, combining Marxist political-economic critique of capital accumulation and radical social transformation with poststructuralist cultural analysis

**Ecocriticism = Ecology based on Marxist Theory** Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Clark, B., & Foster, J. B. (2010). Marx's Ecology in the 21st Century. *World Review of Political Economy*, 1(1), 142.  
Foster, J. B. (1999). Marx's theory of metabolic rift: Classical foundations for environmental sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(2), 366-405.

**Sustainability as Policy: 2030 Agenda**  
1987 UN Brundtland Report: Meeting needs of present without compromising needs of future generations  
1992 UN Earth Summit: Rio Declaration, Agenda 21  
2002 Johannesburg World Sustainable Development Summit  
2015 UN Rio+20 Conf follow-up: 2030 Agenda – 17 SD Goals

**Progress: Multidimensional Understanding of Sustainability as Social, Environmental, Economic**

**Radical Critiques of 2030 Agenda**  
Struckmann C (2018) A Postcolonial Feminist Critique of the 2030 Agenda for SD: A South African Application. *Agenda* 32:12-24.  
Telleria J, Garcia-Ariza J (2021) The Fantastic Narrative of Sustainable Development: A Political Analysis of the 2030 Global Development Agenda. *EPC: Politics and Space*, online first  
Vegh, Weiss V & White R (2021) A Marxist Perspective on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Emerald Handbook of Crime, Justice & Sustainable Development, 63-83  
Makikainen O (2019) Sustaining the One-Dimensional: An Ideology Critique of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. Master thesis, Uppsala U

**Realist Criticism of 2030 Agenda**  
→ No Trajectories Towards Attainment

- 1 NO POVERTY → Widespread / Rising Poverty
- 2 ZERO HUNGER → Food Shortages / Hunger
- 3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING → Global Health Crisis
- 4 CLIMATE ACTION → Climate Change
- 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES → Polarization of Living Conditions of Rich & Poor

**Main Problems for a Critical Theory of Society:**  
1) Class and Capitalism not mentioned as problems negatively impacting sustainability  
2) Communication and Culture not mentioned as realms of (un-) sustainability (Source: Fuchs, 2017)

→ Ideological Hegemony of Neoliberalism → Real Alternatives?

## Critical Social Theory and Sustainable Development: The Role of Class, Capitalism and Domination in a Dialectical Analysis of Un/Sustainability

Christian Fuchs' *Sustainable Development* (2017), 1303-1338  
Published online 6 January 2017 in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com) DOI: 10.1002/sd.v67

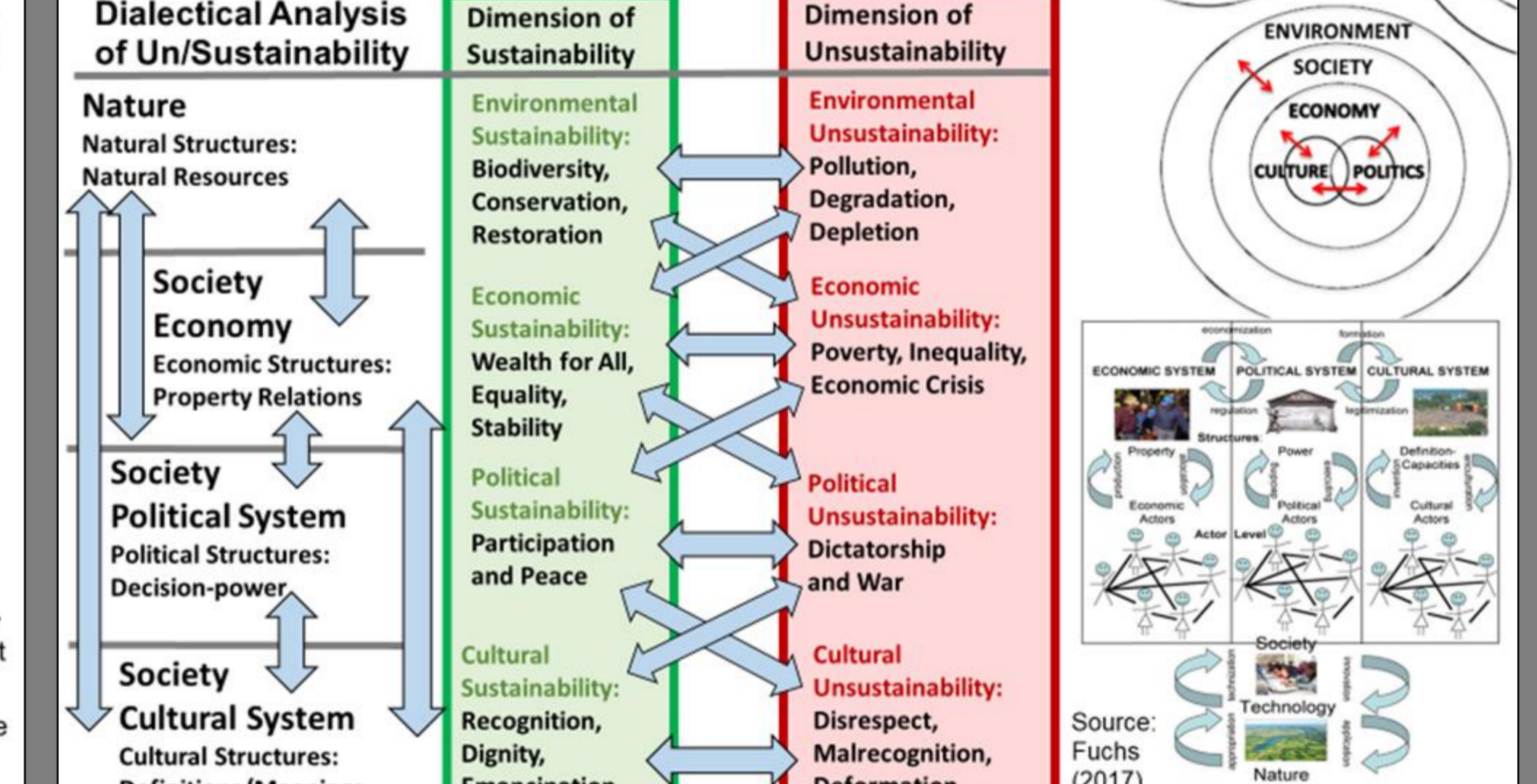
**Dialectics – Ambivalence – Two Faces of Un/Sustainability**

► Sustainability as Neoliberal Ideology  
[W]ithout questioning capitalist interest [...] contributing to environmental and social unsustainability [...] SD is [...] a legitimizing ideology that supports neoliberalism.

► Sustainability as a Critical Concept  
Given that Marx [...] was an early theorist [...] critical theory of unsustainability is certainly feasible. Marx [...] understands sustainability as the organization of society [...] that allows future generations to satisfy their needs and improves society [through] participatory democracy and democratic socialism.

Such ideologies [...] want to develop capitalist profits and formulate [...] social and environmental moral values without considering that capitalism and capitalist expansion may negatively impact society.

The sustainability concept's ideological character [...] is that it [...] sounds immensely positive and allows diverse groups that have opposing interests to project their political goals into it.



## Critical sustainability: incorporating critical theories into contested sustainabilities

Jeff Rose & Adrienne Cachelin

In the Anthropocene, defined by human impacts on the planet, there is growing pressure to find more sustainable social, political, and environmental relations.

Calls for greater sustainability have existed for decades, yet have consistently been embedded in capitalist processes and narratives that dilute their intentions and impacts.

**[W]e advocate for a critical sustainability ...**

- ... that rejects the superordination of capital accumulation over ecological integrity social and environmental justice concepts and practices.
- ... engaging not only with socioenvironmental relations, but also with the dominant political economies that so powerfully shape these relations.

**Critical Sustainability = Critique of Unsustainability of the Economic System**

Analysis	Category	Criteria
Geographical focus	International (I), National (N), or Local (L)	Geographical scale necessary for the implementation of the strategy
Type of approach	Top-down (TD), Bottom-up (BU)	Strategies pursued by the highest level of system (usually expert-led); Strategies that are designed for components or local contexts (usually community-led)
Ecological	Sustainable economic (SE), Policy distribution (PD)	Strategies that address the physical volume of throughput that might put the carrying capacity of an ecosystem at risk (e.g., resource use, pollutant emissions); Strategies that address the supply of goods among people, division of environmental costs, and environmental justice (e.g., wealth management, social payments, public goods)
Efficient allocation (EA)		Strategies that address an efficient division of the resource flow between alternative product uses to maximize individual performance, in order to maximize well-being per unit of resource use (e.g. energy efficiency, redirecting investments to ecological conservation)

Correspondence with Dialectical Analysis:	Identification of broad degrowth goals, topics, and keywords used in the GT process.
<b>Nature: Environmental Conservation</b>	<b>Goal 1: Reduce the environmental impact of human activities</b> consumption impacts; ecological conservation; infrastructures; pollutant emissions; production impacts; resource use; trade impacts
<b>Societies: Economic Redistribution</b>	<b>Goal 2: Redistribute income and wealth both within and between countries</b> access to goods and services; equity; global governance; socioeconomic opportunities
<b>Societies: Political Democratization and Cultural Emancipation</b>	<b>Goal 3: Promote the transition from materialistic to a convivial and participatory society</b> community building, education, and value change; democracy and participation; free time; voluntary simplicity and downshifting

**DEGROWTH: A VOCABULARY FOR A NEW ERA**

ONLY AFTER THE LAST TREE HAS BEEN CUT DOWN WILL WE REALIZE THE LAST TREE WAS BEING CHOPPED

NO MATTER HOW GREEN WE MAKE OUR LIFESTYLES, CAPITALISM IS NOT SUSTAINABLE.

DEGROWTH VIENNA

NEW ROOTS. SOLIDARITIES. CONNECTIONS.

**From CSR to RSC: A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy of Corporate Social Responsibility**  
Marisol Sandoval, City University, London  
Review of Radical Political Economics 2015, 47(4) 608-624

**Table 1. Ways of thinking about CSR.**

Reductionism	Projectionism	Dualism	Dialectics
Reduces social responsibilities to profit goals: social problems as profitable business opportunities	Projects social responsibilities onto profit goals: responsible profit generation	Separates profit goals and social responsibilities from each other: generating profit and acting socially responsible	Describes profit goals and social responsibilities as contradictory: structural irresponsibility of profit generation

Within the discourse on CSR diverging viewpoints exist regarding [...] the traditional corporate goal of maximizing profits [...]: reductionism, projectionism, dualism, and dialectics.

This perspective reveals an antagonism between the corporate and the social that points to the impossibility of CSR. Critical CSR research thus far has failed to draw the necessary conclusions from [...] the structural flaws of the concept of CSR. I suggest a new concept turning CSR off its head

CSR must be turned into responsibility to socialize corporations (RSC) as logical continuation of a dialectical perspective on CSR that considers [...] antagonisms between profit & social responsibility

**From Societal to Corporate Sustainability – Mainstream Perspectives on CSR: Concepts and Definitions of CSR and Corporate Sustainability: Between Agency and Communion**  
Manreva (2003). *Journal of Business Ethics* 44, 95-105

**On the Nature of Corporate Sustainability**  
Moser, Koebel & Hoffmann (2020). *Organization & Environment* 33(2), 319-341

**Concepts and forms of greenwashing: a systematic review**  
Kunzler, J.R. & Smith, B. (2020). The greenwashing triangle: Adapting from field to theory. *Environmental Science and Technology*, 54(11), 5112-5122

**GREENWASHING**

**Bound to Fail? Exploring the Systemic Pathologies of CSR and Their Implications for CSR Research**  
Schneider, A. (2020). *Business & Society*, 59(7), 1303-1338

**Bound to Fail? Exploring the Systemic Pathologies of CSR and Their Implications for CSR Research**  
Anselm Schneider

**Figure 1. The dynamics of capitalism as systemic constraints**

**Abstract**  
Among critics of corporate social responsibility (CSR), there is growing concern that CSR is largely ineffective as a corrective to the shortcomings of capitalism, namely, the negative effects of business on society and the underlying of public goods. At the same time, researchers suggest that despite the shortcomings of CSR, it is possible to make it more effective in a targeted manner. To explore the frequent failure of corporate CSR practices and to explore the possibilities of remedying them, I examine the close relationship between CSR, the persistent expansion of capitalism, and the pressure that capitalism puts on companies to legitimize their business operations. My analysis shows that the failure of CSR to serve as a corrective to the problematic effects of capitalism is, in fact, an inevitable consequence of the expansion of capitalism. On this basis, I suggest that capitalism limits the possibilities of making CSR more effective, argue for change on the systemic level of capitalism, and explore the way in which CSR research can contribute to this political endeavor.

**New Concept: From CSR to RSC – Responsibility to Socialize Corporations**  
RSC is a reminder of the possibility of socially responsible economic alternatives beyond capitalism, which realize collective decision power and satisfy social needs rather than individualized profit goals

- Democratize the workplace (e.g. workers right to participate in, corporate decision-making process including wages and working hours, support worker unions and worker-owned cooperatives)
- Reduce poverty and socio-economic inequality (e.g. redistribution of wealth, guaranteed basic income; worldwide minimum wages & laws against child-labor; reduction of working week; unhindered migration; cancellation of Third World debt; public health care, pensions, education, infrastructure ...)
- Strengthen democracy (e.g. public funding of civil society & social movements, direct forms of political decision making, freely accessible political education)
- Restrict corporate power (e.g. economic regulations, control of capital flows, nationalization of banking system, public funding of watchdog organizations that report about corporate crimes ...)
- Strengthen tendencies beyond capitalism [...] based on the idea of the common (e.g. abolition of intellectual property rights, support of initiatives such as open source movement ...)

[R]adical reformism that combines social movement activism, bottom-up alternative projects, and structural reforms [...] create a socially responsible society based on the radically democratic organization of the economy and politics as an alternative to capitalism.

**5th Recent Event:**  
7 Oct. **GLOBAL FORUM ON #DEMOCRATIZING WORK**

**PROGRAM 2021**

- 5 OCT - DEMOCRATIZE
- 6 OCT - DECOMMODIFY
- 7 OCT - DECARBONIZE

3043 attendees from 85 countries  
387 speakers, 36 nat. chapters  
129 panels in 9 languages  
Recordings available in coming weeks

**Agitation: From op-ed to manifesto**  
On 16 May 2020, the op-ed turned movement, **WORK, DEMOCRATIZE**, was published in more than 43 newspapers, in 27 languages, in 36 countries around the world. It has since gathered thousands of signatures – including academics, activists and people everywhere who believe that “working humans are so much more than resources”.

**Innovation: From manifesto to the first Global Forum on Democratizing Work**  
Orchestration: From ad hoc efforts to an organized #DemocratizingWork movement

**OSF043. Democratizing Work in Turkey: The Effect of COVID-19 on Work and Employment in Turkey**  
OSF115. Democratizing Work: Organizational paths of experiences  
OSF213. Democratizing Work Through Employee Ownership  
OSF318. Reconceptualizing India's Environmental Paradigm  
OSF415. Practical implications on Democratizing the Firm

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Democratizing Work Means Changing Structures Of Domination And Empowering Employees To Develop Civil Society