

# IdeaFest: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works and Research from Humboldt State University

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Volume 3 *ideaFest: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works and Research from Humboldt State University*

Article 12

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2019

## An Addiction to Capitalism: A Rhetorical Criticism of Mainstream Environmentalism

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### Recommended Citation

Engel, Jake (2019) "An Addiction to Capitalism: A Rhetorical Criticism of Mainstream Environmentalism," *IdeaFest: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works and Research from Humboldt State University*: Vol. 3 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ideafest/vol3/iss1/12>

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# An Addiction to Capitalism: A Rhetorical Criticism of Mainstream Environmentalism

## **Acknowledgements**

Dr. Frye of the Communication Department assisted with minor feedback

# An Addiction to Capitalism: A Criticism of Mainstream Environmentalist Rhetoric

Jake Engel<sup>1\*</sup>

**ABSTRACT**— Inspired by research on the politics of sustainability and the rhetoric of the political economy, this paper will analyze and critique the rhetoric of mainstream environmentalism using Marxist theory. Specifically, my goal is to demonstrate and analyze how capitalism has co-opted environmentalism by individualizing and thus commodifying outrage inspired by the justice movement, reflecting Marx’s critique of capitalism’s malleability in the face of public outrage. As will be demonstrated, Marxist theory warns that this adaptation is only possible so long as the veneration of capitalism remains axiomatic. As such, this analysis is complimented with scholarship on neoliberal ideology to demonstrate how the corporate co-optation of environmentalism has led to what Antonio Gramsci referred to as a “Passive Revolution.” In this light, an internationally recognized “solution” known as Cap-and-Trade is also criticized for following a similar path of commodification. As such, I offer a preliminary course of action based on the global research of economist Thomas Piketty and recognize the tangible progress of Representative Ocasio-Cortez and her proposed Green New Deal. I conclude with the need for further research and scholarly collaboration in the ongoing dialogue on the best discourse and praxis to harness a path towards a sustainable future.

**KEYWORDS**—*environmentalism, Neoliberalism, Marxism, sustainable development, green capitalism, rhetorical criticism, social movements, co-optation*

There is a formidable myth in our political discourse that assumes that greater environmental protection will result from greater wealth. This myth has its roots in the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC), a theory developed in 1991 by Princeton economists Gene Grossman and Alan Krueger (Steinberg, 2015, p. 216) positing that as societies grow richer, environmental degradation will lower due to elevated eco-stewardship engendered by entrepreneurial innovation. This theory is wrong (Wanner, 2015, p. 953; Steinberg, 2015, p. 216). It is well established in the scholarship of environmental studies that wealth does not diminish pollution, but aggravates it instead (Clement, 2011, p. 954; Wheelan, 2010, p. 44; Wanner, 2015, p. 953; Stern, 2004, p. 2; Steinberg, 2015, p. 216). Critically, this scholarship illuminates the often-wide gap that exists between the public costs of production (pollution, environmental degradation, etc.) and the private costs of production (investments made in products by producers and consumers). These gaps, also known as externalities, result in market failures because the private transactions

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Engel, J. 2019. An addiction to capitalism: a criticism of mainstream environmentalist rhetoric. *ideaFest Journal: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works & Research from Humboldt State University* 3: 68–76.

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that keep an economy afloat worsen the health of society *as a whole* (Wheelan, 2010, p. 44).

While this rebuttal may be empirically established, the ideology packaged in the EKC maintains a tight grip on popular conceptions of “common sense,” entrenching itself in the status quo of policy—namely green capitalism. Green capitalism is an institutional framework established through mainstream environmentalism in which consumers are encouraged to “buy green” in the hopes that they are helping the climate in some shape or form. However, their perceived contribution is akin to a drop in the bucket compared to the high levels of fossil fuels

used to produce these products. While for-profit corporations continue to expand their enterprises and degrade the environment, they give lip-service to environmentalism in the form of “sustainable packaging” or “donations to wildlife preservation.”

To that end, this paper will analyze and critique the rhetoric of mainstream environmentalism using Marxist theory. Specifically, my goal is to demonstrate and analyze how capitalism has co-opted environmentalism through the individualization and commodification of the justice movement, thus reflecting Marx’s critique of capitalism’s malleability in the face of public opprobrium. As will be shown, Marxist theory warns that such adaptation is only possible so long as the veneration of capitalism remains axiomatic. In doing so, this analysis will also recognize capitalism’s topological nature, demonstrating how class oppression maintains its stability through the capitalist transmogrification of justice movements, like environmentalism, into a classist demonstration of privilege. Before said engagements though, it is necessary to trace the origins of contemporary practices in mainstream environmentalism.

According to Nathaniel Rich of the *New York Times*, contemporary environmentalism can be traced to a series of events initiated by Rafe Pomerance, a Washington lobbyist and environmentalist, and James Hansen, former director of NASA’s Goddard Institute (Rich, 2018). In 1979, Pomerance organized for world-renowned scientist Gordon MacDonald to meet with President Carter’s top scientist, Frank Press (Rich, 2018, 1.). After an ominous presentation of the data and hazards of climate change, Press ordered Jules Charney, the father of modern meteorology, to organize a meeting with the nation’s top climate scientists, including James Hansen, to determine whether the information was accurate enough to be presented to President Carter (Rich, 2018, 1.).

Producing what would be known as the Charney Report, these scientists compared highly advanced computer models of weather systems with one another, fiercely debating calculations, which differed by fractions of a percent. For example, according to a model designed by Hansen, if the atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> doubles from pre-Industrial levels, the world would heat by 4 degrees Celsius (Rich, 2018, 3.). On the other hand, another model suggested only 2 degrees of warming from the same concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>. As Rich ominously notes,

“The difference between the two predictions, between warming of two degrees and four degrees, was the difference between thinning forests and forests enveloped by desert, between catastrophe and chaos” (Rich, 2018, 3.).

Ultimately, the Charney Report concluded that “... when carbon dioxide [levels] double in 2035 or thereabouts, global temperatures would increase between 1.5 and 4.5 degrees Celsius, with the most likely outcome of three degrees” (Rich, 2018, 3.). For the next four decades and beyond, this report would inform numerous international negotiations and treaties aimed at hindering a changing climate. However, once Ronald Reagan was elected President and neoliberalism planted its seeds in American and international government, leading scientists like Hansen questioned “...whether what had seemed to be the beginning had actually been the end” of their progress (Rich, 2018, 6.).

As one can imagine, this report spelled trouble for Big Business, specifically the Fossil Fuel industry. The world’s best scientists had come together to emphatically predict global catastrophe by 2035 if CO<sub>2</sub> levels didn’t lower. This meant drastic measures would have to be taken on a global scale to hinder CO<sub>2</sub> concentration fast enough to secure a healthy planet before time ran out. In defense of profit then, the Fossil Fuel industry had to convince enough people that economic growth and environmental stewardship could complement each other. They had to convince the world of green capitalism.

Green capitalism came to the forefront of environmentalism in 1983 when Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland was chosen by the Secretary General of the United Nations to lead the Brundtland Commission, a commission that was charged with overseeing global environmental and economic development (Carruthers, 2001). What is important to note about this commission is that, in contrast to earlier forms of environmentalism which understood “sustainability” as the philosophy and practice of challenging hegemonic institutions of production under the guise of planetary limits to growth, the commission manipulated this narrative to *maintain* these institutions under the direction of market-oriented solutions to eco-degradation through the rhetoric of “sustainable development”. Famously, Brundtland declared in the Brundtland Report that “Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising

the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Carruthers, 2018, p. 98). While this sounds agreeable, the rhetoric was quite strategic (Measter and Japp 1998). Brundtland's goal was to secure the trust of environmentalists while maintaining the privilege of corporate elitists to operate under vast deregulation and neoliberal ideology; her statement was "friendly" enough to captivate environmentalists while maintaining enough ambiguity to wink at the business community in fidelity. What would follow are decades of neoliberal global policies aimed at fattening the fat cats while degrading the environment in virtually any way that produced profit.

Consequently, such connivance has fomented habits of trickery among several multinational corporations (MNCs). According to Phaedra Pezzullo in *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice*, for example, "October was designated National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in 1984 by Zeneca, a subsidiary of Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd" (Pezzullo, 2009, p. 108). Initially, then, we were led to praise Zeneca (which later merged to become AstraZeneca) for their leadership in promoting awareness of Breast Cancer. As Pezzullo notes, AstraZeneca "...could be saving women's lives [as] increased awareness motivates a greater number of women to be screened for cancer" (Pezzullo, 2009, p. 110). One of the most insidious characteristics of corporate promotions of social responsibility, however, is what they *don't* convey.

Critically, what AstraZeneca has done is engage in the "co-optation" of a social justice and environmental issue (Pezzullo, 2009, p. 112). Co-optation is a term used by environmentalists to refer to any institution of hegemony that "shares" the promotion of a certain issue with the very disenfranchised groups who are affected by it. While some may view this as a progressive step in corporate behavior, Pezzullo notes that "The problem of corporate public relations is to reposition commodities whose production and consumption may be damaging to the physical environment as 'earth-friendly'" (Pezzullo, 2009, p. 112). For example, the Toxic Links Coalition (TLC) was formed in 1994 in response to AstraZeneca's deceiving rhetoric (Pezzullo, 2009, p. 113). Specifically, TLC has argued that AstraZeneca "...profits first by producing many of the toxins implicated in the breast cancer epidemic and then by selling the drugs used to treat the disease" (Pezzullo, 2009, p. 114). In other words, by poisoning women's bodies and then selling them drugs

as therapy, AstraZeneca has positioned itself as both the cause and the "solution" to breast cancer. As a result, TLC wants to "Shift public discourse about breast cancer from promoting mammograms to 'what might be causing breast cancer' or to 'the environmental causes of cancer'" (Pezzullo, 2009, p. 114).

This, of course, is just one example of corporate contradictions in their rhetoric of sustainability. According to Peter Dauvergne in "The Sustainable Story: Exposing Truths, Half-Truths, and Illusions," MNCs are making grandiose claims such as "100 percent recycling; zero waste to landfill; 100 percent sustainable sourcing; 100 percent carbon neutrality" and more (Dauvergne, 2016, p. 391). In the case of Coca-Cola, this MNC has even managed to partner with the prominent non-governmental organization, The World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), for Arctic conservation. In lieu of their 2014 deal, if Coca-Cola matched WWF donations of \$1 million, WWF agreed to promote Coca-Cola's brand on their website as a sustainable company, "...praising [them] for their generosity" (Dauvergne, 2016, p. 394). In fact, after Coca-Cola labeled its cans with polar bears for a month in 2011, WWF declared that this MNC is "...more important, when it comes to sustainability, than the United Nations" (Dauvergne, 2016, p. 394). Critically then, as MNCs disingenuously boast of their sustainable practices, an insidious marketing strategy called "greenwashing" has supported their rhetoric.

According to Nick Feinstein in "Learning from Past Mistakes: Future Regulation to Prevent Greenwashing," greenwashing is broadly defined as any "...false assertion [or] claim that exaggerates, misdirects, or misleads consumers as to the environmental qualities of a product" (Feinstein, 2016, p. 233). As such, when companies boast of the sustainable foundations of their products, the logic underpinning their rhetoric encourages further engagement with the market as a means to protest that very market. Critically, "...the late 1980s created a new breed of consumer who demanded environmentally responsible products. Almost overnight, green consumerism transformed the niche market for ecologically safe products into a mainstream industry" (Feinstein, 2016, p. 230).

For example, in "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?," Michael Maniates argues that mainstream environmentalism has commodified and individualized climate action by holding consumers accountable for their purchasing habits as opposed to

targeting the Fossil Fuel industry for maintaining the status quo of production (Maniates, 2012, p. 34). In other words, rather than encourage open political engagement to challenge the power structures of a class system, mainstream environmentalism has transmogrified the social infrastructure of its movement into a classist product with a price tag. In this way, capitalism maintains its ability to commodify our bodies, our environments, and the needs of both through the continued nourishment of class asymmetries via the privatized and thus privileged access to certain goods deemed “appropriate” by mainstream environmentalism. In this light, it is now necessary to unpack precisely how environmentalism can be “commodified” by examining the nature of a commodity.

According to Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*, Part 1, “A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (Tucker, 1978, p. 303). As implicated in this definition, the nature of a commodity can be understood by articulating the difference between a “need” and a “want” and how both are often conflated through social conditioning. A useful reference is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod 2018). This hierarchy is demonstrated in a triangle, like that of a food pyramid. On the very bottom are basic physiological needs like adequate food, shelter, and environment; as the level increases, higher needs like community and self-esteem become central to one’s health. Meeting these higher needs can be difficult though, since people vary in how to define, establish, and maintain healthy communities and self-esteem. As a result of this ambiguity, these needs are often left malnourished and are thus more susceptible to systemic translation into culturally conditioned wants such as over-consumption and lifestyles defined by material goods. Critically, this dialectic of desire is evidenced in the environmental rhetoric of sacrifice (Meyer 2010).

Under the guise of limiting consumption to sustain ecosystems, eco-conscious consumers exist on a dialectic between what Todd McGowan refers to as “societies of prohibition” and “societies of commanded enjoyment” (Stravakakis, 2006, p. 100). In societies of prohibition, individuals are asked by their peers and media to engage in asceticism for the health and safety of the community (Stravakakis, 2006, p. 100). In societies of commanded enjoyment, however, the asceticism required by previous acts of sacrifice is “rewarded” through the mediated encouragement of over-consumption (Stravakakis, 2006, p.

100). Accordingly, eco-conscious consumers are found both yearning for moral approval from the rhetoric of sacrifice, and eager to “earn” their visas into societies of commanded enjoyment to extol and engage in cathartic materiality. Conveniently, the connivance of capitalist constructions of desire makes the supposed cathartic nature of said materiality an unreachable state of mind, teasing consumers with the ideology of satisfaction as if by dangling a carrot in front of a working horse (Stravakakis, 2006, p.100). In this way, the politics of consumption are maintained through a “...tripartite nexus connecting economy, desire, and power” (Stravakakis, 2006, p. 100), each category reinforcing a culturally engineered syllogism of obedience. (As Maniates notes, “In our struggle to bridge the gap between our morals and our practices, we stay busy – but busy doing that which we’re most familiar and comfortable: consuming our way to a better world”) (Maniates, 2012, p. 37).

Accordingly, the rhetoric of mainstream environmentalism can be best understood with reference to the Marxist saying, “First as Tragedy, Then as Farce” (Tucker, 1978, p. 594). In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx applied his theory of historical materialism—the idea that material conditions have historically influenced thoughts, behaviors, and outcomes—to illuminate how power was merely recycled by the French Revolution (Tucker, 1978, pp. 600, 601, 606). He noted that after Napoleon Bonaparte inspired the French peasants by helping them overthrow the Monarchy of Louis Phillippe, his nephew, Louis Bonaparte, took advantage of this populist wave and established himself in a farcical Bourgeois republic (Tucker, 1978, pp. 192, 193).

Because French farmers were so poor and alienated from the rest of society, they had no way of representing themselves in the larger system (Tucker, 1978, p. 608). Recognizing a political opportunity to capitalize on a vulnerable population then, Louis Bonaparte persuaded them that he could improve their conditions. What happened, however, was that the farmers became victims of control under his regime, and the corresponding bourgeois class maintained its power. Bonaparte had used his position to milk all the money from their small holdings through taxes to enrich himself and the Bourgeoisie to maintain the status quo of power distribution (Tucker, 1978, pp. 610, 611, 612). Moreover, the term “tragedy” alone is critical in understanding the contemporary context of environmentalism.

This term was coined by the Ancient Greeks to describe a popular genre of theater in which the ending always resulted in the death of the main character. Critically, what made this genre a tragedy was the fact that there was always an inherent quality of the main character which made their death inevitable. Upon reflection of green capitalism then, not only are most corporate claims of sustainable practices "...false, misleading, or unsubstantiated" (Feinstein, 2016, p. 233), but a popular contradiction in environmental studies called the Jevon's Paradox is reinforced (Clement, 2011, p. 954).

The Jevon's Paradox, a theory coined by British economist William Stanley Jevons, notes that if companies innovate their production to require less resource use, then net usage of that resource will actually *increase* (Clement, 2011, p. 954). For example, Jevons observed that "Increases in the efficiency of the production of coal meant greater profits, which would attract more investment, ultimately expanding the scale of coal production" (Clement, 2011, p. 954). Moreover, according to a state-level analysis of carbon emissions in the United States from 1963–1997, "The average carbon intensity declined by about 30%, while the average amount of total CO<sub>2</sub> generated by the sample used in this study increased by slightly more than 122%. During the same period, the average increase in total economic product was roughly 242%" (Clement, 2011, p. 954). Accordingly, even if companies reduce their emissions and engage in sustainable practices, the fact that participation in capitalism necessitates endless economic growth means we must do one of two things: regulate corporations or explore a different system of production.

With respect to the first solution, the most popular internationally recognized method of carbon reduction is a program called Cap-and-Trade (Kill, Ozinga, Pavett, et al. 2010). Under this program, most governments of industrialized countries distribute tradeable permits to qualifying polluting businesses (Kill, Ozinga, Pavett, et al., 2010, pp. 29, 30). These permits allow companies to emit carbon up to a limit, or a cap, set by the respective governments of the international agreement. Accordingly, this program follows quintessential market logic: if a company is wealthier and able to innovate, they will have left-over permits with which to trade less innovative companies for money (Kill, Ozinga, Pavett, et al. 2010). The intended result is such that no company is "overregulated" and can instead increase their bottom line through appropriate behavior (Kill, Ozinga, Pavett, et al., 2010, pp. 17, 32; Steinberg pp. 98, 112). Here's the catch: the system lacks

rigorous oversight (Kill, Ozinga, Pavett, et al., 2010, pp. 27, 43, 52).

Inevitably, this means wealthy companies are incentivized to deceive regulators, continue polluting at current rates, and profit from poorer businesses via the exchange of "left-over" permits for money (Kill, Ozinga, Pavett, et al., 2010, p. 45). As such, the program of Cap-and-Trade has invented a market wherein businesses have legitimate claims to property rights over their emissions in the form of these permits. Therefore, this internationally practiced regulation has managed to commodify the very air we breathe by asking citizens to pay taxes for access to quality air in the form of a highly ineffective regulation. In this case, of course, the commodity represents a legitimate need, but this need becomes privatized, resulting in a want-based market. The other option (a different system of production) faces a formidable ideological barrier in neoliberalism.

Before examining this option, it would behoove me to explain the ideology of neoliberalism since it has been used throughout this paper. According to David Harvey in "A Brief History of Neoliberalism," "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). In other words, neoliberalism is an ideological flavor of capitalism that favors deregulated competition, individuality, and grit as the means to achieving a prosperous society. This ideology sounds familiar (even comfortable) because it's the same ideology that has run much of the world since its launch into mainstream practice during the administrations of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

Surely, one might argue, it mustn't be *that* bad if every President since 1979 has incorporated its philosophy into the guiding principles of their administrations; certainly, each President has had the privilege of electoral success to attain such a position in the first place. As Harvey notes though, the ideological power of neoliberalism operates in a highly insidious manner (Harvey, 2005). If enough people have had to be convinced of neoliberalism's merit to maintain its philosophical bearings throughout every Presidential administration since Reagan, then the strategies of persuasion employed must take clandestine, all-encompassing forms to accomplish such mass deception (Harvey, 2005, pp. 39, 40).

In line with Luis Althusser's acute observation of Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser, 2014, pp. 80, 81), Harvey notes that the ideology of neoliberalism has been infused into everyday rituals and practices, masking itself as "common sense" (Harvey, 2005, pp. 39, 40, 41). We can reflect on Maniates's observation of the individualization of environmentalism to better understand this topology. Individuals no longer need direct persuasion of the merits of sustainable free enterprise before they purchase a new hybrid or other "eco-friendly" products. The ideology of neoliberalism has become so hypostasized through years of persistent marketing strategies, think tank studies, and elite academic cadres, that we've come to embody its philosophy as an unquestioned *performance*. Borrowing Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity, just like gender is an embodied performance ritualized into everyday acts of repetition no longer subject to conscious surveillance (Gunn & Treat, 2005, pp. 161, 163), neoliberalism has tainted all institutions of ideological bearing including education, political parties, media networks, and familial relationships to subsume "rational" decision-making under the parameters of unconscious conditioning (Althusser, 2014, pp. 80, 81, 83; Harvey, 2005, pp. 39, 40, 41). In this way, the barrier to realizing an alternative system of production is found right where pollution started in the first place—at the whim of the owners of polluting businesses (Tucker, 1978, pp. 174, 175).

According to Marx in Part 1 of the German Ideology, the ruling class maintains power through the promotion of its ideology as "...the common interest of all the members of society" (Tucker, 1978, p. 174). For example, Marx suggested that the "Trick of proving the hegemony of the spirit in history is thus confined" to separating those in power from their ideas (Tucker, 1978, p. 175). In other words, so long as we ignore the connection between those in power and the corresponding ideology that complements their power, the hegemony of Bourgeois ideology will remain veiled as that of the people. Reinforcing this hegemony is the discourse of catastrophism (Foust and Murphy, 2009, pp. 153, 154, 161; Yuen, 2012, pp. 19, 20, 32).

In Foust's "Revealing and Reframing Apocalyptic Tragedy in Global Warming," the doomsday rhetoric of environmentalism in mainstream media is problematized as encouraging a sense of inevitability, thereby restricting individual spirit to enact change (Foust, 2009, pp. 152, 153). For example, Foust begins by referencing Al Gore's award-winning documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, as a

vantage point off which to analyze and critique popular conceptions of the environment through the lens of epideictic rhetoric. In this film, Gore overwhelms the audience with incessant visions of real-life disaster only to conclude that the best strategy to combat climate change is to adopt an individualistic approach and vote with our dollars. As such, Foust critiques this narrative, arguing that by situating disaster as inevitable and its solution as individually oriented, we strip individuals of their sense of collective agency and motive to take more ambitious measures that extend beyond the market (Foust, 2009, pp. 153, 154). As a result, Foust argues, the rhetoric of catastrophe (or apocalypse) mediates individual behavior to remain entrenched in the capitalist framework as if through a placebo effect (Foust, 2009, p. 153).

Moreover, as Yuen notes in "The Politics of Failure Have Failed: The Environmental Movement and Catastrophism," the discourse of catastrophe has an antiquated record in our collective memory, resulting in a sense of "catastrophe fatigue" (Yuen, 2012, p. 20). For example, in the film *2012*, the media industry took advantage of a Mayan prediction that the world would end that year. Once this prophecy was proven false in 2013, the film was merely added to a *rising pile* of blockbuster, catastrophe-oriented media. Accordingly, not only does the rhetoric of catastrophism plague public spirit with fatigue and a consequential loss of perceived agency, but this process inevitably supports capitalism as the best institutional framework to channel a complex mixture of fear, frustration, and said fatigue (Yuen, 2012, p. 32). Specifically, Yuen refers to this process as "catastrophe capitalism" in which markets adapt to environmental criticisms by adjusting their presence to appear more eco-conscious (Yuen, 2012, p. 33). Ironically, just like AstraZeneca was both part of the cause and the solution to breast cancer, capitalism as a socioeconomic system seems to be both crisis-ridden and crisis-dependent (Yuen, 2012, p. 33).

To that end, if the only viable option to prevent a global catastrophe by 2035 is being blocked by the social conditioning of the masses by the few, then perhaps the Industrial Revolution and the ideology that ensued were the beginning of the end of a historic addiction—an addiction to capitalism. Specifically, Thomas Wanner notes that we have entered a stage in this addiction which Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci coined a "Passive Revolution" (Wanner, 2015, p. 25). A passive revolution, according to Gramsci, is one in which "Counter-hegemonic challenges to the dominant capitalist order are co-opted

and neutralized through changes and concessions which re-establish the consent in that order" (Wanner, 2015, p. 25). In other words, we have entered a stage in which the very forces predicted to cause a global demise in the coming decades have adapted to their loudest critics to maintain the status quo through the appearance of progress while simultaneously nourishing class oppression. As part of this adaptation, the ruling class has adopted what economic historian Karl Polanyi termed "fictitious commodities" (Wanner, 2015, p. 25).

According to Polanyi, the term "fictitious commodities" refers to anything that becomes commodified, yet is not meant to be exchanged in the market (hence its fictitious character) (Wanner, 2015, p. 25). Although I have argued that nature, or at least the *idea* of nature, is commodified in the form of hybrids and myriad other "eco" products, the international program of Cap-and-Trade more accurately reflects Polanyi's definition. Under Cap-and-Trade, companies can commodify and privatize healthy air through legitimate claims to property rights of their carbon emissions under the guise of permit use. As such, citizens are then asked by the government to pay taxes to distribute these permits for access to quality air. As discussed though, the oversight and enforcement mechanisms of this program are next to nothing, making the commodification of air free to companies in the position to attain permits. Accordingly, Polanyi mentioned fictitious commodities in his book, *The Great Transformation*, to describe an insidious process by which capitalism slowly subsumes and commodifies everything in society until nothing is barred from producing profit (Wanner, 2015, p. 25).

In this respect, it seems like capitalism, regardless of a neoliberal taint, is proving to be biophysically unsustainable in a culture defined by infinite growth on a planet constrained by limits to resource use. In response to the potential of a withdrawal from such a toxic relationship then, this global addiction has reached the stage of farce—or repetition through irony. As discussed, consumers have become more critical of the lack of eco-stewardship among industry leaders, and are thus demanding more sustainable methods of production. The results, however, have been the corporate greenwashing of products, the reinforcement of class oppression, and the inefficient regulation of industry to deceive consumers into being content with an illusion of progress.

Upon recognition of this dim forecast, there have been several calls to resist "inevitable catastrophe" through

the ecological transformation of the political economy (Hawken, Lovins, Lovins 1999; Akuno, Nangwaya 2017; Kurtzleben 2019). Among the most recent and popular is Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's plan for a Green New Deal (GND) (Kurtzleben 2019). In short, the GND, a bold iteration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's original New Deal of the 1930s, will entail a stimulus package which pairs populist concerns over class oppression with environmental concerns over a changing climate and environmental degradation by implementing a sweeping set of economic reforms under the guise of a green and just economy. Critically, this vision is echoed by esteemed political journalist Naomi Klein's argument that to properly address the hazards of a changing climate, politicians, cultural activists, and educators alike should bridge the gap between two sets of concerns (a changing climate and class oppression) which, to some, may not have seemed intuitively connected (Klein 2011). The logic behind this convergence is quite sound though. The same global plutocracy responsible for changing the climate is also responsible for the highest levels of wealth inequality in world history. As such, addressing one issue should not have to come at the expense of addressing the other; in fact, doing so would be neglectful policy.

To that end, while details on the proposal are still developing, the general idea is to support a number of public investments to reshape the political and environmental structure of the economy. These investments would include programs like universal healthcare, adopting a 70% marginal income tax on top earners, followed by a timely transition to 100% clean energy (Kurtzleben 2019; Jacobson 2019). In response to this proposal, Senator Sanders recently invited Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez to a climate summit to discuss the matter. During this time, both acknowledged the unprecedented magnitude of political will and commitment that such a proposal would require (Green 2018). In fact, Ocasio-Cortez declared that properly addressing climate change will be the "Civil Rights movement of our time," noting that any proposal to address the issue must match the gravity of the problem it seeks to solve (Green 2018).

To be sure, the GND will likely be established in the framework of a capitalist market. This will require a set of regulations and other forms of oversight to ensure that green washing dissipates and that Cap-and-Trade will either be conducted with more enforcement, or be replaced by a stronger program. One idea, voiced by renowned French economist Thomas Piketty in his groundbreaking

analysis *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, is a global tax on capital (Piketty pp. 451-455; Mason 2014). While the GND is no doubt a bold step in the compression of inequality, it ignores a sobering detail about the multi-dimensional structure of said inequality—namely the difference between inequality of income and inequality of wealth. Since wealth (or capital) is not accumulated from labor but rather from assets, it is far more mobile and thus remains geographically unconstrained by the inhabitation of its owner.

In short, those who are powerful enough to own capital have the legal privilege to hide that capital across the globe in politically benign territories known as tax havens (the Cayman Islands being amongst the most popular) (Peretti 2016). These tax havens help the 0.01% shield the bulk of their finances from being redistributed through taxes. In this light, Piketty's call for a global tax on capital matches the gravity of the situation in two ways. First, it recognizes the root of inequality and does not mistake earned income for accumulated assets. Second, it addresses the scale of the problem by spanning the globe and not constraining action to geographic limitations. A hefty tax on income is productive, but it provides a national solution to an international crisis. (To be clear, most of the world's wealth does originate from the United States. Esteemed economist Branko Milanovic illustrated this well when he compared various countries' respective share of the global plutocracy (Milanovic, Ch. 1, pp. 36, 37). Moreover, it should be noted that Ocasio-Cortez is a Representative, not a Senator. This is important to mention because Representatives are not responsible for international policy, like treaties. They only engage in domestic politics.)

Therefore, while praising the GND's domestic efforts, it would be wise to supplement its domestic tax on income with a global tax on capital, like that recently proposed by 2020 Democratic Presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren (Yglesias 2019). In doing so, we would need to build on our alliances and call for a multi-faceted treaty to tax capital on a global scale. This would require, among other things, a demonstration that the U.S. honors these alliances at all (one of the most dangerous outcomes of President Trump's blatant disregard of our allies is that international crises like climate change and an ever-increasing global plutocracy will be left untouched due to an acute spike in an international flavor of individualism). Finally, with the revenue accumulated from such a tax, the U.N. should be provided with an independent

treasury department responsible for appropriating the funds on regulations and swift transformations to renewable energy around the globe.

As one may note, there has been no mention of any plan to transform the means of production. Moreover, the plan I *have* outlined should not be mistaken to typify an authoritative agenda; much further political analysis is required to comprehend the excruciatingly complex network of actors, values, processes, and institutions involved in addressing such ambitions. In this way, my goal has been to contribute to said dialogue by addressing, discerning, and complicating status quo conceptions of sustainability using critical theory. Perhaps someday, through the interdisciplinary collaboration of scholars, environmental scientists, and political philosophers, a productive course of action can be taken on a global scale to unite the struggles of the working class with those of the planet and future generations.

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