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Population, Markets, Political Economy, and Social Construction Views on Sustainability

The concept of sustainability is a difficult one to understand, however I interpret it as preserving the longevity of a system whether that system is an ecosystem, economy, or species. Therefore, sustainability should be a major consideration for any type of socioeconomic approach and great care should be taken to conserve its viability and ability to reproduce. Throughout this course, a variety of different perspectives towards the interactions between humans and the environment have been described yet these all define sustainability in either very technical or very ethical ways. In addition, each approach identifies solutions to their shortcomings as if our species will always be able to survive in the end. However, it is my belief that a sustainable solution to the pressing issues of overpopulation, climate change, and the threat of economic collapse can only be attained through achieving a delicate balance between many of these perspectives. Through analyzing the four different approaches of population and scarcity, markets and commodities, political economy, and social constructivism, I hope to convey my understanding of how our planet and species can become more sustainable.

As the human population continues to grow exponentially and the availability of food and resources increases at an arithmetic rate, the question is raised as to whether we can achieve a sustainable solution to this growth. There is no question that overpopulation is an issue as our society continues to progress. However, there are conflicting perspectives on whether the degradation of our planet is caused by this overpopulation. A popular approach towards current environmental issues and overpopulation commonly employed by the upper societal classes is one rooted in the beliefs of Malthusian thought. Fundamentally, this concept relies on the perspective that the geometric growth of the human population is the single greatest threat to the sustainability of our species and the best way to solve this issue is through the moral restraint of women. It is obvious that the Malthusian mindset was developed in a time where women did not have the same rights and equality as men. However, many of Malthus’s claims about the relationship between society and the environment are proven to be correct despite his failure to account for components like affluence and technology. After Malthus’s time, many countries went through periods of industrial revolutions and experienced vast innovations in technology. As a result, this development gave arise to new conflicting beliefs that technology plays the largest role in the sustainability of our species. Typically, more developed countries have lower birth rates than third world countries due to a higher level of women’s rights. As a result, there is a misconception that the most effective way of mitigating humans environmental impact is through bolstering development in undeveloped countries. Yet developed societies like the U.S. and China have much larger ecological footprints per capita and if the entire planets consumption was at the same level, our species carrying capacity would drastically decrease. Marxism conflicts with Malthusian thought here and dictates that environmental crises such as poverty, food scarcity, and habitat loss are a direct result of the capitalist structure in these developed countries. The debate between whether environmental issues are a result of capitalism, overpopulation, or other outside factors will go on, yet data shows that our population will continue to grow. Therefore, what is truly the best way achieve sustainability in terms of a population and scarcity approach? The answer is not in China’s one child policy or in Malthus’s moral restraint of women and refusal to aid the poor. The most efficient solution is the most moral, and lies in the education and autonomy of women particularly in underdeveloped countries. The majority of women in countries with high birth rates do not have a say in the number of children they have. Through investing in women’s education worldwide and using places like Kerala India as an example for other countries, fertility rates will decrease and we will have the most efficient and sustainable solution towards population growth.

A market approach towards human’s relationship with the environment has an underlying optimism towards how a capitalist and free market society can exist while simultaneously mitigating our impact on the environment. Fundamentally, capitalism requires the exploitation of natural resources. However, a market approach says that there is a plethora of ways that humans can thrive in a capitalist society while ensuring the sustainability of our planet and species. The exponential growth of our population and the global trend toward free markets means that the demand for scarce resources should increase while the supply of these same resources will decrease which will ultimately drive up prices. Yet, the market response model illustrates that an increase in prices will lead to consumers either recycling these resources, using them more efficiently, or finding a substitute. This model is cyclical and should in theory mean our population and use of resources will be sustainable in the long run. Furthermore, in the ideal free market society where government is only in place to handle dishonesty and disputes, the Coase theorem would hold true. Externalities associated with environmental goods and services would be resolved with the most efficient outcome for both parties using bargaining and contractual agreements. In practice, the Coase theorem rarely exists because of a lack of truly free markets although there are still examples in which governments would issue tradable pollution credits that big corporations can buy and sell to operate more efficiently. This “cap and trade” system is one type of regulatory mechanism that is used in a market approach to reward large companies when they operate more efficiently. For a markets approach to exist into perpetuity, it requires innovation and the existence of resources to turn into commodities. For example, market factors may lead to the requirement of alternatives for coal and petroleum. An efficient alternative would be natural gas, however the means by which we acquire natural gas can be extremely destructive to the environment illustrated through “fracking”. The conflict between implementing the most efficient solution for a market and preserving human rights and the environment is a fundamental issue of this socioeconomic approach. This is a consequence of the success of markets being observed in anthropocentric terms that rely on the success of our economy. Ultimately, a market approach would answer the question of sustainability by looking at the cyclical nature of our economy and finding ways to innovate, create new technology, and become a more efficient society.

Where a market approach is focused around the current state of our economy and supports capitalist and free market societies, a political economic approach is completely critical of this view and says that industrialism has led directly to the environmental and social problems we are faced with. This approach is unique because it acknowledges that individuals can make moral decisions that affect our environment but ultimately, we have structured our economy where the uneven distribution of power means that government and big corporations are the biggest factor in achieving long term sustainability. Without radically changing the system we have created where the growth and acceleration of our capitalist society leads directly to increased environmental problems, humanity will never be sustainable. A Marxist view of modern capitalism is focused around the factors of labor, accumulation, and inevitable crises. In our current economy, resources have become privately owned instead of collectively owned which has led to people selling their labor on the market. In a capitalist market a laborer works for someone that owns the means of production and conditions of production to produce a commodity. The capitalists then underpay the workers for their labor so that they can receive a profit or surplus value when they sell these commodities to consumers in the market. The wage relation creates a hugely uneven distribution of wealth in which powerful individuals and large corporations become more and more powerful. This perspective is illustrated through huge corporations like Exxon Mobile having revenues far greater than the economies of individual countries. Changing markets and increased competition means that capitalists become obsessed with finding ways to grow and expand the system. Consequently, this leads to the abuse of labor, depletion of natural resources, and an increase in pollution all so that wealthy individuals can create more surplus value and accumulate more profit. Political economy and Marxist thought do not perceive this system to be sustainable due to its extremely volatile nature and believe that capitalism will eventually undermine economic and environmental conditions leading to widespread movements for a more socialist economy. Furthermore, unlike a market approach, the uneven development that causes clear distinctions in the well-being of different genders, classes, and races in our society is a key consideration of the political economy of nature. In theory, a political economic approach is moral and takes outside factors like people’s quality of life into consideration when characterizing the tie between nature and society. However, it can be dangerous because of its extremely anthropocentric focus and perception of capitalism as concrete. Without simultaneously taking environmental and economic issues into account, it is unlikely that this approach will be viable and sustainable.

A social constructivist approach towards sustainability is unique in that it views social discourses and narratives as having massive political and social implications because of their ability to direct policies, place blame, and develop solutions that may not be altogether sustainable. In many instances, it is critical of commonly used words when referring to our environment such as “wilderness” and “nature” because of the significant cultural and historical context of these words. Before Industrialism, the connotation surrounding the word wilderness was one that conjured up thoughts of a barren wasteland largely due to fundamental Christian beliefs around Adam and Eve. However, rapid expansion and development led to the scarcity of wilderness and it shifted our perception of the wild as somewhere that we can get closer to god instead of the devil’s domain. This is just one circumstance of where people may react and respond differently to discourse outside of its context and come to conclusions based on societal beliefs. This is crucial to understand when viewing sustainability from a social construction approach because it helps us reflect on how our actions and the actions of society can influence how we perceive our environment. The constant questioning of the reality we live in is a much more moral approach to viewing sustainability and criticizes flaws in the system and human rights in the same way that a political economic approach might. However, social constructivism examines fundamental ideologies in the ways that we view race, class, and gender. It takes historical contexts like European imperialism into account when looking at how we naturally perceive the differences in race. Furthermore, constructivism does not only focus on discourse when pondering society and the environment but also explores how and why specific institutions impact our understandings of what is true. Although this approach may seem like the most moral and intelligent way to view the world, it has many flaws. The perpetual questioning of our reality causes the problems of relativism and nihilism in which we cannot identify reliable information to act on. In conclusion, when looking at sustainability from a constructivist approach, radical relativism should be avoided yet we must understand that the narratives that our social and environmental beliefs are based on are material because they directly affect the extreme complexity of our natural world.

Through examining these four distinct socio-economic perspectives, I have concluded that the greatest threat towards the sustainability of our planet in my opinion is the exponential growth of the human species. Our current trend towards a global capitalist economy means that the system of commodifying nature, advancing technology, and supporting innovation will continue to accelerate until the ecological footprint of humanity is too great for the earth to withstand. The rapid increase of people on our planet will eventually lead to a level of consumption that will be detrimental to the preservation of our environment and species. As a result, we must be willing to accept this trend towards globalism and invest in universal human rights and the widespread education of women. Our old policies on consumption and industrialization will not be viable as our populations continue to grow. If we wish to continue to have the materials required for us to thrive, humanity must form a new approach towards these issues and establish a balance.