

06.21



Commentary

# Sustainable Consumption: A View from the Global South

Nikhil Varghese Mathew



SPRF.IN

June 2021

Commentary

# Sustainable Consumption: A View from the Global South

Nikhil Varghese Mathew

The centralisation of capital, as alluded to in this paper, and the expansion of the “world market,” is built around the need for multinational corporations to access larger markets, inexpensive labour and cheap sources of raw material (Suwandi et al., 2019).

The global discourse on sustainability has revolved around the need to transition towards “Sustainable Consumption” ever since it was introduced during the 1992 Earth Summit chaired by Maurice Strong, a Canadian businessman who made his wealth from the oil and gas industry. A couple of years later, the 1994 Oslo Symposium on “Sustainable Consumption” sought to resolve the ambiguities around the term’s definition and decided to define it as: “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations.” (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals n.d.).

However, mainstream developmental approaches have espoused, both in theory and practice, an ideological foundation for sustainable

consumption that is ignorant of the societal conditions enmeshed with production relations<sup>1</sup>. Instead, the effort is merely towards perpetuating ‘business as usual’. In seeking to posit individual consumption practices as being fundamentally at odds with sustainability, and in seeking to obfuscate the ontological interconnectedness between nature and society by supposing a dichotomous relationship between human development and the environment, “sustainability” (as is conceptualised by mainstream narratives) both decontextualises and ahistoricises socio-ecological interdependencies and extant material power relations (Dolan 2002).

This is evidenced by the following extract from the ‘Agenda 21’ report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The section on ‘Recognizing and Strengthening the Role of Indigenous People and their Communities’ notes: “International development agencies and Governments should commit financial and other resources to education and training for indigenous people and their communities to develop their capacities to achieve their sustainable self-development, and to contribute to and participate in sustainable and equitable development at the national level.” (United Nations 1993). Encouraging modes of development centered around the Global North and consequently free market arrangements, implies credence to the argument made that prevalent policy narratives around broader rubrics of developmental financing and sustainability are designed to allow capital and its advocates thereof to advocate for and lend legitimacy to the paradigm of “nature as capital” (Liodakis 2010; Foster 2014).

Impediments to capital accumulation are overcome through incentivising investments for previously nonexistent natural resource frontiers<sup>2</sup> (Sweezy 1967). Thinkers from the Global South thought have gone on to critique the role of multilateral agreements in commodifying nature, with scholars such as Archana Prasad stating in light of the REDD-Plus regime<sup>3</sup> and the perpetuation of ‘green capitalism’<sup>4</sup> that “REDD-Plus became a vehicle for promoting green capitalism in the wake of a severe capitalist crisis and the need to address concerns regarding dipping profits of corporations” (Prasad 2020).

The global economy has become the field of activity for giant corporations that control over 80% of world trade, where the production chain of commodities is fragmented into multiple links spread across the globe (Wiedmann et al., 2015). The fundamental restructuring of global production and trade networks that has accompanied efforts to entrench green capitalism has resulted in immiseration and expropriation of communities instead of achieving the stated aim of reducing

---

<sup>1</sup> Production relations here refers to the relationship between people structured by their ownership of either capital or labour power. Within a system of generalised commodity production, these relations of production are mediated by caste, patriarchy, and racism among other social cleavages. While these can be said to be pre-capitalist forms of exploitation, the logic of contemporary production relations results in their accommodation within the market economy, effectively resulting in a situation wherein the broad underclass of the socio-economically deprived subsidises costs of production.

<sup>2</sup> As seen in the neoliberalisation/ commodification of nature. For instance the commodification of the atmosphere in itself as a form of capital in the creation of carbon credits.

<sup>3</sup> Refer [here](#) for additional reading on the issue.

<sup>4</sup> Green Capitalism is the systematic belief that nature’s inherent value is in the monetary profit it makes. This approach is contradictory in nature since although it speaks of the “green” agenda, which implies putting a stop to depletion of Earth’s resources brought about by the “madness of economic reason”, it also advocates for capitalism, a system of accumulation which accounts for nature as a mere input to the accumulation of capital. Refer [here](#) for additional reading on the topic.

greenhouse gas emissions.

Through construing nature as “one vast gasoline station” (Harvey 2015) green capitalism and market environmentalism allows for practices such as corporate greenwashing that undermine efforts towards transcendental change, whilst concomitantly working “to shift the focus from the firm, create confusion, undermine credibility, criticize valuable alternatives, and deceptively promote the firm’s objectives” (Budinsky and Bryant 2013). Green capitalism necessitates reinforcing the conception of the non-human as an externality, placing the onus on the individual as an entity removed and disembodied from the larger matrix of societal phenomenon that produces consumption and production practices. Therefore, under the logic of contemporary production relations, precedence is accorded to micro-level behavioural changes as opposed to larger, structural issues that stitch together all aspects of modern living.

The centralisation of capital, as alluded to in this paper, and the expansion of the “world market,” is built around the need for multinational corporations to access larger markets, inexpensive labour and cheap sources of raw material (Suwandi et al., 2019). The process of the global expansion of capital, headquartered in the Global North, was restrained during the post-second world war period. This restraint has now disappeared with the reintroduction of the spontaneity of the system, resulting in the strengthening of the centralisation of capital on a global scale (Patnaik 2018). Thus, it is argued that the cornerstone of interactions between nation states, at the present stage of industrial development, is the inescapable reality that “a few major corporations from a small number of countries dominate the world market,” wherein through the significant movement of capital from the Global North to the Global South, we see a decentering of production across sectors (Suwandi 2019).

Decentering of production allows, through the restrictions placed on the mobility of labour and a contrasting free mobility accorded to capital, the drain of economic surplus from the global South by holding down wages (Patnaik and Patnaik 2015). In 2012 alone, the net flow of resources to the global North from developing economies was estimated to amount to USD 2 trillion (Suwandi et al., 2019). This exemplifies how multinational corporations are “sucking out the surplus of an economy without any quid pro quo” (ibid.) by higher rates of exploiting labour in the Global South, establishing globalisation of production upon the basis of wide wage differentials between central and periphery economies. Differentials that far exceed their differences in productivity.

The 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference is set to take place in Glasgow from the 1st November 2021. In light of this, it is important to reiterate that any genuine and effective exercise in sustainability must be predicated upon broad-ranging equity and social justice, while acknowledging and transcending problems presented by models of mainstream economic growth and development. The much-touted European Commission (2019) strategy document ‘Going Climate-Neutral by 2050’ outlines four axes of policy actions said to be necessary for ensuring carbon neutrality. Points two and three refer to the need to “scale up private investments” and to “provide the right signals to markets”. The strategy demonstrates the developed world’s preoccupation with pursuing ‘business as usual’, which can no longer be allowed to preempt all genuine efforts to arrest climate change.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Budinsky, Jennifer and Susan Bryant. (2013). “It’s Not Easy Being Green”: The Greenwashing of Environmental Discourses in Advertising.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 38: 207-226.

Dolan, Paddy. (2002). “The Sustainability of “Sustainable Consumption.” *Journal of Macromarketing* 22 (2): 170-81.

European Commission. (2019). *Going Climate-neutral By 2050: A Strategic Long-term Vision for a Prosperous, Modern, Competitive and Climate-Neutral EU Economy*. Luxembourg: Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Foster, John Bellamy. (2014). “Paul Burkett’s *Marx and Nature* Fifteen Years After.” *Monthly Review* 66 (7). Accessed 28 May 2021, <https://monthlyreview.org/2014/12/01/paul-burketts-marx-and-nature-fifteen-years-after/>.

Harvey, David. (2015). *Seventeen Contradictions And The End Of Capitalism*. London, United Kingdom: Profile Books.

Liodakis, George. (2010). “Political Economy, Capitalism and Sustainable Development.” *Sustainability* 2(8): 2601-2616.

Patnaik, Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik. (2015). “Imperialism in the Era of Globalization.” *Monthly Review* 67(3). Accessed 29 May 2021, <https://monthlyreview.org/2015/07/01/imperialism-in-the-era-of-globalization/>.

Patnaik, Prabhat. (2018). “Globalization and the Peasantry in the South.” *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 7(2): 234-248.

Prasad, Archana. (2020). “Ecological Crisis, Global Capital And The Reinvention Of Nature: A Perspective From The Global South.” *In Rethinking The Social Sciences With Sam Moyo edited by Praveen Jha, Paris Yeros, and Walter Chambati*. New York, United States of America: Columbia University Press.

Suwandi, Intan. (2019). “Labor-Value Commodity Chains: The Hidden Abode of Global Production.” *Monthly Review* 71 (3). Accessed 27 May 2021, <https://monthlyreview.org/2019/03/01/global-commodity-chains-and-the-new-imperialism/>.

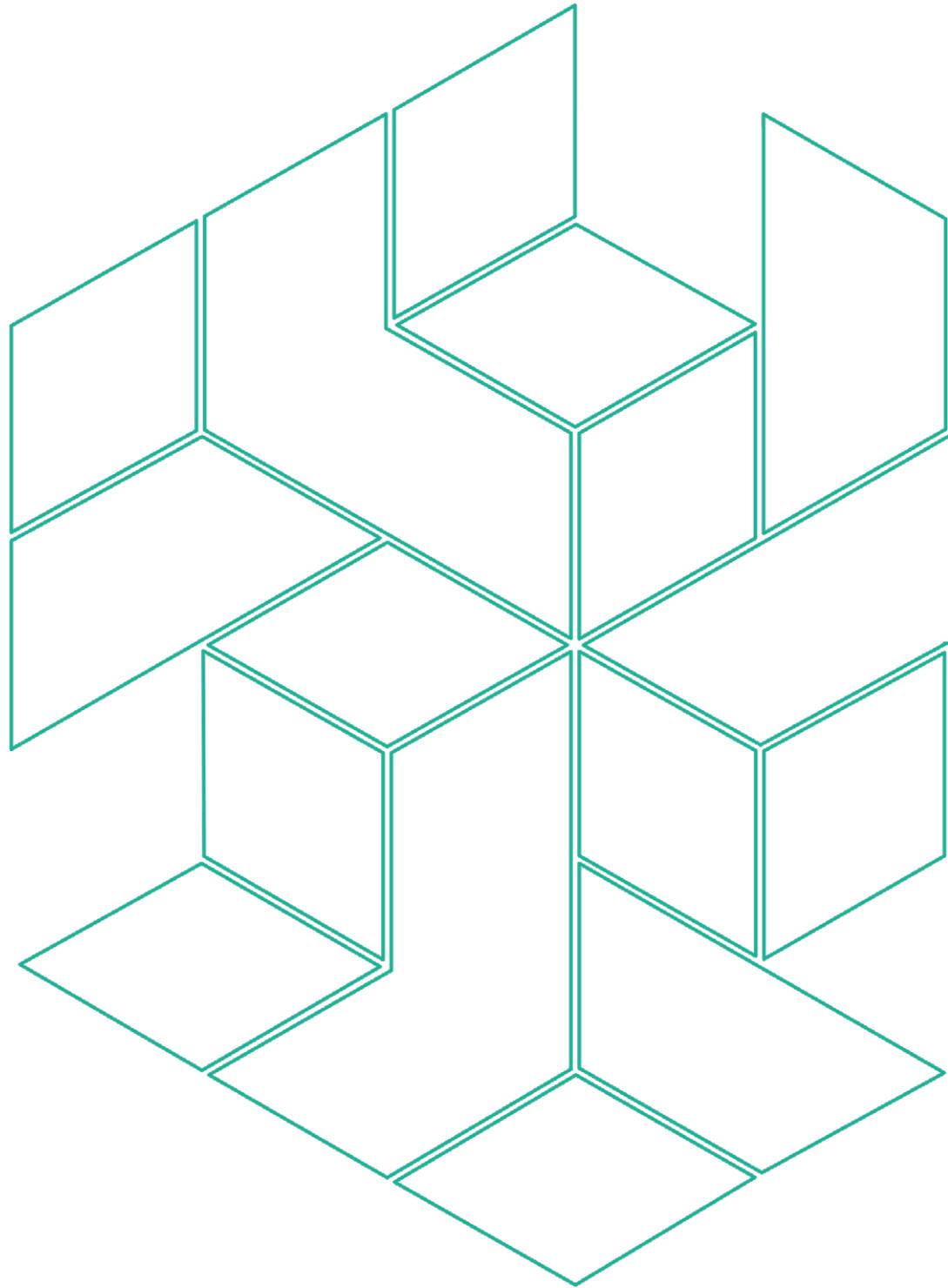
Suwandi, Intan, R. Jamil Jonna, and John Bellamy Foster. (2019). “Global Commodity Chains And The New Imperialism.” *Monthly Review* 70 (10). Accessed 28 May 2021, <https://monthlyreview.org/2019/03/01/global-commodity-chains-and-the-new-imperialism/>.

Sweezy, Paul. M. (1967). “Rosa Luxemburg’s ‘The Accumulation of Capital’.” *Science & Society* 31 (4): 474-485.

United Nations. (1993). *Report Of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*. New York, United States of America: United Nations.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. (n.d.). “Sustainable consumption and production.” Accessed 1 June 2021, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainableconsumptionandproduction>.

Wiedmann, Thomas, Heinz Schandl, Manfred Lenzen, Daniel Moran, Sangwon Suh, James West, and Keiichiro Kanemoto. (2015). "The Material Footprint Of Nations." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 112 (20): 6271-6276.



SPRF.IN