

Avoiding Catastrophe Requires a New Age

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In their lead article in the September 2021 issue of *Monthly Review*, John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark propose that we name the current geological age, the first age of the Anthropocene Era, the Capitalinian Age (p. 1). They do this because it raises the hope that there will be a second age in the Anthropocene, and point out that for this hope to be realized major changes will be required in the socioeconomic relations that gave rise to the current age (p. 2). The alternative to this second Anthropocene age, which the authors propose to name the Communian Age, is civilizational collapse, which will bring an early end to the Anthropocene, and make the Capitalinian the only age of the new era. The Communian can only come about, the authors state, if human society is able to generate a stable relationship with the Earth System on which it depends (p. 12).

That we humans need a radical change in our socioeconomic system is beginning to become common wisdom. When, on September 15, 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 7/1, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, the global community came together to state that major economic, social, and environmental changes are needed to achieve sustainability, end poverty, and strengthen universal peace (2015, October 15, p. 1). I was unfamiliar with the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) before beginning this course. Reading through the seventeen goals: no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equity; clean water and sanitation; affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate

action; life below water; life on land; peace, justice and strong institutions; and partnerships for the goals (United Nations, n.d.), I was greatly heartened to see that thinking in the rest of the world on the need for sustainability is far ahead of what it is in my own country, the United States, still shackled by neoliberal ideological hegemony. Reading the fuller versions of each of these goals (General Assembly, 2021, October 15, p. 14), there is no doubt that they can not be achieved with business as usual. Sadly, since the United States has such an outsized impact on the global rules of the game, we will have to overcome our backwardness here if we are to avoid human catastrophe.

In chapter fourteen of the textbook, Business Ethics, titled *The Green Office: Economics and the Environment*, author James Brusseau uses the case study of the environmental impact of tourism on Cancun, Mexico to explore the multiple relations linking business, the environment, and environmental protection (n.d., pp. 705-740). Dr. Brusseau presents five moral principles, which he refers to as attitudes, toward protection of the environment: the environment should not be protected, and the environment should be protected in the name of serving human welfare, future generations' welfare, animal welfare, or for its own sake (p. 715). I suspect the Koch brothers, Donald Trump, and other unapologetic neoliberals lean toward the first attitude, the UN sustainability goals embody the second and third, animal rights activists would hold the fourth, and the government of Bolivia with its laws giving equal rights to Pachamama (Mother Earth), embraces the fifth. Reading through the Bolivian Constitution of 2009, I was struck by how fully it incorporates the UN SDGs (Bolivia (Plurinational State of)'s Constitution of 2009).

In section 14.3, *Three Models of Environmental Protection for Businesses*, Dr. Brusseau presents what he calls the three attitudes businesses can take towards environmental responsibility: accelerate and innovate, monetize and count, and express corporate responsibility (n.d., p. 726). The first of these assumes that technological innovations, the very things that got us into the present crisis in the first place, will be able to get us out of it. The second relies on market incentives and regulation, while the third assumes that corporations can act ethically, abandoning their profit maximization above all else imperative to incorporate human values into their decision making.

All three of these approaches will be required to avoid catastrophe. There is no way at this point to escape the fact that further technological development, this time in the service of creating and maintaining sustainable Earth systems, is the only way out of the crisis. With carbon concentrations in the atmosphere rapidly approaching 450 parts per million (ppm), and climate scientists in agreement that this level must be kept below 350 ppm to avoid climate disaster (Foster, J.B. & Clark, B., 2021, September, p. 12), we humans will not be able at this point to simply stop pouring ever more carbon into the atmosphere, but will have to find a way to actively remove carbon that is already there, or to somehow limit the amount of heat energy that reaches the planet. Regulation and incentives will also undoubtedly have a role to play, but the most important of the three approaches for the long term will be the third, corporate responsibility, which will need nothing short of a social and economic paradigm shift to become possible.

We humans have a tendency to become what we measure, and what we measure in our current economic system is profit. As Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski point

out in The People's Republic of Walmart, while the set of all things that are useful to human beings overlaps with the set of all things that are profitable, the two sets are not congruent, and only profitable things are produced under our current economic system, even if they are harmful to humans (2019). Economist Kate Raworth, in her book *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*, lays out the need for a new economic model bounded by two rings, a lower ring providing the material needs for human well-being, and an upper ring bounded by the limits of our planetary systems, which must replace the current economic focus on profit as the only measure of value if we are to build a sustainable social system (2017).

In the prompt presented us describing our task for writing this paper, we were asked to evaluate whether we believed that a US company was ethically justified in manufacturing DDT in the United States, where it is legal to manufacture but not to use, shipping it to Mexico to grow food, where, we are asked to assume it is legal to use (DDT use was prohibited in Mexico during the 1990s), and then importing the food grown more cheaply with its use back into the United States for sale. Under our current economic and social system the answer, tragically, is that ethics have very little to do with it. As long as the success of corporations is measured by profit, then they will take those actions which maximize their profits, simple as that.

If our goal, on the other hand, is to survive as a human civilization and to avoid impending catastrophe, we need to collectively and actively find our way out of the Capitalinian Age and into the Communian by fundamentally altering the rules governing

our social and economic system until they align with the UN sustainable development goals.

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