

Capitalocene and the Mainstream Environmental Management Narratives



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The mainstream environmental management narratives argue that man's pursuit of economic growth is the major reason for climate change and environmental damage. The huge role greed of capitalists and crony capitalists plays in environmental damage is generally overlooked in these narratives. It is high time that the focus shifts to capitalocene approach, which highlights the harmful impact of capitalist practices on environmental quality. The present paper is a small step in this direction.

Keywords - Capitalocene - Climate Change – Capitalism

1. Introduction

The Mainstream environmental management narratives come under the Anthropocene paradigm in the environmental studies domain. This paradigm holds the view that in the history of the Earth, adverse impacts on the natural resources happened continuously during the Anthropocene or the age of the Human period.

Three major trends in human history played a crucial role in the environmental damage, namely industrialization, urbanisation and consumerism. With the progress of science and technology, interventions in the natural processes increased in the name of progress of humanity. Economic growth and environmental damage are two sides of the same coin. In order to protect natural resources and improve the quality of environment, people should follow prudent environmental management practices. Governments of countries should make and implement efficient environmental laws and regulations. In a broad sense, the Anthropocene approach blames mankind as a whole for the environmental damage. It believes that the market system, under efficient environmental laws and practices with responsible behaviour by all the stakeholders will ensure environmental protection. This approach supports market fundamentalism and emphasises that Right is right in the matter of environmental management also. The antithesis of this view is the Capitalocene approach which has been developed in the Marxian intellectual tradition. This approach emphasises that the Right is wrong. The present paper is a small attempt in shifting the focus on Capitalocene approach in environmental management discussions.

1. Anthropocene Approach

If someone wanted to write the global history of environmentalism in the modern period, he or she would begin with writing on events that happened in the 1960s especially in the USA. That was the time when a few famous protests like the student movement demanding pacifism, the civil rights movement and the popular counter-culture trends among the youth were happening. Rachel Carson's influential book "*Silent Spring*" was published in 1962. It was based on the reported harm caused by pesticide pollution and as the result the chemical industry of America was highly disturbed. The book was called a landmark in modern environmentalism.

The DDT used as an insecticide was recommended by the scientist and found favour among the American farmers. The chemical had an adverse impact on water and the landscapes. The sudden silencing of the song of the birds (Robins) which ate worms poisoned by the insecticides explained the harm done to the food chain. Inspired by Carson, several authors wrote about environmental damage caused by man's excessive activities on nature. Garrett Hardin wrote an influential article 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (1968) and E.F. Schumacher wrote his famous book "*Small is Beautiful*" (1973). Increasing public awareness about environmental damage and the necessity of policy interventions at local, national and global levels led to conferences, discussions and resolutions.

Global environmental conferences are important events that bring together experts, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss and address environmental challenges. There have been numerous global environmental conferences held over the years, covering a wide range of topics and issues. Some notable conferences held in the early 1990s include the First World Climate Conference, the International Conference on Environment and Development, and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, prominent conferences included the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COPs), the World Water Forum, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development. More recently, some notable global environmental conferences held between 2020 and 2023 include the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15), the World Climate

Change Conference (COP 26), and the Our Ocean Conference. To find more information about global environmental conferences, one can utilise resources such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and academic databases like Google Scholar and Web of Science. It is also important to narrow down one's focus and utilise filters, explore conference websites, and network with professionals to find relevant information.

The Club of Rome's 1972 report, "The Limits to Growth," was a groundbreaking study that warned of the potential environmental and societal consequences of unchecked population and economic growth. While the report faced some criticism, it undoubtedly sparked crucial conversations and influenced several impactful environmental conferences throughout recent history. Here are some notable examples:

1. The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm Conference)

- Held in Stockholm, Sweden, this landmark conference was the first major international gathering focused solely on environmental issues.
- It established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and laid the groundwork for international environmental cooperation.
- The conference's agenda was heavily influenced by "The Limits to Growth," with discussions centering on concerns about resource depletion, pollution, and the need for sustainable development.

2. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit)

- Held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, this conference marked the 20th anniversary of the Stockholm Conference and aimed to build upon its progress.
- It resulted in the adoption of Agenda 21, a comprehensive action plan for sustainable development in the 21st century.
- The conference's themes of sustainable development, poverty eradication, and protecting biodiversity were all directly linked to the concerns raised in "The Limits to Growth."

3. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg Summit)

- Held in Johannesburg, South Africa, this conference aimed to assess progress made on Agenda 21 and set new goals for sustainable development.
- It emphasised the need for poverty reduction, improved access to clean water and sanitation, and addressing climate change.
- The conference's focus on equity and social justice echoed the concerns about population growth and resource distribution raised in "The Limits to Growth."

4. The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20)

- Held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, this conference marked the 20th anniversary of the Earth Summit and aimed to renew global commitment to sustainable development.
- It resulted in the adoption of "The Future We Want", a document outlining key areas for action on sustainable development.
- The conference's focus on green economy, institutional reform, and global partnerships reflected the need for systemic change emphasised in "The Limits to Growth."

5. The 2022 Stockholm+50: The International Environment Conference

- Held in Stockholm, Sweden, this conference commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Stockholm Conference and aimed to accelerate progress on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- It focused on key areas like climate action, biodiversity loss, and pollution, recognizing the urgency of addressing these challenges.
- The conference's emphasis on collective action and transformative change echoed the warnings and calls to action presented in "The Limits to Growth."

Global Impactful Environmental Conferences was Influenced by the Club of Rome report (1972) Here is a compilation of the COP conferences from 1990 to 2024:

The first UNFCCC Conference of the Parties took place in Berlin, Germany in 1995. COP 2 was held in Geneva, Switzerland in 1996. These early conferences set the stage for future discussions on climate change and the development of international agreements to address it.

In 2013, COP 19 was held in Warsaw, Poland. The conference resulted in the adoption of the Warsaw Framework for REDD-plus, which aimed to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. The following year, COP 20 was held in Lima, Peru, where the Lima Call for Climate Action was developed, paving the way for the Paris Agreement.

The landmark Paris Agreement was adopted at COP 21 in Paris, France in 2015. The agreement set a global goal to limit warming well below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C. COP 22 in Marrakesh, Morocco in 2016 made progress on operationalizing the Paris Agreement, including establishing the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action.

COP 23 in Bonn, Germany in 2017 focused on implementing the Paris Agreement, with a particular emphasis on the Talanoa Dialogue on ambition. COP 24 in Katowice, Poland in 2018 adopted the Katowice Rulebook, establishing the guidelines for implementing the Paris Agreement. COP 25 in Madrid, Spain in 2019 focused on finalising the Article 6 rulebook for carbon markets and accelerating action on climate change.

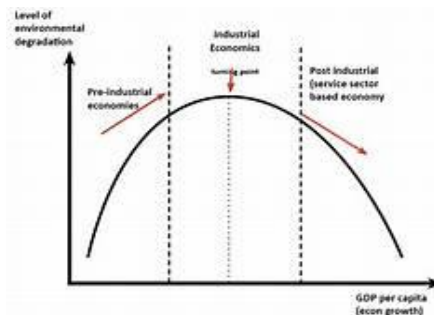
In 2021, COP 26 was held in Glasgow, United Kingdom, where key pledges to reduce emissions were secured, including the Glasgow Climate Pact and the Global Methane Pledge. COP 27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt in 2022 focused on implementing the Paris Agreement, including finance, adaptation, and mitigation. COP 28/CMP 18 & CMA 6 took place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates in November-December 2023.

Finally, COP 29/CMP 19 & CMA 7 is scheduled to take place in Baku, Azerbaijan in November-December 2024. The conference will include the 29th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 29), the 19th meeting of the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 19), and the sixth meeting of the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 6), among other matters. The 61st sessions of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA 61) will also take place during the conference.

There are a few concepts used in the mainstream environmental management narratives which are influential in discussions and policy making at different levels. “Negative externality” is one such concept. Rapid industrialization, urbanisation and consumerism trends lead to many negative externalities such as air and water pollution. A negative externality is a situation where social cost is much higher than private cost.

There are huge challenges such as climate change, global warming, ozone layer depletion, natural calamities like droughts and floods, biodiversity loss and outbreak of pandemic. However, the market will take care of these challenges through demand and supply mechanisms. The products of the environmentally friendly industries will be purchased by the consumers and these industries will continue and grow in the market. The products of environmentally unfriendly industries will be rejected by the consumers and these industries will incur losses and go out of the market. The process would be so in the case of every commodity and service in the country. The quality of the environment is high in rich countries and low in poor countries. This is because rich people can afford to spend more money on environmental protection. A poor country cannot afford to do so. It is mentioned that poverty is the worst polluter.

There is an “Environmental Kuznets Curve” (EKC) which explains the relationship between economic growth and level of environmental damage in a country. Studies show that environmental damage increases as economic growth increases until the economy reaches a particular level of development. Thereafter, economic growth will generate more income to ensure improvements in environmental quality. The inverted U-shaped curve, shown below, explains this crucial relationship.



India and the other developing countries are yet to reach the threshold (Y1) level of per capita income. As the result, people of these countries suffer high levels of pollution and negative aspects of climate change. On the other hand, developed countries have a high level of per capita income and as a result enjoy a high level of environmental quality. Liberal economic policies will encourage the market system to function efficiently which will ensure both high levels of economic growth and environmental quality. In other words, the Right is right. This view is seriously challenged by Capitalocene approach

2. Capitalocene Approach

The Capitalocene approach is based on Marxian economic and social theory. Karl Marx argued that capitalism would continuously revolutionise the production process through scientific and technological advancements in its search for higher levels of profits. Environmental degradation is the result of increasing intervention in the natural process of production by instruments of capital used by the capitalist. According to him man makes capital and later capital makes man. Capital is valued in discussion and nature is treated as a free gift. When environmental damage results, the blame is placed on mankind as a whole. The greed of capitalists and crony capitalists is largely ignored in the discussion on environmental issues

The Capitalocene is a geological era where the capitalist activity has become the dominant force shaping the planet, characterised by environmental destruction, climate change, and resource depletion. Mainstream environmental management narratives often

focus on technological solutions, individual responsibility, and market-based mechanisms to address these issues, but fail to address the root causes of environmental degradation, which lie in the capitalist system itself. Marxian analysis offers a powerful critique of mainstream environmental narratives and proposes alternative solutions based on principles of social justice, ecological sustainability, and collective action. Key Marxian ideas include the critique of capitalism, alternative solutions such as Eco socialism, sustainable production and consumption, and global solidarity, and case studies analysing specific environmental management policies or projects. Additional points to consider include intersectionality, decoloniality, agency and empowerment. Incorporating these Marxian ideas into a report can provide a critical analysis of mainstream environmental narratives and offer alternative solutions that address the root causes of environmental degradation in the Capitalocene.

1. **Metabolic Rift:** Marx's theory of metabolic rift argues that capitalism creates a rift between humans and nature, leading to ecological crises. This rift is caused by the separation of humans from the natural world and the prioritization of profit over ecological sustainability
2. **Racial Capitalism:** Racial capitalism refers to the intersection of capitalism and racism, where capitalism exploits and oppresses marginalized communities for profit. This exploitation often leads to environmental degradation
3. **Disaster Making:** Disaster making in the Capitalocene refers to the ways in which disasters are created and exacerbated by the capitalist system. This includes the externalization of environmental costs onto marginalized communities and the prioritization of profit over environmental sustainability even during disasters such as wars and pandemics.
4. **Value and Nature:** Marx argued that nonhuman nature provides use values to capital, which are converted through the labour process. This leads to the overexploitation of natural resources and the commodification of nature

Karl Marx was able to foresee the future environmental crisis that would be caused by pursuit of exploitative projects by the capitalists. He wrote about the contradictions under capitalism. The first and the most powerful contradiction is the one between the capitalists and the workers. He predicted a class war between the haves and the have-nots, and as the result capitalism would be replaced by socialism. The second contradiction is the one between capital and the nature. The capitalists would exploit both workers and natural resources. There would be economic crises and an ecological crisis as the result of the two contradictions. His concept of "Metabolic Rift" explains, to some extent, his second contradiction of capitalism

2. Conclusion

The term "Capitalocene" has gained attention in environmental discourse, challenging the mainstream narrative of the "Anthropocene" by emphasizing the role of capitalism in environmental damage. The Capitalocene perspective argues that climate change and environmental disruptions are primarily driven by the dynamics of the global capitalist system. This concept has been discussed in academic and public spheres, with proponents highlighting its potential to address environmental injustices and the unequal distribution of costs and benefits within the world-ecology. As of 2024, the Capitalocene remains a subject of debate and critical reflection within environmental and sustainability discourses.

The mainstream environmental management narratives, have been largely centred around the concept of the "Anthropocene," which attributes significant environmental changes to human activities in general, without explicitly emphasizing the role of capitalism. However, the growing discussions around Capitalocene indicate a shifting landscape in environmental discourse, with increasing recognition of the interconnectedness between environmental issues and the dynamics of the global capitalist system.

This ongoing debate reflects a broader reevaluation of the dominant narratives and frameworks within environmental studies and sustainability discourses.

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