

Shallow ecologism looks attractive but is overridden by a combination of deep ecologism and Marx's account of the workings of commodity-producing systems

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In the spring of 2019, bushfires in Australia burned 7.7m hectares of forests, killing more than a billion animals. Studies have shown that human-related climate change increased the chances of such an event happening by more than 30%.

We are living in an age where our existence and activities threaten to destroy the natural world irreparably. This is well recognized – scientists and environmentalists have been campaigning for years for stricter laws that will slow this global industrial juggernaut which is causing so much havoc. The Paris Agreement, signed in 2016 by almost all the nations of the world, is one such step that aims to keep in check the increase in global average temperatures.

However, most of our economic and political systems today, bar a few, are ignorant to this vandalization of nature. As we move into a new age of prosperity - better technology, greater production, more consumption, and more growth, few of our institutions and systems can contemplate deliberately slowing down.

Ecologism is one of the few political movements that aim to promulgate an eco-centric worldview and to enforce limits and regulations on, or to completely stop, human activities which harm the environment. Ecologism is split into two strands – shallow and deep ecologism. Shallow ecologism views environmental issues from a human perspective. This means that shallow ecologism encourages that humans continue their activities and processes, but in a way which does not adversely affect nature. Deep ecologism, on the other hand, refutes the human-centric view of shallow ecologism, instead believing that our main focus should be on protecting nature, and living sustainably as a part of it. Deep ecologism would, of course, require major changes to our economic, industrial, and socio-political practices. (Sivaramakrishnan 2020 Lec 25:2-3)

Ecological and green politics has, in the past few decades, become more of a mainstream issue, especially in Europe. The Green and Socialist parties in Germany and France have held power in some capacity at various levels, and such issues have been gaining momentum on the international political stage with the UN and other bodies – as the Paris Agreement evinces. On a local governmental level,

a number of measures like environmental impact assessments and segregation of household waste are becoming mandatory in various parts of the world. In the United Kingdom, the Natural Capital Committee was set up in 2012 to determine the value of the natural world and to determine how it could be integrated into the current politico-economic system. This is an example of eco-capitalism – the view that market-based policy and instruments should be used to resolve environmental problems. If one were to position these measures and movements, they would lie on the shallower end of the spectrum of ecological ideology. (Sivaramakrishnan 2020 Lec 28:1, Monbiot 2014)

Shallow ecologism seems like an ideal middle ground that would allow the world to continue progressing while still preserving nature. This would mean, for example, switching to alternative energy sources like solar and wind power and the use of technological advances to reduce our impact on the environment. It means continuing to do the things we are doing, but doing them so that they have a slightly reduced environmental impact. However, shallow ecologism's pretence of being a golden mean breaks down when you take a deeper look at its political, ideological, and economic inconsistencies.

In order to keep global temperature rises below 1.5C and to prevent an irreversible loss of nature, we would need to take steps on massive levels – much more than what shallow ecologism would allow. Technological and policy tweaks seem to make a change on the surface, but in reality, only nominally reduce the adverse effects of our industrial activities. For example, policies like a carbon tax, a per-tonne tax on carbon-dioxide emissions, would need to be much higher than current levels to make any real impact. In fact, while major players in the oil and power industry superficially support such policies, a large amount of money is spent behind the scenes on lobbying to control, delay, or block such climate-motivated policy. Other technological changes promoted under shallow ecologism, such as switching from internal combustion engines to electrical vehicles are just drops in the ocean, so to speak.

Karl Marx's ideology and concept of commodity producing systems provides an alternate context with which to view this issue. A discussion on Marx's 'modes of production' is appropriate here. Marx argues that there have been two types of modes of production in human history – subsistence production and commodity production. In subsistence production, production is a means of meeting personal needs. This means that we take from nature what we need, and live sustainable as a part of it rather than exploiting it for mass profit. Subsistence production, according to Marx, was prevalent in pre-industrial or feudal societies. Commodity production, on the other hand, is done mainly for exchange. Marx argues that multiple factors were responsible for the switch from subsistence to commodity production, and though technology was one of them, social and political changes were

the main causes. As commodity production spread, this had a further effect on the structure of society, with the emergence of two main classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie were the owners of capital and factors of production, while the proletariat were the working class who performed manual labour. This was the rise of capitalism, which Marx sees as progressive but exploitative. (Sivaramakrishnan 2020 Lec 13:8-11)

Marx identifies certain inconsistencies in capitalism and commodity production that are very relevant to the discussion of ecologism.

According to Marx, commodity production leads to a division of labour, where all tasks are divided into components and each worker or set of workers performs only the set tasks. Workers may not understand or see the final commodity being put together, being limited only to their respective tasks. This restriction to a repetitive, perfunctory task subordinates the rest of our life and activities. We become dependent on the system for our sustenance, but in such a way that we are not directly in contact with the people or materials that make up the system. We depend on each worker – each part of the system – to perform his or her own task. Thus, in order to survive, all production must be turned into commodity production, and we become a slave to it.

Marx argues that this distances us from people as well as nature, and limits our capability to express and apply ourselves in meaningful ways. Such ‘universalized and depersonalized dependence’, then, from an ecological perspective, prevents us from truly understanding the value of nature and its positive impact. We become a tiny part of a mindless machine that enslaves us to drudge on inside it, losing our sense of being embedded in and an active part of our surroundings – our environment, our locality, and our people. This industrial and capitalist machine drives on, growing ever larger and eating up everything in its path, chasing only profits at the cost of everything else. (Sivaramakrishnan 2020 Lec 14:2-4)

This leads us to Marx’s second, and perhaps more damaging inconsistency with commodity production. An aside here on the labour theory of value and surplus value. Under the labour theory, the value of a good is the amount of labour time necessary to produce that good. The cost to the capitalist is the amount of time it takes for him to get the worker ready for the workday, that is, to produce the food and clothes to get him ready for the next working day. This is invariably less than the amount of time the labourer works. This surplus is the source of profit for the capitalist. The capitalist is, however, under pressure from the market to reduce commodity costs and increase production. This, along with new machinery and better technology, means that it takes lesser and lesser time to produce a good – meaning, according to the labour theory of value, that the value of the commodity is ever reducing. This in turn leads to a falling rate of profit. In order to keep the system

going, this means that production and consumption must be perpetually increasing. (Sivaramakrishnan 2020 Lec 14:2-8)

Therefore, for capitalist or commodity production to sustain itself, the system must keep churning out more and more for the profit of the few who hold power and capital, without regard to anything in its path – including nature. This is in direct opposition to the principles of ecologism – there is almost no way in which the current brand of capitalism can continue to operate without an irreversible detrimental impact on the natural world. The current ‘Anglo-Saxon’ variant of neoliberal capitalism, promulgated by big industries and corporations who hold wealth and power, believes that maximising profits in the short term without interference from the government is a right. According to mainstream economic thinking, individuals are motivated to maximize their advantage in financial terms. In terms of commodity production, this would mean that holders of capital are motivated only by profits, and do not take into account that they are part of a complex and interdependent ecology that cannot self-regulate beyond an extent. We need to acknowledge that the current economics of commodity production and capitalism simply does not account for this ecology, and we may need a completely new economic perspective – a more holistic ideology based on sustainability. (Elliot 2018)

This is an ideological gap – an issue of differing principles, that cannot be solved by the happy medium that shallow ecologism promises. Yes, we may produce a small percentage of our energy from renewable sources, or find more efficient technology that improves industrial efficiency by some proportion. However, it is inherently difficult for the current brand of capitalism and commodity producing systems to sustainably co-exist with the ecology, because the whole natural environment, for capitalism, is just another resource to be exploited.

Take, for example, the case of ‘Big Oil’ – the largest oil and gas producing companies in the world. While, on the surface, all of these companies are working towards building a public image based around fossil fuels and sustainable growth, they indulge in lobbying and political activities directly opposing this narrative. Research has shown that the largest players in this sector, following the Paris Agreement of 2016, changed their marketing strategies under immense public and media pressure and started campaigns supporting carbon taxes, renewable energy, and climate positivity. Nearly 200M\$ was spent by the five biggest companies on branding and advertising campaigns reflecting this change. However, they have also spent more than this amount on climate lobbying and on trade associations which act as lobbying vehicles to disrupt and oppose government policies aimed at protecting nature and preventing climate change. The major business of these companies still overwhelmingly revolves around fossil fuels, and sustainability related business activities are highly exaggerated for the purposes of positive media exposure. There is a visible gap, a contradiction, even,

between the façade of the climate policies of these organizations and their underground activities that aim to control and disrupt legislation on this issue. (Edwards 2019, McDuff 2019)

Shallow ecologism, in a way, believes that neoliberal capitalist principles discussed above, if bent a little bit, can turn over and save the very thing they have been destroying. What if we destroy a forest only if the value of what we build in its place is greater than that of the forest? What if we improve the efficiency of our coal plants by 10%, and plant trees worth the amount of money saved? These are flawed arguments. As British writer and activist George Monbiot argues, we can't save nature by pricing the natural world. We can't call nature 'natural capital' and ecological processes 'ecosystem services'. We can't gift wrap them, put a price tag on them, and put them up for sale. We can't do this because of two major reasons¹. One, there is no definite way in which we can determine the value of the natural world. You can't say that a particular lake or forest is worth fifty thousand dollars, because there is an unmeasurable value associated with it apart from what can be counted – people or communities may have spiritual or emotional or other attachments. Ecological elements are so intertwined with each other that it is difficult to predict what impact the destruction of one element will be, and the resulting economic fallout. (Monbiot 2014, Sivaramakrishnan 2020 Lec 28:11-20)

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, doing so pushes the natural world back into the system of commodity production and capitalism which, as argued above, inherently opposes its conservation. It pushes it into the hands of those who hold power and capital – those who would do anything to keep and enlarge this capital. If we start thinking of the natural world in terms of 'assets' and 'natural capital', we play right into the hands of these people. The case of Big Oil discussed above shows exactly this – levying a carbon tax effectively puts a monetary value on the harm caused by burning fossil fuels. This is never going to have enough of an impact, because having a high enough carbon tax goes against the very system that controls it. The carbon tax set by the European emissions trading system, for example, is set at pounds 5 per tonne. A price which would make a real impact is around pounds 30 per tonne. However, carbon intensive industries, as discussed above, lobbied the European Union to effectively ensure that this price remained low enough that it doesn't really matter. Similarly, the Green New Deal (GND), a framework that aims to reach a carbon neutral economy in a decade², has seen massive opposition from the Republicans in power and the pro-free-market industrialists who back them. (McDuff 2019)

¹ Monbiot, in his lecture at the University of Sheffield, gives multiple reasons for this. However, I find that his final few points are quite interrelated, and hence I have broadly separated them into two points – the second of which encompasses the broader ideological and political inconsistencies.

² The GND also endorses free healthcare and social security along with carbon neutrality – a comprehensive approach which represents a shift towards intrinsic values (discussed later), which is ideologically at odds with the profit driven system of capitalism.

Some argue that by simply massively increasing the pace of our current shallow ecogism based efforts, we can slow the deterioration of nature to a feasible extent. A “global carbon tax set high enough so that fossil fuels remain in the ground” must be implemented (Elliot 2020). However, as discussed above, this is impossible – in part because there is an ideological roadblock for our profit driven world, and in part because those in power would never allow this to happen. Their interests and values are inherently opposing such efforts, and they are the ones who ultimately make things happen.

Conserving nature at levels that would actually matter would need concerted efforts at a much greater level, and a fundamental change in the way we think about our economy and the natural world. We have to take an eco-centric view and not think of nature as just another resource in our industrial commodity producing economy. We have to re-evaluate our position in the *ecolonomy* – the interdependent ecological system and human economy.

This is a more profound philosophy. In fact, this is where shallow ecogism is inadequate. It is not a philosophy but a strategy – a superficial scheme, that cannot overcome the ideological and politico-economic roadblocks of commodity production and capitalism. Deep ecogism is much closer to the change in philosophy that would be required.

Ideologically, it seems that Deep Ecogism is the only real form of ecogism. The principles of Deep Ecology, as outlined by Arne Naess and George Sessions, underline that human and non-human life have an intrinsic value irrespective of their usefulness for human purposes. They emphasize that humans have no right to reduce the richness and diversity of nature except to satisfy vital needs, and we have an obligation to participate in making the necessary changes to our current processes. This would mean massive changes in our ways of life – an end to commercial farming, a change in the way we produce and process food, massive changes in our transport systems, military systems, and infrastructure. This seems like a big commitment – but it may be the only one that works.

Deep Ecogism would involve a major change not only in the economics of the world, but also in the values of people. George Monbiot argues that the only way to change things is by mobilization – by people coming together, realising the problem, realising the consequences of continuing on the current path, the scale of change required, and acting to affect such a change. He emphasizes the need to cultivate intrinsic values – values related to being embedded in your community and your surroundings, over extrinsic values related to reputation and money. (Monbiot 2014)

This seems clichéd, but this is what’s required. No form of shallow ecogism or pliant anthropocentrism or any other half-hearted but ultimately ineffective ideology is going to work. We

cannot play by the rules of a system that is inherently inconsiderate, or even opposed to, the sustenance of nature.

Ultimately, the unfounded promise of shallow ecologism is defeated by its inadequacy, both in terms of current and projected failures, as well as on a more fundamental ideological level. Marx's accounts of the shortcomings of commodity producing systems, as well as the failings of the current brand of Anglo-Saxon neoliberal capitalism support this. Political and economic inconsistencies whitewashed by those in power who are guided, or misguided, by extrinsic values, offer incriminating evidence against a viewpoint that is aptly named. Its 'shallowness', in a sense, is what leads to its disintegration.

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