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Dialectics of Sustainability: Contrasting Mainstream Neoliberal and Critical Ecosocialist Perspectives on Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The current geological period of Anthropocene is defined by qualitatively new manifestations of negative planetary human impact and environmental crisis. Finally, it is increasingly acknowledged as crucial to contain the self-destructive tendencies of capitalism to preserve conditions for life on earth. Yet, there seems little agreement as to how the necessary transition towards sustainability can be realized. This narrative review explores the respective social science literature. Reflecting the meta-theoretical distinction between sociology of regulation and radical change, dialectic analysis contrasts mainstream functional-normative neoliberal and critical structuralist-antagonistic ecosocialist perspectives. The latter deconstruct conventional approaches, such as the United Nations Agenda 2030, as ideological projects of capitalist expansion and legitimization, rejecting claims of green growth, environmental decoupling, and market-solutions of corporate social responsibility. Instead, paradigms of critical sustainability advocate for degrowth and redistribution, decarbonization, decommodification, and democratization, challenging the exploitative growth logic of capitalism itself. On the organizational level, structural pathologies of corporate social responsibility are contrasted with propositions of democratic socialization. Further, attention is called to sustainability discourses in organizational scholarship, demanding paradigm shifts from managerialist to critical ontologies, realist to relational epistemologies, discipline-focused to interdisciplinary, and from value-neutrality to scholarly activism. Analyzing the sustainability discourse from a critical-theoretical perspective presents opportunities to re-appropriate ecological ideas against degeneration into economic ideology, counterproductive to the objective of saving the planet from profitable destruction. With seriousness and urgency of the situation providing momentum for social transformation, sustainable development goals and related mainstream concepts need to be reconceived for more radical social and ecological critique, transcending system-justifying neoliberal ideology.

Key words

Anthropocene, Dialectics, Ecosocialism, Ideological Critique, Sustainability Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

Widespread agreement across disciplines in the natural and social sciences suggests that the world has entered a new geological era of the Anthropocene—a distinct ecological and socio-cultural period, defined by destructive human domination and its devastating detrimental impact on the planet in its entirety [1], [2]. Hallmark

symptoms of the associated ecological decline and deterioration include overburdening pollution of land, air, and sea, depletion of natural stocks and resources, deforestation, land degradation, and other forms of irreversible environmental destruction, accelerating extinction of species, loss of biodiversity, global warming, extraordinary severe weather events, and related manifestations of progressive climate change [3], [4]. These ecological disasters, in turn, proliferate, perpetuate, and potentiate catastrophic social and humanitarian situations in large parts of the world, especially in (but not limited to) the most extremely affected areas of the so-called “Global South”, including escalating inequality, poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and starvation, hostilities, violence, wars and armed conflicts over dwindling resources, displacement and forced migration of affected populations, spreading of foodborne and infectious diseases, and other public health crises [5], [6]. Whereas, until a few years ago, such predictions were frequently dismissed as alarmist apocalyptic scenarios that could still somehow be denied or averted, their present-day reality and progressing manifestation has been scientifically documented in the most dramatic terms, for instance, in the latest report of the United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [7]. However, as evidenced by the same document, with most planetary ecosystems so obviously in decline and such catastrophic consequences on the horizon, there finally also seems to be a growing realization among both experts and political decision-makers that a fundamental reorientation of the global economic system is absolutely necessary to contain the self-destructive tendencies of unfettered capitalism in order to preserve the basis of human and non-human life on the planet [8], [9]. Nonetheless, despite this growing consensus, apparently, little agreement, whether in theory or in practice, can be reached as to how the required turnaround towards ecological and social sustainability can possibly (still) be achieved [10], [11]. Addressing this issue based on an exploratory review of selected key publications, this contribution identifies and contrasts two antagonistic approaches crystalizing within the social science literature. Specifically, this refers to the conventional mainstream or “neoliberal” approach versus an emerging radically critical or ecosocialist perspective [12], [13]. These two oppositional paradigms correspond with the division between technical-empirical and critical-emancipatory conceptions of science [14], underlying the meta-theoretical distinction between the sociologies of regulation and radical change [15]. Additionally, drawing on systems theory, society, organizations, and individuals can be differentiated as hierarchically nested levels of analysis incorporated in sustainability transitions. The present review predominantly focuses on selected concepts at the former two levels, specifically, comparing exemplary notions of conventional versus critical sustainability, green growth versus economic degrowth, and corporate social responsibility versus democratic socialization. A case in point, a common reference point on the societal level is the United Nation Agenda 2030 specifying 17 goals for sustainable development. This landmark in sustainability policy has variously been deconstructed as a neoliberal ideological project of capitalist expansion and legitimization through counterfactual claims of green growth, decoupling through innovation, market-solutions to environmental protection, and voluntary corporate social responsibility [16], [17]. Based on this critique, the alternative paradigm of critical sustainability is dialectically developed based on counter-concepts of degrowth, decommmodification, radical democratization, and redistribution on all levels of political, economic, and social organizing. From the ecosocialist perspective, critical analysis of the root causes of unsustainability converges with social critique of the exploitative growth imperative inherent to the capitalist systems logic [14], [17]. On the organizational level, structural pathologies of corporate social responsibility are deconstructed and contrasted with radical propositions of socially responsible democratic socialization and social activism. To conclude, demasking the mainstream sustainability discourse from a critical-theoretical perspective presents an opportunity to re-appropriate underlying ecological ideas against degeneration into economic ideology counterproductive to the goal of saving the planet from profitable destruction. Evident seriousness and urgency of the situation are frequently emphasized as opportunities to raise consciousness and mobilize momentum for social transformation. Lastly, attention is called to how the sustainability debate shapes current discourse in organizational science. Highlighting recent programmatic contributions, deemed necessary are paradigm shifts from managerialist to critical positions, from discipline-focused to interdisciplinary research, from realist to relational epistemologies, and from pretense of objectivity and value-neutrality to engaged scholarship and academic activism. Normative foundations supporting this reconceptualization of the academic self-image include occupational codes of ethical responsibility to prioritize people over profits, ecology over economy, and planetary survival over subservience to vested interests. Sustainable development goals of the Agenda 2030 and related concepts need to be reassessed as vehicles for real-world improvements and basis of more radical critiques of unsustainable social organization in the Anthropocene.

2. DIALECTIC EXPLORATION

An exploratory review of key publications in the interdisciplinary social science literature on environmental and social sustainability was conducted with the objective of delineating and contrasting two broader types of approaches, namely, the conventional mainstream (functionalist, normative) “neoliberal” perspective versus an emerging radically critical (antagonistic, structuralist) “ecosocialist” one. These oppositional paradigms, evidence for the existence of which has been suggested in the literature repeatedly [10], [11], [13], reflect the

meta-theoretical distinction between sociological traditions of regulation and radical change [14]. The former proposes a view of society based on integration, progress, and consensus; the latter emphasizes domination, power struggles, and conflicting interests. The type of change advocated by the former is incremental, pragmatic, and follows a reformist agenda, whereas the latter stresses the need for fundamental, utopian, and revolutionary transformations [9], [17]. Background of said undertaking is growing interest in alternative approaches through which the necessary turnaround towards ecological and social sustainability can still be initiated, despite the progressing era of Anthropocene, suggesting irreversible environmental damage and accelerating planetary crises. The purpose of the sighted, compiled, and reviewed material was to serve as basis for speaking engagements at several scientific conferences as well as for curriculum development in university teaching. In these academic arenas, sustainability is increasingly becoming an important cross-cutting theme of particular interest. Following principles of narrative and problematizing literature reviews [18], exploratory searches were conducted covering major databases in the social sciences, using various combinations of terms, including “sustainability”, “sustainable development”, “radical environmentalism”, “critical theory”, “ecosocialism”, “corporate social responsibility” and “critique”. Based on the screening of titles and abstracts, relevant articles were identified and categorized according to various criteria, including article type, disciplinary focus, and level of analysis. Drawing on systems theory, society, organizations, and individuals were differentiated as hierarchically nested levels of analysis and articles allocated to these interdependent tiers. The present review predominantly focuses on the former two levels, specially, three core themes of the current sustainability debate are deliberated in a dialectic analysis. Sustainable development, green growth, and corporate social responsibility are three important concepts in the mandated turnaround of the capitalist economic system that have been portrayed as ideologically annexed and redefined by neoliberal discourse. To counteract this, conventional neoliberal understandings of these concepts are contrasted with radical ecocritical antipodes of a) critical sustainability, b) economic degrowth, and c) responsibility to socialize corporations. For each of these three themes, a limited number (typically three) of selected key publications will be reviewed. Explicit aim of this dialectic exploration of elements of Marxist ecology was to demonstrate the critical potential of ecosocialist perspectives in environmental science as antipodes to neoliberal, market-based conceptions [12], [13], [16], [17]. Core to all three concepts are structures and processes of direct democracy and participation as well as fundamental rejection of the capitalist profit and growth imperatives. A final step explores, how critical conceptions of sustainability and degrowth shape current discourse in organizational science, highlighting some exemplary recent contributions to the debate.

3. CRITICAL SUSTAINABILITY

Although until recently critical conceptions of sustainability have received only limited attention, they are far from completely novel [19], [20]. For instance, almost two decades ago, different philosophies for environmental education have been differentiated and defined as rooted in the empirical, hermeneutic, and critical sciences, concluding that the latter, emphasizing emancipation, self-determination, and critique of ideology and domination, form the basis of radical ecocentric environmentalism [14]. Published about a decade later, the first identified seminal contribution comparing mainstream and critical perspectives on sustainable development [21] starts out by stating that the concept of sustainability, originally introduced to address environmental concerns, has been predominantly defined by the mainstream tradition of neoclassical (neoliberal) economic analysis, characterized by an inherent drive to prioritize economic issues and profits and marginalize or subjugate ecological concerns. This mainstream version of sustainable development, driven by perpetual accumulation requirements of capitalist economics, would aim at sustaining economic growth rather than developing ecological perspectives, supporting weak sustainability propositions at best, and remaining opposed even to the most basic steps towards necessary fundamental changes, which are seen as incompatible with the vested interests of short-term capital accumulation. Thus, the focal essay concludes that, for any meaningful aspect of sustainable development to be attained, fundamentally critical perspectives would be indispensable and need to be more fully developed [21]. Recommended for this purpose is an amalgamation of radical structuralist and poststructuralist approaches. Core to the former, the classic social critique of Marxism combines a shattering political-economic analysis of the exploitative, destructive, and crisis-prone tendencies of the capitalist system with a dedication to radical social transformation and emancipation through revolutionary action. To this end, Marx was interested in analyzing and actively supporting the social forces that could resist and rise up against, and, eventually, were expected to overcome capitalism, establishing a more democratic, just, and sustainable society characterized by socially and ecologically balanced relations of production and consumption—benefitting both the human species and the planet. Specifically, the Marxist concept of the “metabolic rift” provides an ecosocialist basis for analyzing the unsustainable exploitative growth regime of capitalism, underlying its inherent ecological crisis tendencies [19], [20]. This structuralist theoretical basis, according to the focal essay [21], should be enriched with additional traditions of critical analysis, such as the poststructuralist cultural critique of environmental degradation tendencies from other non-mainstream and grassroots perspectives. A decade later, a second identified key publication [22] extends and elaborates the roles of class,

capitalism, and domination in an outlined dialectic analysis of sustainable development from the perspective of critical theory. After providing a brief chronology of sustainability policy-making, starting from the 1987 United Nations (UN) Brundtland Report, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) and associated Rio Declaration, to the 2002 (Johannesburg) and 2015 (Rio+20) Summits, the UN Agenda 2030 is reviewed and discussed. Providing the current paradigm for national and supra-national policies, the Agenda 2030 specifies 17 goals for sustainable development. Some of these are, in principle, uncontroversial (e.g., no poverty; zero hunger; gender equality), while others are more ambiguous (e.g., affordable and clean energy; climate action), yet, for some, it seems dubious whether they are compatible with genuine sustainability (e.g., decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation, and infrastructure). Indeed, in light of declining ecosystems, accelerating climate change, widespread and rising poverty, food shortages, global health crisis, and continuing polarization of the living conditions of the rich and the poor, even moderate criticisms have pointed out that the Agenda 2030 has no realistic trajectory towards attainment of these goals. Moreover, more radical critiques have deconstructed the agenda as a neoliberal project of capitalist legitimation and expansion [9], [13], [17]. The focal contribution here [22] takes a balanced approach, acknowledging the progressive multidimensional understanding of sustainability as comprising social, environmental and economic objectives, but criticizing the neglect of the roles of communication and culture as well as of class and capitalism as factors negatively impacting or impeding sustainability. Subsequently, two perspectives are contrasted, debunking sustainability either as economistic neoliberal ideology or reframing it as a fundamentally critical concept. Accordingly, economistic ideologies seek to maintain and increase capitalist profits, while, at the same time, formulating desirable social and environmental values and goals, but without reflecting (or disclosing) how capitalist principles are negatively impacting society and counteracting these stated objectives [10], [11], [13]. The ideological character of the sustainability concept, specifically, is described as sounding positive and allowing diverse groups to project their opposing political goals into it, eventually blocking meaningful change. In contrast, a suggested concept of sustainability based on critical theory addresses the root logic of instrumental reason, treating human beings and living nature as objects to be dominated and exploited by some groups at the expense of others [22]. Unsustainability, it is argued, is based on instrumental reason, striving to justify and rationalize structures of domination and exploitation. Mainstream conceptions of sustainability disregard these systemic aspects of class and capitalism, rendering them apologetic and ideological. In contrast, drawing on Marx as an early theorist of ecology [19], [20], sustainability is understood as the conscious organization of society in a way that allows future generations to satisfy their needs and improves society through participatory democracy and democratic socialism. Based on this utopian vision, critical theory exposes global capitalism's destructive, dominative, exploitative and exclusionary character, its inherent economic, political and cultural antagonisms, and their interaction with patriarchy, racism, nationalism, bureaucracy, and destructive industrialism, as manifestations of instrumental reason, compounding the aforementioned metabolic rift between a society's mode of production and the natural environment. Productive forces thus turn into destructive forces of the social metabolism between nature and society, depleting and destroying rather than conserving and protecting natural resources. Thus, unsustainability correlates with the degree to which economic class interests of elites become the governing principles of a society and its subsystems, particularly, as the poor tend to be most negatively impacted by environmental degradation and crises. However, sustainability would also be able to serve as a useful concept for the critique of capitalism, class and power inequalities. To demonstrate this, the article introduces a differentiated dialectical model of sustainability, consisting of the nested spheres of nature and society, as well as embedded economic, political, and cultural subsystems, reciprocally interacting via technology and human agents in ways that are either conducive or detrimental to various dimensions of sustainability. Due to the complexity of this framework of analysis, the interested reader is referred to the original publication [22] for details. The last of the three selected key publications [23] is a relatively recent and comprehensive review and development of the concept of critical sustainability, summarizing and representing the current state of theorizing. Starting out with the assertion that repeated calls for greater sustainability in the past have been assimilated into capitalist processes and neoliberal narratives that have subdued, counteracted, and perverted their original intentions and environmental impacts, the authors advocate a critical re-conception of sustainability, rejecting prioritization of capital accumulation over ecological integrity and social and environmental justice – focusing not only on socio-environmental relations, but challenging the dominant political economies shaping these relationships according to particular vested interests of wealthy and powerful elites. Echoing the last contribution reviewed above, critical sustainability is portrayed as a new understanding of sustainability, in which class, politics, and class politics truly matter, including recognition of the historical preconditions underlying respective class politics. While recognizing both the material and ecological necessities that sustain life on the planet, critical sustainability rejects the commodification of nature, instead striving for a biopolitical organization of social life that ensures human and nonhuman welfare, based on sociopolitical orientations that support dignity, equity, respect, and rights for all, within the boundaries of ecological systems [23]. This includes acknowledging tensions and conflicts among conventionally distinguished pillars of sustainability (economy, society, ecology), which typically are resolved by privileging profits over people and

the planet, thus stifling necessary social change. Capitalist ideologies of exploitation and accumulation are regarded as so heavily intertwined that social justice and ecological sustainability are practically impossible to achieve under the current economic system. Following a central tenet of radical ecosocialism, critical sustainability thus is portrayed as converging with the Marxist critique of social and ecological unsustainability of the accumulation-based capitalist economic system [19], [20], [22], [23]. Emphasizing this point, the authors assert that, while their conception of critical sustainability supports allied versions of justice-oriented environmentalism and deep ecology, it would remain distinctively and essentially Marxist in its direct implication of capitalism as both an external (systemic) and a more subversively internal (ideological) threat to its core impact and ideas.

4. ECONOMIC DEGROWTH

The second thematic category concerns the more concrete and applied antagonism between neoliberal concepts of sustainable economic growth, typically in the form of “green growth” or “greening” capitalism, and antithetical ecosocialist concepts of “degrowth” and “decommodification”. Echoing several of the issues pointed out above, an exemplary critique of the sustainability discourse deconstructs the commodification of nature as a key feature of capital’s response to the ecological crisis [24]. Accordingly, the core problem with capitalisms response to the environmental crisis is that nature and social relations are transformed into economic resources, subordinated to the logic of the market and imperatives of profit, resulting in a progressive deterioration rather than improvement of social and environmental injustice. The concept of “green capitalism”, it is argued, reflects a renewed strategy for profiting from planetary destruction by leveraging the promise of technological innovation and expanding markets, while keeping the institutions of capitalism intact. Concluding that the expansionist logic of the capitalist system itself is not sustainable, strategies of degrowth and economies of subsistence are recommended. Continuing at this very juncture, the next included conceptual contribution sets out to assess the normative justifications for concepts of green growth and degrowth through the lens of critical social theory [25]. Whereas green growth means preserving the current capitalist economic system, and particularly its inherent growth paradigm, proponents of degrowth argue that perpetual economic growth cannot be environmentally sustainable and needs to be constrained and replaced by alternative approaches of a more radical transformation of society through strategies of degrowth. Degrowth is defined as the socially sustainable process of downscaling the social metabolism of society, that is, reducing the overall volume or throughput of material production and consumption, with the goals of preserving the natural environment and increasing human well-being and social equity [26]. In contrast to notions of green growth, degrowth requires a reduction in natural resource use, production and consumption, by decreasing the quantity of household goods, such as entertainment, information and communication technology, private cars, transportation, and energy use. Although a decline in the gross domestic product is not a goal by itself, it is an inevitable consequence of the need of developed countries to radically downscale their economies. Dialectically delineating the antagonistic approaches of green growth versus degrowth, the article concludes that, despite evidence that the claims of the former regarding growth without environmental impact through innovation and “decoupling” are largely counterfactual, it is the latter that still remains mostly marginalized in both academia and practice. The authors argue that the expected impact of degrowth’s principle of prioritizing environmental preservation has a much stronger validity and normative justification and should be the preferred option. Thus, the reviewed article [25] seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate by establishing normative grounds for focusing efforts for environmental sustainability on the necessity for economic degrowth rather than the counterfactual fantasy of green growth. Addressing the actual implementation of mandated degrowth-strategies, the third identified key contribution [27] presents a systematic review of 128 previously published peer-reviewed articles on degrowth, analyzing a total of 54 proposals for action, based on both an a priori (theoretically constructed) and an emergent (empirically derived) conceptual framework. The former includes the categories of: a) Geographical focus (international, national, local); b) Type of approach (top-down/expert-led and bottom-up/community-led); and c) Ecological economics policy objectives (sustainable scale, fair distribution, and efficient allocation). Whereas sustainable scale strategies reduce the absolute throughput threatening to overload the carrying capacity of an ecosystem (e.g. resource use, pollutant emissions), fair distribution strategies seek to change the supply of goods among people, including the division of environmental costs and justice (e.g. transfer payments, broadening public participation). Efficient allocation strategies address resource flows between alternative uses to maximize generated welfare per unit of resource use (e.g. energy efficiency, investments in environmental conservation). Based on this classification, three more specific goals of degrowth proposals were extracted, based on the analysis of core topics and keywords: 1) Reducing the environmental impact of human activities (topics: consumption, production, and trade impacts; ecological conservation; infrastructure; pollutant emissions); 2) Redistributing income and wealth both within and between countries (topics: access to goods and services; equity; global governance; socioeconomic opportunities); and 3) Promoting the transition from a materialistic to a convivial and participatory society (topics: community building, education, and value change; democracy and participation; free time; voluntary simplicity and downshifting). These three goals correspond with related

approaches of radical environmentalism, recommending decommodification, redistribution, and democratization as sustainability interventions into the interactions among nature and economic and cultural societal systems [22]. Based on their analysis, the authors conclude that the majority of degrowth proposals are national top-down approaches, focusing on government, rather than local bottom-up initiatives, emphasizing topics related to social equity and environmental sustainability [27]. However, largely neglected remain topics related to implications population growth and consequences for developing nations. Lastly, future research on how degrowth proposals would act in combination is called for. Overall, the review provides a most valuable starting point to explore the scope and range of approaches, topics, and goals of degrowth proposals and thus is highly recommended to the interested reader.

5. SOCIALIZING CORPORATIONS

The third category refers to the organizational level, contrasting the neoliberal mainstream with critical and radical propositions on the socialization and democratization of private corporations. Literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) is vast and diverse and only examples are referred to here [28], [29]. A common understanding of CSR refers to voluntary activities aimed at including social and environmental concerns in business operations and interactions with stakeholders [30]. Different ambition-levels of CSR are distinguished, ranging from compliance-driven (laws, regulations), profit-driven (markets, reputation), caring or green (values, principles), synergistic (integrated, embedded), and holistic (universal responsibility). However, apart from personal convictions, the basis for higher-level CSR ambitions remains as questionable as their economic viability. Similar limitations apply to the overlapping concept of corporate sustainability – a version of CSR focusing on environmental issues [31]. A recent seminal contribution offers an insightful analysis of systemic pathologies of CSR [32]. Accordingly, instead of proliferating responsible business practices, CSR predominantly serves market expansion, indoctrination, and legitimation. These pathologies are elaborated in terms of their functions of spreading the reach of capitalism to areas previously not under economic valorization and exploitation (material expansion; new markets for “green” products), contributing to the dissemination of capitalist rationality and neoliberal discourse by consolidating a “business ontology” (symbolic expansion; public faith in markets and managers), and meeting legitimation requirements of capitalism by diverting attention from corporate misconduct and negative externalities (obscuring destructive effects of industrial production). Pathologies are analyzed with regard to corresponding CSR activities (codes of conduct, stakeholder dialogue, CSR reporting), primary recipients (customers, society, employees, academics), dysfunctional effects, capitalist dynamics that underlie those (commodification, indoctrination, legitimation), and steps towards systemic change. Potential contributions of critical CSR research refer to efforts towards “de-commodification”, exploring ways of serving society beyond market transactions, and “de-naturalizing” and “de-legitimizing” capitalism, revealing its downsides and propagating alternatives beyond prevailing ideologies. Dysfunctional pathways and feedback loops between pathologies of CSR are developed in a multi-level model of individual, organizational, and systemic dynamics (e.g., negative side effects of material and symbolic expansion compounded by CSR; increased legitimation requirements addressed by CSR). The article [32] concludes that failure of CSR is inevitable, insisting on change on the systemic level of capitalism, and suggesting ways how critical CSR research can contribute to this political endeavor—transcending mainstream neoliberal discourse of CSR as a system-justifying ideology embodying rather than addressing the underlying pathologies of capitalism. The final article reviewed here [33] contributes to the debate by elaborating the structural incommensurability of profit goals with social and environmental concerns, and, subsequently, introducing a new concept, termed, not without humorous irony, as the “Responsibility to Socialize Corporations” (RSC). The author argues that the dominant discourse on CSR naturalizes capitalism, hiding irresponsible business practices, legitimizing corporations and neoliberal deregulation, and depoliticizing the search for a responsible economy, strengthening corporate power rather than containing it. Distinguished are four perspectives within the CSR discourse regarding the relationships among economic and social (including ecological) objectives: a) Reductionism frames social and environmental issues as profit opportunities (green marketing); b) Projectionism pretends that responsible business practices and profit-orientation can be combined (business ethics); c) Dualism separates the two domains (corporate philanthropy); and d) Dialectics, which recognizes the structural incommensurability and antagonistic nature of profit goals and social responsibility. The first three approaches instrumentalize the social, idealize the economic imperative, or isolate the economic from the social, obscuring the real interrelations between the two domains and failing to draw necessary conclusions regarding the structural problems of CSR. The dialectical perspective problematizes structural antagonisms between profit motive and social responsibility, concluding that the concept of CSR needs to be turned “off its head to its feet”, resulting in the notion of RSC, as a societal alternative based on democratic ownership of the means of production and socialist organization of politics, from private to common property, from elitist to participatory decision making, and from particularistic to universal interests in the common good. For this transformation towards socially responsible economic alternatives, a battery of measures is discussed [33], including efforts to restrict corporate power (economic regulations, control of capital flows, nationalization of banking systems, public institutions monitoring corporate

crimes) and to democratize workplaces (strong worker rights and mandatory direct involvement in decision-making; strong labor unions and worker ownership). Activities on the organizational level would need to be embedded into changes at the societal level, aimed at strengthening democracy (public funding of civil society and social movements, direct participation in political processes), reducing poverty and socio-economic inequality within and across national states (redistribution of wealth, guaranteed income, public health care, pensions, and education, minimum wages, reduction of the working week, laws against child labor, cancellation of debts), and strengthening tendencies beyond capitalism based on the idea of the common good (abolition of intellectual property rights, support for the open source movement, alternative organizations). Overall, what is demanded here [33] amounts to radical reformism combining social movement activism, bottom-up alternative projects, and various structural reforms to create a socially responsible and ecologically sustainable society based on the radically democratic organization of the economy and politics as an alternative to the current system of corporate capitalism.

6. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

Aim of this exploration of Marxist ecology, unorthodox economics, and critical organizational theory was to demonstrate the potential of alternative ecosocialist perspectives as antipodes to neoliberal (market-based and corporation-focused) conceptions [19], [20]. The three exemplary mainstream concepts of sustainable development, green growth, and corporate social responsibility were contrasted with radical (eco-)critical antipodes of a) critical sustainability, b) economic degrowth, and c) responsibility to socialize corporations. Core to all three are structures and processes of direct democracy and bottom-up participation as well as a fundamental rejection of the dominant capitalist profit and growth imperatives, emphasizing the need for radical changes at the systems level [5], [14], [9], [10]. A common reference point on the societal level, the United Nation Agenda 2030, a landmark in policy-making, has been deconstructed as a neoliberal ideological project of capitalist expansion and legitimization, incorporating counterfactual claims of green growth, decoupling through innovation, market-solutions to environmental protection, and voluntary corporate social responsibility [16], [22]. The ideological nature of these system-stabilizing (rather than system-transcending) concepts is seen in the fact that they negate or obscure the fundamental contradiction between the inherent destructiveness of economic productivity and profitability, on the one hand, and the realization of social and environmental sustainability, on the other [13], [22], [34]. In the interdisciplinary literature, an alternative paradigm of critical sustainability is currently emerging, based on the development of antagonistic counter-concepts of degrowth, decommodification, radical democratization, and egalitarian redistribution of resources on all levels of political, economic, and social organizing [26], [27]. From the ecosocialist perspective, critical analysis of the root causes of unsustainability converges with the social critique of the exploitative profit and growth imperatives inherent to the capitalist systems logic [4], [5], [20]. On the organizational level, structural flaws of CSR were deconstructed as systemic pathologies and contrasted with the radical proposition of democratic socialization [32], [33]. Core to all dialectically contrasted concepts are structures and processes of direct democracy and participation and fundamental rejection of the capitalist profit and growth mechanisms as drivers of unsustainability. In an additional step, it was explored, how critical conceptions of sustainability influence current discourse in organizational science. In this context, attention is called to how the sustainability debate shapes academic accounts of alternative forms of organizing and doing research in the era of Anthropocene. Highlighting an exemplary recent programmatic contribution [35] mandated are paradigm shifts from managerialist to critical ontological positions (e.g., from corporate interests to ecological welfare), from discipline-focused to collaborative interdisciplinary research (e.g., from specialization to systems-thinking), from realist to relational epistemologies (e.g., from simplistic causality to dynamic interdependence), and from pretense of objectivity and value-neutrality to a principled and committed stance of engaged scholarship and academic activism (from neutral observation and analysis to facilitating social change). Each of these paradigm shifts is detailed by the authors and integrated into a matrix for guiding organizational sustainability research in the Anthropocene, identifying challenges, topics of interests, and future steps for more responsible and engaged scholarship. A number of these recommendations are illustrated in a recent special issue on organizations and organizing in a post-growth era [36]. To conclude, deconstructing the sustainability discourse from a critical-theoretical perspective presents opportunities to re-appropriate ecological ideas against degeneration into economic ideology counterproductive to the goal of saving the planet from profitable destruction. Seriousness and urgency of the situation are emphasized as opportunities to raise consciousness and mobilize momentum for social transformation among the public as well as political decision-makers [9], [11], [17]. Normative foundations that need to be further developed to support this reconceptualization of the academic self-image, include occupational codes of ethical responsibility to prioritize people over profits, ecology over economy, and planetary survival over subservience to vested interests. The literature reviewed above as well as described paradigm shifts for radical academic engagement in the field of organizational studies [35] offer promising venues for such an undertaking. Future research needs to redeploy the sustainable development goals of the Agenda 2030 as vehicles for actual real-world improvements and as basis of more radical critiques of unsustainable social

organization in the Anthropocene. Referring again to the disturbing latest scientific evidence on climate change [7], the urgent need for a dramatic turnaround to preserve the conditions for life on the planet should be out of question. At present, the conventional interpretation of the Agenda 2030, along with notions of green growth and CSR, functions as ideologies to obscure the structural antagonism and negative dialectics between capitalist expansion and ecological sustainability, inhibiting real transformative change, thus, indirectly contributing to the destruction of the foundations of life on earth [11], [22], [34]. The fantasmatic vision of sustainable development within the logic of the current system is frequently portrayed as a “light at the end of the tunnel”. Referring to the catastrophic ecological and social consequences of the current planetary trajectory discussed at the outset of this essay, this false promise more accurately resembles the headlight of a train approaching from the opposite direction [5], [6]. Considering the truly alarming state of affairs, radical alternatives of critical sustainability beyond conventional neoliberal ideology, are more desperately needed than ever [9]. This contribution hopes to call attention to some underlying issues and the emerging body of literature, and to raise consciousness for the need to fundamentally alter the prevailing understanding of sustainability from incremental quantitative adjustments towards a qualitatively different utopian vision of radical social and economic as well as psychological and behavioral transformation.

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