Empires of Sustainability

People and Planet after Globalisation

Joseph Murphy

EMPIRES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Focussing on the greening of imperialisms and empires, *Empires of Sustainability* analyses the shift around the world from denial of the environmental crisis to action to prevent catastrophe, and the resulting implications.

Evidence of this shift is clear in widespread and purposeful social change which is gathering momentum. The book explains how globalisation accelerated us towards the crisis, and today, even as its own legitimacy is being questioned, is evolving through solutions and responses to it. Looking ahead and as the environmental crisis worsens, two possible futures are discerned and explored. One is that through universal actions to save the planet, shaped by interweaving political and economic forces, the hegemony of globalisation is restored, albeit in a green form. The other is that the world reorganises into competing spheres of influence, with politics, economics and the environment interwoven differently in each case. In these ways, we face the prospect of one or more Empires of Sustainability emerging over the decades ahead, unless we build a better alternative society. The author presents an alternative: a more diverse World of Caring Places.

This accessible book will appeal to students and scholars of international political economy, sustainability and environmental studies, and analysts, policy makers, campaigners and others concerned about the future of relations between people and planet.

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For Brigid

CONTENTS

FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Environmental Crisis: From Denial to Action

Environmental Crisis

This book is about the global environmental crisis – its impacts, causes and solutions. I could begin with a provocative quote or compelling anecdote but summarising the key threats which constitute the crisis will lay a firmer foundation to build off. Think-tanks, pressure groups and governments produce such summaries regularly, and I draw on some of these below, but anyone can do the same by observing the world and reading the news. Try it. Our summaries will not be identical. Probably we will disagree on details. More than likely, however, our conclusions will be the same.

Climate change is an obvious place to begin now that it is widely accepted and established in public debate. According to one of the most recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC):

> It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred.
>
> *(IPCC, 2021: 4)*

> Global surface temperature will continue to increase until at least mid-century under all emissions scenarios considered. Global warming of 1.5°C and 2°C will be exceeded during the 21st century unless deep reductions in CO_2 and other greenhouse gas emissions occur in the coming decades.
>
> *(IPCC, 2021: 14)*

This warming – or 'heating' as some prefer – has many threatening knock-on effects, including heatwaves and wildfires, droughts in some areas and increased rainfall in others, increased ferocity of storms, diminished snow and ice cover, and sea-level rise.

The causes of climate change are complex, of course, but research has clarified many of them. Although vested interests have spent many decades and resources trying to confuse the issue, it is primarily the result of a build-up of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere. The sun's radiation passes through these gasses, particularly carbon dioxide and methane, but they trap the Earth's radiation as it leaves, causing the atmosphere to warm. Carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere by many processes but combustion of fossil fuels – petrol and diesel in cars, kerosene in planes and coal in power stations – is the most significant. Methane is released in large amounts by livestock. Climate change is therefore built into almost every aspect of modern society including food, energy and transport.

As the IPCC report emphasises, our world is warming now. Changing weather patterns are already disrupting food production and rendering once productive areas infertile. Rising sea-levels are already flooding coastal areas, destroying homes and communities. The consequences of climate change, however, are not evenly distributed. In fact, much depends on wealth and location. This means that although the problem has largely been caused by the richest countries, it is the poorest countries who are suffering the most. And the impacts of climate change will only get worse in the future with some predicting that there will be 150–200 million climate change refugees by 2050.[1]

Destruction of life on Earth is another key threat we face.[2] In 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) concluded that:

> Nature and its vital contributions to people, which together embody biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are deteriorating worldwide.
>
> *(IPBES, 2019: 10)*

> Direct and indirect drivers of change have accelerated during the past 50 years.
>
> *(IPBES, 2019: 12)*

The most familiar aspect of this trauma and tragedy is species extinction. Indeed, we are living through a mass extinction event – variously referred to as the sixth mass extinction, Holocene extinction or Anthropocene extinction. Mass extinction events have happened before, following meteor impacts, volcanic eruptions and other natural events. Humans, however, are responsible for this one. Related to extinction but worth distinguishing from

it is the dramatic fall in population sizes of many species. In the same report the IPBES estimate that global biomass of wild mammals has fallen by 82 per cent since prehistory (IPBES, 2019: 25).

Like climate change, the roots of this destruction are complex, but the immediate causes are not. Mining is an example. Here I am using the term 'mining' in a general way to refer to all activities which deplete nature in unsustainable ways, such as logging companies clear felling ancient forests and factory ships indiscriminately removing shoals of fish from the ocean. Land take is another cause. In simple terms we are transforming more and more land for farms, cities, roads, reservoirs and so on, leaving less and less space for plants and animals to flourish. Life continues, of course, but it is being denuded both in terms of its diversity and quantity.

Why does this matter? Most obviously because human livelihoods and communities are being ruined at the same time; particularly those that rely on long-standing and more harmonious relations between human and non-human life. Coastal fishing communities, for example, where daily catches decrease as foreign trawlers move back and forth on the horizon removing large quantities of aquatic life. Reckless destruction of life also matters, however, irrespective of its implications for people. I say this because I believe society is under a general obligation to care for nature, irrespective of its economic value or utility, or indeed any benefit we might derive.

In addition to climate change and the destruction of life, my summary of the environmental crisis includes worsening global toxicity and contamination. In simple terms we are dumping ever increasing quantities and varieties of solids, liquids and gasses which the planet is unable to render harmless. I have already referred to carbon dioxide from combustion and methane from agriculture but there are countless other examples. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates, for example, that 'If current consumption patterns and waste management practices continue, then by 2050 there will be around 12 billion tonnes of plastic litter in landfills and the environment' (UNEP, 2018: vi). The uncontrolled movement of micro-plastics and fibres around the world has attracted attention recently leading some to argue that humans have created a global plastic cycle and are responsible for a general 'plastification' of the planet (Brahney et al., 2021). This includes micro-plastics present everywhere from the polar regions to our bloodstreams (Leslie et al., 2022).

Things are discarded and dumped for many reasons. First and foremost, doing so is usually easier and cheaper than handling effluences responsibly. And often people and countries will act this way as long as the contamination impacts someone and somewhere else. More broadly, however, there is an assumption that the planet will deal with whatever we discard; it will somehow process and assimilate all the pollution we pass on. This is a frontier assumption; after we despoil what we have, there will always be more

clean space to occupy. The idea that there will always be more clean space, however, is just as outdated as the idea that there will always be more buffalo or beavers to kill. It may have been tenable once, but that era is now in the past.

Many of the impacts of toxicity and contamination are known. We know, for example, that increases in greenhouse gas concentrations lead to climate change. Similarly, we know that when waste electronic equipment is exported or smuggled from rich to poor countries it often causes human health and environmental damage when it arrives because of the lack of safe handling capacity. Many impacts of waste and pollution, however, are not known in detail or at all. The global spread of micro-plastics illustrates this point. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that through pollution we are handing assorted known and unknown problems on to those who will come after us. This means that in addition to relations between rich and poor, people and nature, the crisis we face links present and future generations.

I could continue in this way for much longer, introducing one threat after another, but there is no need. Climate change, destruction of life and worldwide contamination are enough to make the point that the environmental crisis is real. To extend the widely used spaceship Earth metaphor, warning lights on the flight deck are flashing red. That said, the term 'environmental crisis' is also misleading because it suggests that the crisis resides in our surroundings. In fact, it is a crisis in relations between us and our world or, to put it another way, between people and planet.[3]

From Denial to Action

What are we doing about the people–planet crisis? One answer, of course, is 'not enough.' We have already failed on many fronts and will do so on many more in the future. That said, something else is happening. A shift from apathy and denial to action is underway. In saying this I am not swayed by one or two, or even large numbers, of isolated projects and initiatives. I am persuaded by evidence of systemic and purposeful social change across production, governing and consumption which is gathering momentum. Indeed, developments which were unthinkable ten years ago are not only acceptable today but have been normalised. At the COP26 climate change meeting in Glasgow in 2021, Sir David Attenborough, optimistically, articulated the potential of this shift: 'In my lifetime, I have witnessed a terrible decline. In yours, you could and should witness a wonderful recovery.'[4] In addition to exploring the causes of the people–planet crisis, this book investigates the substance and implications of this shift.

Change is particularly apparent in production where climate, resources and manufacturing meet. Total electricity generation worldwide from renewable sources, for example, is on the verge of surpassing electricity generation

from coal. Hydropower is the largest source of renewable electricity for historical reasons, but today's growth areas are wind and solar photovoltaic (IEA, 2020). This transformation of generation is accompanied by changes to electricity distribution infrastructure, including the reinforcement and enlargement of power grids. The world around us is being re-wired including new electricity interconnectors linking countries and continents to form 'mega' or 'super-grids,' so that eco-electricity generated in one location can be transported over enormous distances to eco-consumers elsewhere. And not surprisingly we also see changes in manufacturing – its organisation and outputs. Remarkably, in July 2020 the electric car and battery manufacturer Tesla became the world's most valuable car company by market capitalisation, overtaking Japan's Toyota. Along the way it has pioneered the concept and reality of the giga-factory not only for making but also recycling its products. Long-lived car manufacturers around the world are now racing to catch up. One of the most significant factors influencing all such changes has been the slow, faltering but nonetheless significant advance of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and related targets for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

We are also seeing a striking shift from apathy and denial to action in how nature is governed. Experts and officials are developing new concepts and approaches apace. The most important is undoubtedly 'eco-system services'; a term that refers to the benefits which humans derive from healthy nature, such as clean water and pollination of crops. Advocates of this way of conceiving nature and our relationship to it argue that it can underpin responsible management around the world and the idea of extending it to include ownership and payment for such services is spreading. More traditional approaches, however, are still being employed. For example, on 13 November 2020 Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that the United Kingdom (UK) had placed under protection 4.3 million km^2 of the world's ocean – an area 17 times the size of the UK itself. This milestone was reached by creating vast reserves around UK Overseas Territories like Ascension Island, St Helena, Pitcairn and Tristan da Cunha. In explaining this move a link was made to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and negotiations to agree a Global Biodiversity Framework including the '30 by 30' initiative – the goal of having at least 30 percent of global land and sea designated as protected areas by 2030.

Not surprisingly action to solve environmental problems extends beyond production and governing to consumption – including what people buy and how they live. In a recent assessment, for example, the US Department of Agriculture emphasised that organic food in the US is experiencing double-digit growth despite its price premium, is 'increasingly mainstream' and 'consumed at least occasionally by a majority of Americans.' This is explained, they argue, by concerns around toxicity and contamination, particularly the

human health and environmental implications of chemicals used in mainstream agriculture.[5] Households are also increasingly taking responsibility for sorting and recycling a wide range of waste materials, day-to-day energy and water management, and infrastructural changes such as installing insulation, clean boilers and photovoltaic arrays. In short, and as far as this is possible, some people are starting to internalise saving the planet as their responsibility. It is, in other words, becoming part of their identity.

So, if we are changing course, what is our destination? To the extent that there is a widely shared answer to this question it is 'sustainable development' or, more simply, 'sustainability.' This idea began its journey into the mainstream in 1987 when it featured in *Our Common Future* – the final report of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development. In that report it was defined as '… development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987: Chapter 2). Publication of *Our Common Future* was followed in 1992 by the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro – officially the UN Conference on Environment and Development. This was the moment when governments, businesses, charities, churches, unions and many more embraced sustainability as a shared goal. In other words, the moment when it went mainstream and became the new orthodoxy linking people and planet.

Action to solve the environmental crisis, therefore, is linked to sustainability's role and meaning. In seeking to understand this we must remember that there was already a vibrant debate regarding the people–planet crisis and how it could be solved before sustainability. This included, for example, the de-growth and de-industrialisation arguments set out in the early 1970s in *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) and *Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith et al., 1972). The concept of sustainability, therefore, did not simply occupy vacant terrain, but rather it marginalised existing arguments. It achieved this primarily by suggesting, contrary to what it replaced, that economic growth and environmental protection could be reconciled with each other. A further important aspect of sustainability's mainstreaming is that for many years its embrace was not followed by the implementation of strategies to achieve it 'by the year 2000 and beyond' as the Chairman of the Earth Summit requested in 1992 (WCED, 1987: Chairman's Foreword). Indeed, over the 1990s and into the 2000s, although leaders of all kinds endorsed the idea ever more frequently, they largely failed to act. Thus, for many, as relations between people and planet deteriorated rather than improved across these decades, sustainable development became a 'zombie concept' – neither alive nor dead.[6]

Recently there have been attempts to bring sustainability more fully back to life. In 2015, for example, the international community agreed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). According to the United Nations these are intended as

'a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.' The key threats I emphasised above are all covered in different ways. Goals 7 and 13 relate to climate change, for example, and goals 14 and 15 to safeguarding nature. Many of the goals also suggest the kind of society we need to build. Goal 10, for example, is 'Reduce inequality within and among countries' and goal 16 is 'Promote peaceful and inclusive societies … [and] provide access to justice for all.' This is one version of sustainability but there are many more. The United Nations, after all, does not have a monopoly on its meaning. It is, in fact, a contested concept, synonymous with dispute and disagreement, and subject to all powerful forces, particularly political and economic.

The questions I want to answer in this book crystalise in this context. Why are we seeing a shift from denial to action now? How are actions and solutions being shaped and decided? What kind of world will these solutions build over the coming decades? Are there viable alternatives which would build a better world? What are these and how can they be pursued? And more broadly, why are people–planet relations dysfunctional today and how can more harmonious relations be nurtured into the future?

Empires of Sustainability

How, in general terms, can we answer these questions? Where are the threads which we can unpick to make sense of something as tangled as the people–planet crisis and the shift from denial to action? Identifying a starting point is difficult because all aspects of society are implicated. Everything from acquiring natural resources, manufacture of products, governing and rulemaking, how people live through to disposal of waste. My approach is to focus on how political and economic forces, operating separately but more importantly interweaving, animate and structure society, particularly relations between people and planet. This book, therefore, has political economy at its core.

Jeffrey Frieden, Professor of Government at Harvard University, provides a clear and simple explanation of political economy as a way of studying the world. It involves, he emphasises, 'the integration of political and economic factors in our analysis of modern society.' He also stresses its key advantage:

> Inasmuch as just about everyone would agree that politics and economics are intricately and irretrievably interwoven—politics affects the economy and the economy affects politics—this approach seems natural.
>
> *(Frieden, 2020: 9)*

In other words, intuitively, most people would agree that politics and economics combined shape many aspects of the world we live in, even if they do not know how.

The world has changed a lot since political economy emerged as an analytical approach in the 18th century. Today, for example, there are many more interactions linking nations across borders. Intergovernmental meetings are one example but knowledge, money, products, resources and more flow between jurisdictions today more than they ever have in the past. Over time the accumulation of such interactions has led investigators to shift scale from national to international political economy. Even the idea of international can be inaccurate, however, in a world with so many supranational organisations and arrangements. These are just some of the reasons why many researchers advocate the study of global political economy.

Exploring the people–planet crisis this way makes sense in theory but putting this agenda into practice is not straightforward. One key problem is that political economy has tended to treat the planet as a limitless and largely uninteresting backdrop to more important things. Even the best scholars of the past did little more that treat the planet as a stock of land and raw materials, whilst focussing on the dynamics of other things like population and capitalism. This is not enough anymore if it ever was. Today we need to study the interweaving of politics and economics in a way that not only foregrounds complex relations between people and planet but is also alert to the way that global environmental limits are reflecting political and economic forces back on themselves and society. We need, in other words, a global political economy of people–planet.

In this context my analysis begins with the observation that our world is organised into spheres of influence, each with its own centre and margin, and that this has important implications for relations between people and planet. In various ways, for example, lifestyles in the richer parts of the world (centre) are sustained by destruction of the environment and life chances of people living in its poorer parts (margin). Also, increasingly, action required to solve the environmental crisis is being defined in centres, frequently in ways that benefit them but impose further burdens on margins. Observing such centre–margin patterns and phenomena is a useful first step but going further means analysing and explaining centre–margin interactions and to this end I go beyond spheres of influence to 'imperialism' and 'empire.'

I explore and develop the concepts of 'imperialism' and 'empire' over the following chapters but to be clear I will define them here. Imperialism is comprised of a diverse range of processes, shaped by interweaving economic and political forces of profit and control, through which centres exert power over their margins. The centre–margin interactions involved can be damaging and even deadly at the margins but more generally tend to distribute rewards and burdens asymmetrically or impose the centre's way of organising and understanding the world. Building on this, an empire