



Guiding questions for critical sustainabilities

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As interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners pursue research and forge perspectives that respect the urgency of complex planetary socioecological crises, the importance of critical sustainabilities is increasingly clear. Critical sustainabilities mandate that we create solutions beyond techno-fixes, beyond individual consumer behaviors, and beyond sustainability as a solely environmental project. To be effective, these sustainabilities must interrogate the workings of power at every scale, searching for root causes embedded in our relationships in and as nature, in our political and economic legacies, and in our practice as community members, citizens, and scholars working for new knowledge and social equity.

Developing the questions and systems thinking skills needed to expose the sources of human and ecological degradation is essential to critical sustainability. In the table below (Table 1), we offer some key inquiries regarding the interrogation of power relations, and contrast common approaches to sustainabilities, often co-opted by capitalism, with critical sustainabilities.

Throughout this critical sustainability symposium, each of the scholars have engaged these complex questions in different ways, working within various systems to understand the impacts of normalized power inherent in capitalist structures on issues of equity and justice. We have seen much overlap not only in their systemic analyses, but also in their approaches to knowledge generation.

Giovanna diChiro (2018) illustrates the complexity of sociohistorical context and knowledge generation, focusing attention on how the stories we choose to tell can universalize an individualized and short-sighted human nature at the expense of stories that embed humans in nature and culture. She invites

readers to develop the art of noticing how our stories influence who we are and what we do. Critically examining the popular Anthropocene narrative, she notes that the term fails to adequately represent all of human-nature relations and considers what/who is normalized and what/who is erased in this narrative. She suggests, “Declaring that the planet’s core environmental problem is humanity, the Anthropocene story too readily conflates the exploitative cultures and extractive economies of the one percent of high-impact, high-extractive, and high-consumptive humans with the entire species. At the same time, it easily ignores the other large-scale story of global crisis: human inequality and the ongoing struggle for basic human rights for billions of people worldwide.” She goes on to note that this widely acknowledged story “limits the possibilities for gaining critical insights from examples of sustainable lifeways, knowledges, and cultures that are achieved by those people who have been colonized, enslaved, or eradicated in the service of wealth and domination of the earth” (2018: page #). The sociohistorical systems’ context she provides helps us see how stories can either disrupt existing power structures responsible for exploitation, cultural erasure, displacement, and colonization or quietly, and often without our noticing, reinforce them.

Fernando Bosco and Pascale Joassart-Marcelli (2018) consider the critical nature of sociohistorical context in asking that we consider space not as a prescribed or map-driven container, but rather as something that is produced and experienced by inhabitants, both past and present. They point out that “food deserts do not emerge overnight but are rather produced over time by a combination of factors including suburbanization and white flight, capital disinvestment, and political neglect” (2018: page #). This relational conception frees us from the trap of oversimplified and even offensive notions of obesogenic environments and food deserts and instead allows us to understand relationships to food as inhabitants move through environments. They note “...young people in our study, journeying through their neighborhood on their way to school and buying snacks at a corner store or food at an ethnic market were both ways of affirming their personal identities and of contesting and resisting circumstances imposed

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Table 1 Interrogations of power: common and critical sustainability approaches

Interrogations of power	Common sustainability approaches	Critical sustainability approaches
<p>Sociohistorical systems</p> <p><i>Does the suggested sustainability process/product/action/story recognize how historical policies and practices rooted in race, class, gender, and other social markers have informed the foundation of contemporary inequity and degradation?</i></p> <p><i>Does the sustainability process/product/action/story normalize or disrupt existing power structures responsible for exploitation, cultural erasure, displacement, and/or colonization?</i></p>	<p>Ignoring or omitting how the past has shaped the present allows for narratives of meritocracy based in a supposedly equal playing field. In this scenario, those who work hard, advocate for their needs, and participate as citizens (by voting) are rewarded and represented. This perspective is foundational to capitalist notions of equality and equal opportunity.</p>	<p>Historical policies and practices have set the tone for who is and is not recognized in society. The legacy of practices including slavery, displacement, forced relocation, and genocide, often institutionalized through policies like the Bracero Program, the Homestead Act, and redlining, maintain the practices of discrimination that feed wealth inequality and uneven capital accumulation.</p>
<p>True costs</p> <p><i>Does the suggested sustainability process/product/action/story normalize efficiencies and profit at the expense of equity? What “externalities” are embedded in the sustainability process/product/action/story?</i></p>	<p>Efficiency, growth, and profit are presented as unquestioned positive contributions. Externalities are a widely accepted side effect of production and their inclusion in techno-fixes and green consumerism is commonly accepted in sustainability initiatives.</p>	<p>Production efficiencies equate with violations of human rights and ecological health (at particular scales) and profit tends to be sourced from the expropriation of material nonhuman nature and/or exploitation of people. The idea that there are “side effects” of production shifts the comprehensive costs of production to the public while allowing for capital accumulation by owners, corporations, and shareholders.</p>
<p>Knowledge generation</p> <p><i>Who is informing the knowledge being created and/or the stories being told?</i></p>	<p>Knowledge, from study design to dissemination to codification through textbook creation, is only legitimate when performed by specialized, credentialed researchers with disciplinary expertise.</p>	<p>Community members are experts in their own lives with the most appropriate questions and voices for problem solving. The generation of knowledge happens in collaborative processes between community members with and as researchers.</p>
<p>Mechanisms for change</p> <p><i>Is the sustainability process/product/action/story individual or collective in nature? Does it harness concepts and practices of place and community?</i></p>	<p>Sustainability initiatives often promote individual actions as a “silver bullet” for complex problems, normalizing the capitalist tenets of individualism.</p>	<p>Critical sustainability suggests that we must recognize all scales of an issue, ranging from personal to communal to political to regional to global. This approach mandates social and political levels of response and recognizes that some sustainability efforts exacerbate injustices and inequities.</p>

by family rules, social expectations and economic conditions” (2018: page #). Here, we see not only how historical policies and practices rooted in race, class, and gender have set the stage for inequity and degradation, but also how our approach to research can reinforce the narrative of passive victims rather than active producers of identity and place.

Liz Ivkovich (2018) wrestles with how to elicit understandings of the true costs of our agricultural systems in exploring a type of dance performance—environmental justice dance—and her own role as a consumer of this dance. This performance “isn’t about nature in the way that environmental dance generally has been” rather it “unworks nature, exposing the hidden labor of the mesh of beings – human and other-than-human – behind this romanticized ideal” (2018: page #). She describes “...foregrounded, the cheerful chatter of a white, male scientist/tour guide in his lab coat, an ode to expertise. Backgrounded, black and brown dancers vomiting plastic. Juxtaposing these bodies against each other [we see that] the global industrial food system sits on the backs of men and women of color” (2018: page #). In this setting, Ivkovich

notes “the dancers are depersonalized – exhibits rather than humans. At the same moment their material personhood is emphasized – skin color, sexuality, (lack of) agency ... At first the dancers read as human, then they become Monsanto marketing materials, then genetically modified organisms, then human once again, all the while I am audience, complicit consumer, outsider, and insider” (2018: page #). Ivkovich reads this performance as a way to reveal the incompatibility of capitalist efficiencies and equity.

Manisha Anantharaman (2018) grapples with how power is hidden in narratives of change as individual behavior and reckons with the consequences of this conception in further marginalizing populations living in poverty. She notes that the “language of behavior change that dominates much sustainable consumption research depoliticizes the privilege that allows one to consume at high rates and then voluntarily cut-down consumption or waste production in response to environmental awareness. This depoliticization is epistemic violence as it results in one group (privileged consumers) being elevated to the status of good sustainable consumers while

misrecognizing and devaluing the quotidian and vernacular sustainability of the poor, people of color and other marginalized social groups” (2018: page #). She brings this lens to her own research noting that if she had “failed to apply a critical perspective while evaluating bicycling practices, I might have simply lauded the innovative ways in which the middle classes reimagined bicycling and used it as a way of reducing their environmental footprints, while failing to see why this distancing from the poor was problematic” (2018: page #). She finally suggests that “discussions of power, oppression and justice can no longer be marginal to sustainable consumption scholarship, they must be front and center” (2018: page #).

Brett Clark, Daniel Auerbach, and Stefano B. Longo (2018) present how mainstream conceptions of sustainability fail to engage thoroughly with the sociohistorical character and imperatives of “growth” under capitalism. They detail how the historical development of the capital system inherently involves processes of expropriation and exploitation, which results in environmental degradation and social inequalities related to race, class, and gender relationships. They explain that the capitalist, growth-oriented economy is necessarily incompatible with sustainability and equalities, whether conceptualized and/or operationalized in social or environmental measures.

Finally, all of the authors in this symposium approach the creation of knowledge, or academic research, not as something one does on communities, and not as something one does for or in communities, but rather as a process of co-production with communities of interest and concern. As a result, knowledge can become truly transformative. This approach to research and community engagement is especially notable at a time when many of the dominant modes of knowledge production within the academy tend to contradict efforts toward, and results from, civic engagement.

This approach to knowledge generation, and the practice of these scholars, resonates with an understanding that mechanisms for change must be based in non-commodified and non-individualized approaches to sustainability. They must include

sociopolitical engagement and reject the superordinance of capital accumulation over ecological integrity.

We offer these questions, perspectives, and articles as means to build approaches to sustainability that are more critical, that will foreground equity and justice. Traditional sustainability efforts, narratives, and projects have not been working, not for already-marginalized communities, not for the majority of people, and often not for nonhuman nature when examined across multiple scales. The sustainabilities envisioned (and often realized) through critical perspectives consider a broader range of voices (not just those who sit at the table making decisions), the processes undertaken, the historical-situated nature of the concerns, and the complexities associated with moving across scales. Critical sustainabilities note that “solutions” are often illusory, and that a series of complex tradeoffs are more likely when accounting for the people, environments, and economies involved. In this sense, critical sustainabilities provide a strong and compelling basis to empower and to organize for broad social transformations that pursue social equity and ecological integrity.

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