

# The Ecological Footprint and Unsustainable Development

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1. *Our Ecological Footprint* by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees (1996) instigated a major strand in radical social thinking about construction of the future.<sup>1</sup>

The authors not only defined a new concept—that of an *ecological footprint*—they also developed a *metric* for it, whose units are defined in terms of “global hectares,” comparing the biological capacity of societies/countries (their ability to produce and reproduce the conditions for life on the Planet) with their consumption of resources made available to them by this bio-capacity.

The authors’ conclusions are worrying. At the global level, the bio-capacity of our planet is 2.1 global hectares (gha) per capita (i.e., 13.2 billion gha per 6.3 billion inhabitants). In contrast, the global average for consumption of resources was already—in the mid-1990s—2.7 gha. This “average” masks a gigantic imbalance, the average for the Triad (Europe, North America, and Japan) having already reached a multiple of the order of four magnitudes of the global average. A good proportion of the bio-capacity of societies in the South is taken up by and to the advantage of these centers.

In other words, the current expansion of capitalism is destroying the Planet and humanity. This expansion’s logical conclusion is either the actual genocide of the peoples of the South—as “over-population”—or, at the least, their confinement to ever increasing poverty. An eco-fascist strand of thought is being developed that gives legitimacy to this type of “final solution” to the problem.

2. The interest of this work goes beyond its conclusions. For it is a question of a calculation (I use the term “calculation,” rather than “discourse,” deliberately put in terms of the *use value* of the planet’s resources, illustrated through their measurement in global hectares (gha), not in dollars.

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The proof is therefore given that social use value can be the subject of perfectly rational calculation. This proof is decisive in its import, since socialism is defined in terms of a society founded on use value and not on exchange value. And defenders of capitalism have always held that socialism is an unreal utopia because—according to them—use value is not measurable, unless it is conflated with exchange value (defined in terms of “utility” in vulgar economics).

Recognition of use value (of which the measurement of economic footprints is but one good example) implies that socialism should be “ecological,” indeed can only be ecological, as Altvater proclaims (“Solar socialism” or “no socialism”). But it also implies that this recognition is impossible in any capitalist system, even a “reformed” one, as we shall see.

3. In his time, Marx not only suspected the existence of this problem, he had already expressed it through his rigorous distinction between use value and wealth, conflated in vulgar economics. Marx explicitly said that the accumulation of capital destroys the natural bases on which that accumulation is built: man (the alienated, exploited, dominated, and oppressed worker) and the earth (symbol of natural riches at the disposal of humanity). And whatever might be the limitations of this way of putting it, trapped within its own era, Marx’s analysis nonetheless remains an illustration of a clear consciousness (beyond intuition) of the problem, which deserves to be recognised.

It is regrettable, therefore, that the ecologists of our time, including Wackernagel and Rees, have not read Marx. This would have allowed them to take their own proposals further, to grasp their revolutionary import, and, of course, to go further than Marx himself on this topic.

4. This deficiency in modern ecology facilitates its capture by the ideology of vulgar economics, which occupies a dominant position in contemporary society. This capture is already under way and, indeed, considerably advanced.

Political ecology (such as that proposed by Alain Lipietz) was located from the beginning within the gamut of the “pro-socialist,” political Left. Subsequently, “green” movements (and then political parties) located themselves in the Center Left, through their expressed sympathy with social and international justice, their critique of “waste,” their concern with the fate of workers and “poor” peoples. But, apart from the diversity of these movements, we should note that none of them has established a rigorous relationship between the authentic socialist dimension necessary to rise to the challenge and a

recognition, no less necessary, of the ecological dimension. To achieve this relationship, we should not ignore the wealth/value distinction emphasized by Marx.

Capture of ecology by vulgar ideology operates on two levels: on the one hand, by reducing measurement of use value to an “improved” measurement of exchange value, and on the other, by integrating the ecological challenge with the ideology of “consensus.” Both these maneuvers undermine the clear realization that ecology and capitalism are, by their nature, in opposition.

5. This capture of ecological measurement by vulgar economics is making huge strides. Thousands of young researchers in the United States, and their imitators in Europe, have been mobilized in this cause.

The “ecological costs” are, in this way of thinking, assimilated to external economies. The vulgar method of measuring cost/benefit in terms of exchange value (itself conflated with market price) is then used to define a “fair price,” integrating external economies and diseconomies.

It goes without saying that the work—reduced to mathematical formulas—done in this traditional area of vulgar economics does not say how the “fair price” calculated could become that of the actual current market. It is presumed, therefore, that fiscal and other “incentives” could be sufficient to bring about this convergence. Any proof that that such a convergence would really occur is entirely absent.

In fact, as can already be seen, oligopolies have seized hold of ecology to justify the opening up of new fields to their destructive expansion. Francois Houtart provides a conclusive illustration of this in his work on biofuels. Since then, “green capitalism” has been part of the obligatory discourse of men/women in positions of power, on both the Right and the Left, in the Triad, and the CEOs of oligopolies. The ecology in question, of course, conforms to the vision known as “weak sustainability” (the notion that it is possible for the market to substitute for all national resources/forces, none of which is indispensable in defining a sustainable path)—in other words, the complete commodification of the “rights of access to the planet’s resources.” Joseph Stiglitz, in a report of the UN commission which he chaired, openly embraced this position at the United Nations General Assembly, June 24-26, 2009, proposing “an auction of the world’s resources (fishing rights, licences to pollute, etc.).”[\[citation?\]](#) This is a proposal

that quite simply comes down to sustaining the oligopolies in their ambition to mortgage further the future of the peoples of the South.

6. The capture of ecological discourse by the political culture of the consensus (a necessary expression of the conception of capitalism as the end of history) is equally well advanced.

This capture has an easy ride. For it is responding to the alienation and illusion that feed the dominant culture, that of capitalism. An easy ride because this culture is actual, and holds a dominant place in the minds of the majority of human beings, in the South as well as the North.

In contrast, the expression of the demands of the socialist counter-culture is fraught with difficulty—because socialist culture is not there in front of our eyes. It is part of a future to be invented, a project of civilization, open to the creativity of the imagination. Slogans (such as “socialization through democracy and not through the market” and “the transfer of the decisive level for decision making from the economic and political levels to that of culture”) are not enough, despite their power to pave the way for the historical process of transformation. For what is at stake is a long, “secular” process of societal reconstruction, based on principles other than those of capitalism, in both the North and the South—a process that cannot be supposed to take place “rapidly.” But construction of the future, however far away, begins today.

## Notes

1. Matthis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1996).