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# Unequal into the Collapse: Why There Can Be No Sustainability Without Social Justice

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**Abstract:** As climate change is not just a climate-related problem, social inequality is not only a problem of poor people. This essay explains why a structural social inequality, also in the distribution of power, is one of the main causes of the current polycrisis and inhibits a transformation of our society towards sustainability. Nevertheless, the institutional debate on “sustainable development” in the frame given by the United Nations and governmental organizations continues to suffer from a social blindness, because it is still ideologically trapped in the dominant development model of modernization. While modernization is an expression of a separation thinking and consider privileges and disadvantages as independent from each other, sustainability (in a broader meaning) is an expression of an interconnected thinking. It stands for a good life not at the expense of others: Global South, peripheries, lower classes, future generations, and nature. What our society celebrates as “economic growth” is mostly based on an incomplete invoice in which externalized costs are hidden. At *prosperity islands*’ visible and invisible borders, structures of social inequality act like a “sorting machine” that sets who experiences development as progress and who as a recession; who benefits from it and who pays the price. Because on a limited planet each growing order causes a growing disorder elsewhere (according to the laws of thermodynamics), the current environmental crisis cannot be overcome without changing the structures and relations within the society. A sustainable transformation requires a fair redistribution of wealth, opportunities, and power – it means also a “democratization of democracy” in the Western countries. This essay is largely based on discourse analysis, literature and Internet research.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Social Inequality, Environmental Justice, Modernization, Resilience, Democracy, Social Change, Good Life

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## 1. Introduction

Although over fifty years have passed since the publication of Club of Rome’s first major Report, and more than thirty since the United Nations’ Agenda 21, the gap between the promises of sustainability and the real development continues to grow. For the “accelerated society” [1] and the “knowledge society” [2], this situation is particularly paradoxical. How can a society cling to its problems, even though the solutions are so urgently needed and most of them have already been known? Why does humanity continue to choose an unsustainable trajectory?

In order to find the right answer, we should first rephrase the question. In the age of the neoliberal globalization, linguistic generalizations such as “the society” and “the mankind” are often an expression of an ideological framing in

which social inequalities are ignored. In that framing, economic growth is presented as a benefit for everyone at no cost at all. However, this everyday propaganda is contrary to the laws of ecology, just as “there is no such thing as a free lunch” (Barry Commoner) [3]. According to the second law of thermodynamics (entropy), in closed systems each growing order causes a growing disorder elsewhere. Since every profit generates costs, an ecological and social bill grows along with the economy. Sooner or later this bill has to be settled, for example in the form of the current polycrisis. Initially, the “islands of prosperity” do not realize this problem because they externalize their costs [4]. At their visible and invisible borders, the structures of social inequality act like a “sorting machine” [5] that determines who experiences development as a progress and who experiences it as a recession; who benefits from it and who pays the price. The fact that the gap

between the privileged and the disadvantaged ones is widening, shows how efficient this sorting machine is. According to Oxfam International, in 2017 just eight men owned the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity [6]. How much is it justified, then, to be able to speak of “one” society? Are we really in the Anthropocene – or rather the “Westerncene” or “Capitalocene” [7]?

Sustainability means on one hand *crisis-resilience*, i.e. the capacity of ecological and social systems to avoid dead ends in their evolution. On the other hand, sustainability stands for a *good life*, that is not meant to be at the expense of others – including future generations and nature [8]. This essay shows that social inequality is not sustainable and has to be considered as one of the main reasons of the recurring crises. In addition, social inequality represents a major obstacle to the “great transformation towards sustainability” [9]. For these reasons, there can be no sustainability without social justice [8].

With the 1987 Brundtland Report, the principles of intragenerational and intergenerational justice were firmly anchored in the understanding of sustainability. Nevertheless, the institutional sustainability debate continues to suffer from social blindness, as the following section of this essay demonstrates. The third section addresses the relevance of the structures of social inequality in the social development. In the history of mankind, one of the main causes of the collapse of civilizations was the division of the society into Elites and Masses. The fourth section explains why this division concerns our society too. In order to overcome the current polycrisis, we have to change the conditions within our society. Therefore, the term “transformation” means a deep “system change” [10], as the essential prerequisite of sustainability is the overcoming of non-sustainability, including social inequality. How this can be achieved is outlined in the fifth section.

This sociological essay holds a systemic perspective and is characterized by interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. It is largely based on discourse analysis, literature and Internet research.

## 2. Social Inequality in the Institutionalized Sustainability Debate

Forestry is repeatedly mentioned as the cradle of sustainability, but after the “*Sylvicultura oeconomica*” by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in 1713, the concept of sustainability was almost forgotten. It was only about 260 years later that it was rediscovered within the international development debate. The model of modernization, dominating development policies in the post-war period, came under criticism and alternatives were sought.

### 2.1. The Development Model of Modernization

Modernity is a self attribution of the West. In modernization, the “First World” sees itself as the highest point of a

development that is seen as linear: from the state of nature over agrarian and industrial societies to service societies. The same development that is described as upward progress is prescribed on every other society as modernization. Even worse, modernization declares itself to be the fate of mankind. It is without escape and without a reasonable alternative, as is the market economy, globalization and digitization.

Modernization theories are the sociological equivalent of economic growth theories. They consider economic growth as the most important driver of social development [11]. Those who want democracy, freedom, education and prosperity need only to promote economic growth [10]. Here, prosperity is measured with a single indicator (gross domestic product) and the promotion of mass consumption is seen as the main way for the economic growth. As if only building a mall brings prosperity into a run-down area. American economist and economic historian Walt W. Rostow saw the “Age of Mass Consumption” as the highest (i.e. the most desirable) stage of social development and thus elevated the USA as a universal development model [12]. Therefore, alongside “Westernization” [13], “Americanization” [14] is a further synonym for modernization.

In addition to the economic growth, modernization theories see knowledge accumulation as another important driver of social development. Just as Plato subordinated his ideal state to the rule of philosophers and saw a danger in democracy (as the rule of mere opinions), modernization is characterized by a top-down governance of society. It is the experts who dictate the future to the laymen. It is the Elites who educate the Masses to “reason” [15].

A subject who sees himself at the forefront of progress treats his objects deficiently. US President Harry Truman in his Inaugural Address in 1949 was the first person to call the Third World “underdeveloped” [16]. Through this attribution, economic, social and cultural otherness was equated with poverty, i.e. with a form of backwardness compared to the Western model. In the worldview of modernization, poverty is self-inflicted. So if you want to overcome poverty, you have to give up your own otherness, for example, by replacing the traditional local subsistence economy with a market economy.

With his speech, Truman ushered in the Age of development policy [16]. It was based on the belief that the development of poor countries and the peripheries of society can only be promoted through external intervention, just as no patient can operate on himself. Thus, the West and the Elites see it as their duty to “help” the others in closing their development gap and replacing the old with the new. The result of modernizing development is a monoculture instead of diversity. In that process, places, economies and ways of life are uprooted and standardized [17].

### 2.2. From Modernization to Institutionalized Sustainability

In the second half of the 1960s, this modernizing development policy began to be questioned from two sides:

1. *Social criticism*: International “development aid” widened, rather than narrowed, the socio-economic gap between developed and developing countries. It was a

clear indication that this development policy served the “helpers” more than the “helped” [18]. Through the Marshall Plan (the prototype of international development aid) the USA had already expanded their own sales market in Western Europe and consolidated their political and cultural hegemony there. After the wave of decolonization, development policies were the pretext that allowed the former colonial powers to maintain some control over the former colonies. On the one hand, this was intended to prevent the expansion of communism, but on the other, industry and mass consumption in the West still required vast amounts of resources that had to come from the Global South. Now, however, this exploitation takes place through economic rather than military means of pressure. In opposition to neocolonialism, a critical school of thought emerged in Latin America, which mixed neo-Marxist theories with Leonardo Boff, Ernesto Cardenal and Enrique Dussel’s (among others) so-called Liberation theology. For these “dependency theories”, poverty in peripheries is not self-inflicted, but the result of an existing *dependencia* to the centers. Therefore, the right path to development could not lie in “development aid”, but in liberation from the exploitation [19].

2. *Ecological critique*: The wasteful development model of the First World could not be a model for the whole mankind. There were also ecological reasons for this. In the Club of Rome’s first major Report (1972), the team of scientists led by Dennis Meadows showed that unlimited growth cannot be possible on a biophysically limited planet. The environment should not be seen as an unlimited storage of raw materials or as a bottomless landfill [20].

In response to the increasing demand for a radical change in development policies, the state governments, within the United Nations’ framework, reacted with the compromise formula “Sustainable Development”. It should correct and optimize the growth-oriented development model in order to continue rather than replace it [11]. Therefore, the ecological and social demands for “Another Development” (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 1975) [21] were defused by incorporating sustainability into the hegemonic modernization discourse [22]. The Brundtland Report’s German edition translated “Sustainable Development” as “dauerhafte Entwicklung” (permanent development). With this translation the editor Volker Hauff, a social-democratic politician and member of the Brundtland Commission, took also a political decision: if in the modernization theories “development” is a synonym for “growth”, then “dauerhafte Entwicklung” sounds like “permanent growth”. Is it just a coincidence? Certainly not. The Agenda 21 (1992) sees the environmental protection as a prerequisite for sustainable economic growth, because “a sound environment [...] provides the ecological and other resources needed to sustain growth and underpin a continuing expansion of trade” [23]. At the same time, the “trade liberalization should therefore be pursued on a global basis across economic sectors to contribute to sustainable

development” [23]. Of course, “economic growth” is also one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda. The coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Green Party, and Liberal Democrats (FDP), that forms the Government of Germany since 2021, is also focusing on “ecological modernization” and “green growth” to alleviate the climate crisis. Their motto, “Mehr Fortschritt wagen” (dare to make more progress), means “technological, digital, social and sustainable innovation” [24]. Even if the current German Government’s program contains positive aspects, its emphasis is clearly on a “more”. “Weniger” (less) appears only twice in the document. The result: renewable energies and electric cars are to be greatly expanded in the Federal Republic, while several coal-fired power stations continue to emit large quantities of greenhouse gases. Sustainability does not need only “innovation”, but also “exnovation” [25].

The theory of the indispensability of economic growth has contributed much to the broad acceptance of sustainability in business circles [11]. Companies such as BASF, Bayer, BMW, Daimler-Benz, RWE, Siemens and Nestlé committed themselves to sustainable development as early as 1994, because “economic growth creates the conditions for the best possible implementation of environmental protection” [26]. The fact that economic growth and technological progress are among the main reasons of ecological and social problems is ignored within the institutional sustainability debate, as well as in the modernization discourse. Just as, in the context of social inequality, the eco-tax burdens the lower classes above all others, while leaving the upper classes untouched with their greater consumption of nature. Therefore, technological innovation often leads to an externalization of the problems instead of a solution to them [4]. “Furthermore, paradoxically, it is precisely the escape into technologies that prevents those cultural and social innovations that could noticeably improve our world” [27].

The Brundtland Report firmly placed intragenerational and intergenerational justice into the sustainability debate. But, within this debate, the question of justice was related only to the “objects” of the development policy (Third World, lower classes...), while the link between wealth and poverty remained untouched and the asymmetries of modernization were implicitly replicated. To this day, the West likes to see itself as a role model in all matters, including sustainability. Although the ecological footprint is particularly big in industrialized countries, a pronounced lack of environmental awareness is attributed primarily to the Global South [23]. For example, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture offers German “expertise to 32 African countries” as “a sustainable investment in the development of Africa” [28]. According to the Brundtland Report, it is poverty that “pollutes the environment [...]. Those who are poor and hungry will often destroy their immediate environment in order to survive: they will cut down forests; their livestock will overgraze grasslands; they will overuse marginal land; and they will crowd into congested cities in growing numbers. The cumulative effect of these changes is so far-reaching as to make poverty itself a

major global scourge” [29]. But, is it an excellent practice to use economic growth to drive poverty out? Alternatives to this model (such as end to exploitation, reduction in mass consumption, a fair economic redistribution, and so on...) are not considered either in the Brundtland Report, in the Agenda 21 or in the German Government’s coalition agreement. Although the 17 SDGs include “reduced inequalities”, this primarily refers to “*poverty-oriented* social policy, wage and fiscal policy” [30], which means addressing the symptoms instead of the causes. The meaning that governmental organizations give to the word “sustainability” reproduce the inequality between those who rule and those who are governed, and between experts and laymen. However, SDG 16 is about “strong institutions”, not about “strong democracy”. A lack of environmental awareness is not seen at the top of institutional hierarchies, but at the very bottom: among the “public” [23]. For example, citizens and consumers are often a focus target group within the “education for sustainable development”. Consumers who are focused on buying based on price and in discounters, are mainly considered responsible for harming the environment. The fact that people may be forced to behave in this way, or that their behavior may be influenced by a massive advertising machine, is rarely noticed. It is particularly noteworthy that the same community of national governments, which largely excludes the population from decisions on economic policy within the framework of neoliberal globalization, transfers the responsibility for sustainability to the population. In other words, while governments pursue a policy of non-sustainability, the population is left to take care of sustainability.

### 3. What Is Social Inequality

Social inequality describes a *relation* in which energy, resources, goods, profit, opportunities, knowledge, as well as costs and risks, are unevenly distributed [31]. In this context, relation means that there can be no mass consumption without exploitation, no wealth concentration without poverty, and no power without powerlessness (and vice versa). Thus, social inequality does not only concern “the others”, but relationships between at least two sides that are mutually interdependent. Therefore, overcoming the disadvantage of some, presupposes questioning the privileges of others.

Social inequality can be described as “structured structuring structures” [32]. For this, there are the following reasons:

1. In social inequality there is an interaction between the macro, meso and micro levels of society. Thus, a neoliberal economic policy that increases social inequalities has an impact on people's private lives. At the same time, internalized value attitudes at the grassroots level of society support unequal relationships at the higher levels.
2. Forms of inequality overlap. Those who are richer often have more political influence, a better education and therefore more career opportunities. Those who are poorer tend to have less political influence, a poorer

education, and therefore fewer career opportunities.

3. In modern societies, the violence that causes discrimination, heteronomy, assimilation or oppression is, above all, a “structural” one [33]. According to Max Weber, a new form of legitimate rule dominates the present: bureaucracy. It is characterized, among other things, by “*formalistic impersonality*” [34]. Thus, power is not only that of people over other people. Political, economic, social and cultural structures also exercise power over individuals, regardless of their status. These structures promote certain people to positions of power, but can drop them just as quickly. Individuals become victims by being dehumanized [35].
4. Social inequality has a strong tendency to reproduce itself. For example, some inherit huge fortunes without having to do anything in return, while others inherit poverty from which there is hardly any way out, even with hard work. Social inequality requires the complicity of the state in order to exist, i.e. the strong protection of private property accumulated over the years, on one hand, and the legal prosecution of people who cannot repay their debts on the other [36].
5. Society does not include only people: also “things” act as “agents” in social networks [37]. On one hand, things themselves create social inequality. For example, while prehistoric bands of foragers were more egalitarian because they owned very little, proceeding human societies have increased property, and thereby social inequality [38]. The control over money, machines, media, or weapons gives certain groups advantages over others. On the other, it is not only people that are treated unequally: in our society banks are considered to be “too big to fail”, but the climate doesn’t earn a similar appreciation.

As “naked apes”, humans are relatively similar. It is only through their *habitus*, through the things and the symbols with which they surround themselves, that their social status becomes recognizable or staged. For example, unlike ordinary citizens, an elected politician is allowed to sit in Parliament. In public spaces, it is the size and brand of the car that you own that express your status. Social inequalities are reflected by the neighborhood you live in, the size and the furniture of your home. Again, whether you come from the upper or lower classes is revealed by your manners, habits and tastes [39], which hobbies you practice and which holiday destinations you visit. While the Elites meet at the opera, the Masses spend their time in the entertainment industry.

Through the *habitus*, social belonging is created by downwards demarcation, but this mechanism has an effect not only vertically (between the classes), but also horizontally (within every class). For example, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a German DAX listed company does not compare himself with his employees, but with the CEOs of other DAX listed companies. With an annual salary of three million Euros, he would feel “socially disadvantaged”, as people in this position collect an average of 5.8 million Euros in Germany [40]. For the average person, a salary of three million Euros

per annum would be an astronomical sum. But when it comes to monetary value, the measurement scale of the top one percent of humanity differs greatly from that of the remaining 99 percent. In a context of social inequality also people from lower classes compare themselves to others. They can elevate their own status by distinguishing themselves from the even weaker ones, for example refugees.

Structures of social inequality are based on a mental system of values that is internalized through education. Although people are biologically similar, they can be discriminated because of their gender, skin color, background or religion being associated with a lower status. On average, women in Germany earn less than men. If there is more equality in Scandinavian countries, then there are also cultural reasons for this [41]. The social effectiveness of money, power and status is also based on values that are shared within the framework of a culture. However, culture-determined values are relative, not absolute. For an uncontaminated indigenous tribe living in the tropical forest a 500 Euro banknote is just a piece of paper. A general is only powerful in a military context that recognizes his *habitus*.

Social inequality refers not only to income differences, but also to power structures. Who determines social development for whom? Who does the economy for whom? If certain groups, agents and interests are structurally privileged and others are structurally disadvantaged, then this is a clear indication of the hegemonic relations inside the society. Liberal-representative democracies do not exclude power structures either, but rather their form has changed [42]. Max Weber defines power as the possibility within a social relationship to enforce one's own will – even against resistance and without consent [34]. Power can be exercised by individuals, groups, organizations, companies, associations, authorities or the state, or it can emanate from social structures. Just as in the relationship between a lord and his vassals, power is not always uncomfortable but can feel like relief and security. Those who maintain good relationships with power may be promoted more quickly. Power does not necessarily require the threat of violence to exert social control, as dependency can be even more effective. Thus, people rarely rebel against their own providers.

#### **4. Social Inequality as Systemic Unsustainability Factor**

One of the most important factors that caused the collapse of civilizations in mankind's history is the society division between Elites and Masses (Commoners). The patterns of decline are the same, as we can see when looking at the Rapa Nui on Easter Island, the fall of the Roman Empire or the Mayans on the Yucatán Peninsula. These are the findings of a study from 2014, where US researchers Safa Motesharrei, Jorge Rivas and Eugenia Kalnay write:

“Collapses of even advanced civilizations have occurred many times in the past five thousand years, and they were frequently followed by centuries of population and cultural

decline and economic regression. Although many different causes have been offered to explain individual collapses, it is still necessary to develop a more general explanation [...]. We attempt to build a simple mathematical model to explore the essential dynamics of interaction between population and natural resources. It allows for the two features that seem to appear across societies that have collapsed: the stretching of resources due to strain placed on the ecological carrying capacity, and the division of society into Elites (rich) and Commoners (poor) [...]. In sum, the results of our experiments [...] indicate that either one of the two features apparent in historical societal collapses – over-exploitation of natural resources and strong economic stratification – can independently result in a complete collapse” [43].

The following pattern is repeated historically in the downfall of society: the Elites who control society have long benefited from the advantages of the previous development path and have perceived it from its best side. It is correspondingly difficult for them to separate themselves from their own privileges. In addition, they are affected by the consequences of the crisis much later than the Masses. It explains why the Elites still persuade themselves in the face of collapse “to continue ‘business as usual’ despite the impending catastrophe” [43]. “This buffer effect is further reinforced by the long, seemingly sustainable trajectory prior to the beginning of the collapse” [43]. That is why the Elites do not prevent the collapse and seem blind to the impending catastrophe. Such was the case, for example, with the fall of the Roman Empire and Maya civilization. “While some members of society might raise the alarm that the system is moving towards an impending collapse and therefore advocate structural changes to society in order to avoid it, Elites and their supporters, who opposed making these changes, could point to the long sustainable trajectory ‘so far’ in support of doing nothing” [43].

If the research results of Motesharrei, Rivas and Kalnay are correct, then today's civilization itself is on the brink, because it puts an excessive strain on the ecosystems and is also characterized by an extreme social inequality. As if our civilization was immune to collapse because it is much more developed. But as the US scientists write: “collapses are not restricted to the 'Old World'” [43].

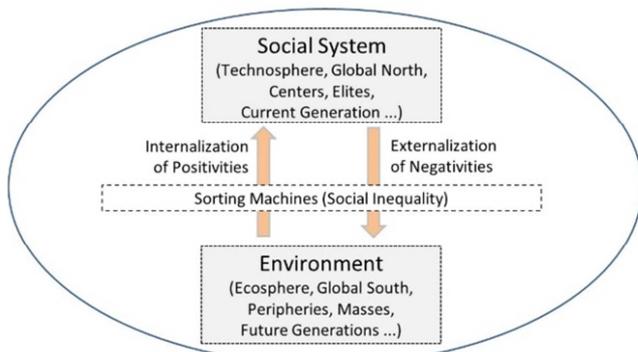
While we have much more technologies than past civilizations had, these technologies create new problems that ancient cultures did not have. “Technological change can raise the efficiency of resource use, but it also tends to raise both per capita resource consumption and the scale of resource extraction, so that, absent policy effects, the increases in consumption often compensate for the increased efficiency of resource use” [43] (Rebound Effect). In addition to that, the current world population has gone through an extraordinary change. For most of human history, the global population was a tiny fraction of what it is today.

##### **4.1. The Capitalist-Industrial Development Logic**

Since the Flagship Report 2011 “World in Transition – A

Social Contract for Sustainability” by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), in Germany the expression “Great Transformation” is associated with the “worldwide remodeling of economy and society towards sustainability” [9]. But for five centuries, another “Great Transformation” has been dominant, namely the capitalist-industrial one. The social anthropologist Karl Polanyi described it in 1944 in his main work “The Great Transformation” [44]. If culture is a kind of “building plan of society”, then modernization is the cultural program that has been habitualized, institutionalized, and materialized in the capitalist-industrial transformation. From the 1990s onwards, this transformation was globalized, and with it the logic of development that led to the current polycrisis. Anyone who wants to avoid the collapse of our civilization should first examine the developmental logic that leads to it, as Polanyi did in his time.

The capitalist-industrial transformation has radically changed the relationship between the social system and the environment, i.e. between the Technosphere and the Ecosphere, the Global North (industrialized countries) and the Global South (developing countries), centers and peripheries, Elites and Masses, and between present and future generations (Figure 1). This is because have been created structures that consistently favor the system (i.e. every island of prosperity) in terms of energy and material flows and consistently disadvantage its environment. In modern society, energy and material flows overlap with the flow of profits, opportunities, knowledge or even civilizational achievements. These elements are called “positivities” (benefits) in Figure 1. At the same time, the costs of this development not only include waste and harmful emissions, but also poverty, risks and conflict. In Figure 1 these elements are called “negativities” (disadvantages).



**Figure 1.** *The capitalist-industrial logic of development.*

The capitalist-industrial logic of development can be described as it follows: the positivities are taken from the environment and internalized into the social system, while the negativities are externalized from the social system into the environment. The growing order in every island of prosperity, therefore, corresponds to a growing disorder in their environment. Environmental and social concerns are often played off against each other (for instance, jobs against environmental protection), but they are both victims of the

same developmental logic [45].

The structures of social inequality form the difference between the social system and the environment. They act as a sorting machine at the visible and invisible borders of the islands of prosperity, exercising a controlled selection. The order (positivities) is internalized and protected, the disorder (negativities) is externalized and kept out. For example, young refugees with an above-average education find open doors to Europe, while others, at worst, end up in refugee camps. In such selection, codes such as money, power and status are at work. Those who have more of them, can usually acquire more, while those who have less have to endure what unfolds and its “collateral damage”.

One effect of this sorting machine is called “ecological footprint/environmental degradation paradox”:

“The rich industrial societies [are] in a position to systematically outsource the conditions and consequences of their excessive consumption to other regions of the world, namely to the societies of the poorer, raw materials-exporting countries. In this way, they consistently clean up their own environmental and social balance sheet – and leave the dirty business to others. Except, of course, for the economic profits that are to be derived from it” [4].

Where there is social inequality, problems are rarely solved at the source, but usually only externalized. For example, during globalization the West has shifted its own dirty, heavy industry to emerging economies such as China and India. Now the sky over the former strong industrial Ruhr region in Germany is blue, but the sky over Beijing and New Delhi is gray and polluted. In the same way the automotive industry exploits lithium and cobalt mines in Bolivia and Congo to produce “clean” electric vehicles, while all the old diesel vehicles are disposed of in Eastern Europe and Africa. It is the same logic that allows private corporations to write off their “externalities” and transfer them to society as a whole. Before the 2008’s financial crisis, profits from speculation were privatized by dividing them among the shareholders. When the crisis arose, the banks huge losses were socialized using taxpayers’ money.

Such a logic of development inevitably leads to a growing disorder within the environment. But while the environment is not a separate entity, and the system is more dependent on the environment than vice versa, the islands of prosperity are still trying to seal themselves off from this disorder.

Globalization promised to dissolve borders and bring the world closer together, but in fact there has been an inflationary increase in walls or fortified borders [46]. The logic of the external border fortifications is reproduced within countries, especially where social inequalities are most pronounced. In the USA, the upper classes are increasingly entrenched in “fortress-like, guarded 'gated communities'”. A phenomenon that has also been spreading in other western countries like Germany [47]. Even the Federal Chancellery in Germany is described by the press as “a well-shielded fortress, surrounded by steel fence poles, secured by the Federal Police” [48]. Just as the Elite conferences such as the World Economic Forum in Davos take place in such a “fortress” [49].

However, these walls and fortresses protect not only prosperity and privileges, but also the causes of disorder and conflicts. They inhibit the perception of the wider reality and prevent confrontation with the victims of the decisions taken by those who live behind the walls.

#### 4.2. Social Factors Contributing to Non-Sustainability

Structures of social inequality are a major driver of unsustainable development. In addition to the above-described capitalist-industrial logic of development, there are other reasons that explain this connection, such as:

1. Social inequality means an unequal perception and experience of the same social development. Proofs can be found in every major German city: the highest car density per inhabitant is often found in wealthy neighborhoods, the lowest in poorer ones. Richer neighborhoods tend to be greener and quieter, while rents are significantly lower on busy streets. People who live in green areas contribute most to car traffic, but they are hardly affected by the pollution in their own place of residence. However, the poorer people who own fewer cars are mostly exposed to traffic pollution. The situation is similar when considering the climate change. According to a report by Oxfam International, “in 2019, the super-rich 1% [77 million people] were responsible for 16% of global carbon emissions, which is the same as the emissions of the poorest 66% of humanity (5 billion people) [...]. Since the 1990s, the super-rich 1% burned through twice as much of the carbon budget as the poorest half of humanity combined” [50]. Especially the rich create a problem but especially the poorer people have to pay for that: “The carbon emissions of the super-rich 1% in 2019 are enough to cause 1.3 million deaths due to heat” [50]. Why should the beneficiaries of development renounce their privileges when they are not impacted directly by the consequences and costs of their decisions that require urgent action?
2. Social inequality inhibits the communication between different groups and perspectives. Processes of social segregation (such as gentrification) result in each class keeping to itself and living in its own reality. Without interacting with other perspectives, the Elites lose touch with significant parts of social reality. Such processes of derealization are a major source of crises. The physical and psychological distance prevents empathy with those affected by their actions.
3. Social inequality not only makes difficult to share and cooperate in problem solving, but also brings frustration and is a major source of social conflicts. Social inequality makes the “tragedy of the commons” (the destruction of the commons) more probable. For example, the conflict of interest between industrialized and developing countries has a certain tradition at the UN climate conferences.
4. Wealth and power convey the deceptive feeling of being protected against any possible crisis, for example heat, drought and flood. If you have money, you can install air

conditioning, live in a protected *gated community* and, in the worst-case scenario, move away. If the more powerful part of the global society does not have to suffer the consequences of its own decisions and is not liable for the costs, this promotes its willingness to take risks. This phenomenon is called “moral hazard”.

5. Those who benefit from social development have often more influence on political decisions. Those who are most affected by the costs are usually denied the opportunity to change the social framework. In an empirical study of 2014 about the US political system, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page came to the following conclusion: “when a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites and/or with organized interests, they generally lose” [51]. Even in countries like Germany, women, workers and migrants are strong underrepresented in the national and local parliaments [52].

The unsustainable impact of social inequality is amplified in three ways:

1. *Free Pricing*: In the free market economy, crises often cause shortages. The consequence is increasing prices that acting like a sorting machine: rich states and upper social classes secure access to scarce goods by pushing poorer competitors out of the market. For example, peak oil may have already been reached, but currently the financial strength of rich countries guarantees their own oil supply from all over the world, while in countries like Nigeria (one of the world's largest oil exporters), the local population has no gasoline [53]. Therefore, pricing in a free market economy offers an exit strategy in times of crisis to the Global North, the centers and the Elites. At the same time, the Global South, the peripheries and the lower classes have to face emergencies at an early stage.
2. *Competition for status*: The economist Fred Hirsch [54] argues that (unequal) economic growth does not serve to satisfy solely basic needs. Rather, a significant part is caused by a culture-driven will to downwards social demarcation. In their behavior as consumers, people are no longer guided by their needs, but by the social status that those needs represent. Belonging to the upper class is determined by the ability to satisfy needs that other classes cannot. What counts is not the absolute, but the relative possession of money, power or knowledge; what one has more than others. Exclusivity. Although we can move from A to B by using different means of transport, some people prefer to take a plane or driving a SUV because they express a higher status. Competition for status also occurs between corporations and states, for example by building the tallest skyscraper. Along with competition, social inequality increases society's environmental consumption and its dependence on resources. At the same time, it makes more difficult the cooperation that would be necessary to solve problems.
3. *Weak form of democracy*: If democracy means “ruling

by the people for the people” [55], then democracy is an unfinished endeavor even in the West. In combination with social inequality, a weak democracy acts as an amplifier of intra-societal competition, which is why environmental consumption is enormous, especially in the West. In this form of democracy, the Masses (especially through their parliamentary and trade union representatives) constantly claim the privileges and consumption options that are otherwise reserved for the Elites. When the Masses elevate their own status, the Elites want to differentiate themselves from the Masses by creating new exclusive buying and owning options. As a result, all groups move upwards, but social inequality between them (including related disadvantage) remains. Ulrich Beck speaks of a social “elevator effect” that takes all classes “one floor higher”. “There is – despite all the new inequalities that are levelling out – a *collective increase* in income, education and mobility, Law, Science, Mass Consumption” [56]. Because Beck’s metaphor of the “elevator” suggests that all members of a society are “in the same boat”, “paternoster effect” [57] is perhaps a more appropriate term to describe the phenomenon we are talking about: the classes continue to sit in different “cabins” that are pulled up in an asymmetric row order. Today in Germany the lower classes can fly to the Canary Islands, a privilege that one time used to be enjoyed only by the upper classes. Instead, the upper classes are now flying to the Seychelles and the Maldives. If mass tourism would also reach the Seychelles (with a corresponding increase in climate-damaging exhaust fumes from long-distance flights) one day, then the Elites will have to choose other exclusive holiday destinations. Virgin Galactic, for instance, is offering commercial flights into space at a cost of \$ 450,000 a seat [58].

The ecological footprint of the Elites is much larger, but through the above-described mechanisms, the Masses themselves become unaware accomplices of exploitation and supporters of an unsustainable system. The long shadow of the ancient Greek agora, on which the original democracy was built on the shoulders of the slaves, is still effective today. In a capitalist-industrial society, economic growth is the preferred artificial stabilizer of an otherwise unstable combination of weak democracy, competition for status, and social inequality. The need for growth is based solely on the fact that there must be neither a strong commonwealth nor a fair redistribution, because they would not be possible without expropriation and the dismantling of privileges. Therefore, “in order to satisfy the economic needs of its own citizens and thereby maintain social peace, the modern state is forced to pursue an outward policy of exploitation that is probably unique in world history” [59]. Every “paternoster effect” implies two sides: “While some go up, others go down, making the rich richer and the poor more and more numerous” [57].

## 5. Towards a Good Life in the Wrong One

As the climate change is not just a climate-related problem, social inequality is not only a problem of poor people. Both are symptoms of pathological relations within the social system. The main question of sustainability is the following one: *How is a peaceful coexistence in the diversity possible, on a limited planet?* So far our society has answered this question in the following way: competition before cooperation, private wealth before commonwealth, status orientation before cohesion. In the liberalized markets, it is not freedom that prevails, but the law of the financially strongest on the financially weakest [60]. In the 1990’s people were not asked which form of coexistence they preferred, if a social-ecologic development or the neoliberal globalization. Such decisions were made over people’s heads, for example in informal committees such as the G7/G8.

The current polycrisis is the result of a globalized monoculture: “there is no alternative” (Margaret Thatcher) to market economy, digitization or high military expenditure. The climate change, the financial crisis, the crisis of democracy as well as international tensions demonstrate that the model of society and development, that has dominated the world until now, is not the right one. As Polanyi warned in his 1944 study, the “crass utopia” of self-regulating markets sooner or later leads to a dramatic shift and polarization within the society. Such a policy “must inevitably tear apart interpersonal relationships and threaten the natural habitat of man with annihilation” [44]. The liberalization of markets, that are based on concurrence, private profits maximization and expansion, cannot bring the world closer: it can only strength tensions and conflicts, military included. Weakening the public services in our societies or weakening cooperative structures at an international political level (e.g. the United Nations) brings to the same result: the increasing of anomic states [61].

For these reasons, the path that led us into the polycrisis cannot be the same one that bring us out from that. A sustainable transformation needs to combine the following three forms of change:

1. *Change of social relationships.* How people deal with their environment depends on the relationships among them. If cooperation and sharing generate a lower consumption of nature (than competition and private ownership), then an overcoming of the climate crisis needs a change in social relationships. Anyone who wants to prevent wars and mass exodus should leave the “imperial way of life” and reduce consumers’ excess [62]. The alternative to the economic growth dogma is sharing, reciprocity and redistribution. This way of life is not utopian but has a long tradition in the human history and persists still today in every family [63]. An economy of proximity in which producers and consumers maintain a personal relationship with each other is much fairer than an anonymous global market. That is why sustainability requires more regionalization instead of globalization. If

the market and the state are not able to manage 21<sup>st</sup> century's global challenges, then there is only a possible alternative: citizens' collective self-empowerment [64]. While the modernization rules the society as a "mega machine", a sustainable transformation should be oriented towards the human scale. In a local dimension proximity makes the social interaction easier. Social interaction is the main road to an atmosphere of trust [65] and trust is the basis for cooperation and fairness. People can identify with their neighborhood more strongly than with higher levels (State, EU, etc.). This emotional identification is an important prerequisite for civic participation and the assumption of responsibility. Against an increasing polarization, in Western countries the "democratization of democracy" is needed [66]. If no good life can be achieved at others' expenses, then an "extended *agora*" is needed today, one that is meant to include others: Global South, lower classes, future generations, and nature [60].

2. *Cultural change.* For the coexistence on this planet, it makes a big difference how social actors have been educated, e.g. as "homo economicus" or as "homo solidaricus". Even mass media support the "imperial way of life" through a huge advertising machinery. Even in universities the market economy is considered as a model with no alternatives. While monocultures (including the economic ones) are particularly vulnerable to crises, cultural diversity makes systems more resilient. Tolerant cities with free spaces and niches for alternatives are more creative and vivid, for this reason they can deal with their problems better. While modernization is an expression of the Platonic and Cartesian separation thinking and consider privileges and disadvantages independently from each other, sustainability (in a broader meaning) is an expression of an "interconnected thinking" [67]. According to Norbert Elias, every social transformation (sociogenesis) is always linked to an internal transformation (psychogenesis) [68]. Thus, a transformation can be sustainable if it is understood and shaped as an individual and collective learning process. Every neighborhood can be an ideal living laboratory for new form of coexistence and for a "strong democracy" [69].

3. *Change of institutional and economic frameworks.* Social inequality become re/produced by institutional laws, economic systems and infrastructures. On one hand they steer people's behavior and guarantee their survival through an artificial social order. On the other, these frameworks are actually unsustainable and inhibit better alternatives. Once a non-sustainable culture is institutionalized or cemented in, it is very difficult to be changed. If a right life is not possible in a wrong one (Theodor W. Adorno), then sustainable transformation requires a progressive emancipation from unsustainable artificial frameworks. Developing countries and indigenous peoples need more self-determination and self-reliance than development aid and access to the world market. In a "post-growth economy", industrial

production could be reduced to half, along with mass consumption. Through labor redistribution, everyone would have more free time, for example to nurture relationships and self-providing instead of sourcing externally [70]. Sustainability requires a (re-)socialization of basic services, including finance and real estate. Strong public services, that serve everyone, can be financed by (re)introducing a wealth tax and a substantial inheritance tax.

Because structures of social inequality are self-referential and tend to reproduce themselves, it is difficult to image that the dominant institutions will change by themselves through self-motivation and internal strength. For this reason, a change of institutional and economic frameworks requires broad social movements as well as new alliances on equal terms. If ecological, social and cultural concerns are victims of the same economic development logic, then an alliance of ecological, social and cultural movements is needed to overcome this development model.

## 6. Conclusions

This essay has explained why social inequality is not only an effect of the current polycrisis but probably it is also one of his main causes. Thus, social justice and the democratization of social structures have positive effects on the system-environment relations. Social inequality means a relation in which privileges and disadvantages determinate each other. In the so-called modernization the main strategy to defeat poverty is economic growth. But problems cannot be solved by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them (Albert Einstein). For this reason, sustainability means "visions of another development" [21, 71]: why do we have to keep growing when we can redistribute fairly and share with each other? Sustainability needs to reintegrate the market into society and ecosystems [44]. Beyond the duality of public and private there is a third proven alternative with a long tradition in the human history: commons and commoning [72]. While the neoliberal globalization has been an expression of a centralistic top-down governance, a transformation towards sustainability needs a polycentric governance, stronger subsidiarity as well as new alliances (e.g. citizen-public-partnerships instead of public-private-partnerships). Parliaments should control the markets, not vice versa. Cooperation and cohesion have a fundamental requirement: trust. The main strategy to promote trust at the bottom of the society is the social interaction between individuals [65]. Because proximity can improve social interaction and trust, a society's sustainable transformation can be carried out starting from a local dimension. An extended *agora* is needed in every neighborhood.

There are various reasons why historically an increasing social inequality has been a major cause of the collapse of civilizations – including advanced ones. The question is, how structures of social inequality can be maintained, even though they disadvantage so many people. How does "legitimacy" work when contradictions become obvious? In a modern

society “structural violence” [33] as well as ideological mechanisms play an important role. When people are educated to compete for the status, then cooperation becomes a challenge for them. For this reason, a sustainable transformation has to be thought as a cultural change too. A “realistic view of humanity” instead of the dominant pessimistic ones (*homo oeconomicus* and *Leviathan*) is needed [63].

Social inequality tends to self-reproduction and self-referentiality, thus this essay is about “structures of social inequality”. They always require a kind of “legitimation” to maintain itself and to be recognized – and this happens especially in formal democracies. Well, environmental and social crises danger the legitimacy of social inequality’s structures as well as dominant development models [73]. The debate on “sustainable development” in the frame of the United Nations was the answer of state governments to the legitimacy crisis of post-war dominant development model. But both the Brundtland Report and the Agenda 21 re-wrapped the main reasons that brought to the crises (economic growth, liberalization of markets, technological progress, etc.) as solutions. If governmental institutions are an expression of social inequality structures, then their public communication tend to be ambivalent and contradictory: the “declared” verbal goals serve to legitimize a top-down governance that instead pursues other “real” nonverbal goals. It could explain why after more than 50 years the gap between the institutional promise of sustainability and the real development continues to grow. For sustainability the message of the nonverbal behavior and habitus is more decisive than the verbal one. Because the way that lead us to the polycrisis cannot be the same that brings us out of it, a sustainable transformation assumes an ideological decontamination of the discourse on sustainability.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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