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# Things are Getting Worse on Our Way to Catastrophe: Neoliberal Environmentalism, Repressive Desublimation, and the Autonomous Ecoconsumer

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/crs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crs)**Alexander M. Stoner** 

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## Abstract

The aim of neoliberal environmentalism was to unleash the market to protect the environment; but as it turns out, things are getting worse on our way to catastrophe. Despite persistent failures, neoliberal environmentalism remains prevalent—and apparently without alternative. This paper directs focus on an often-overlooked dimension of this apparent stasis: the nexus of self and society in advanced capitalism, as shown in the linkage between neoliberal environmentalism and the autonomous ecoconsumer. Marcuse's concept of repressive desublimation is engaged to better understand how environmentalist desire is currently being thwarted in ways that inhibit movement toward socioecological emancipation. The paper provides an illustrative example of desublimated environmentalist desire in the current recycling crisis.

## Keywords

Anthropocene, climate change, critical theory, environment, environmental sociology, Marcuse, neoliberal environmentalism

## Introduction

Modern societies have inflicted irreparable damage to the planet. Perhaps most obvious is the problem of Global Climate Change (GCC). Recent climate science research suggests environment–society reconciliation may be implausible (see e.g. Bourzac, 2018). Future environment–society relations will likely revolve around avoiding the worst planetary disasters (see Gunderson, 2019).

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The acceleration of planetary degradation has, at the same time, been accompanied by the desire for constructive answers on how to confront the situation effectively and meaningfully, as evidenced by the widespread growth of environmentalism. However, mainstream environmentalism is compatible with the very institutional forces currently driving our predictable ecological collapse. The shift, from “limits to growth” during the 1970s, to “sustainability through growth” during the 1980s and the more recent turn toward neoliberal environmentalism, indexes the fusion of mainstream environmentalism to the logic of capital.

The aim of neoliberal environmentalism was to unleash the market to protect the environment; but as it turns out, things are getting worse on our way to catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> Environmental degradation has not only increased but *accelerated* throughout the neoliberal period. The persistent failures of market mechanisms (Melathopolous and Stoner, 2015; Prieto and Bauer, 2012; Smith, 1995), technological optimism (Johnston, 2018; Lave, 2012; York, 2012), and market-oriented environmental governance (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017; Dunlap and Sullivan, 2020; Okereke, 2007) expose the inability of neoliberal environmentalism to adequately address our contemporary ecological predicament. Although the impact of neoliberal environmentalism has clearly backfired, it remains dominant (e.g., in the current prevalence of ecosystem service valuation and environmental finance schemes)—and apparently without alternative. The persistence of neoliberal environmentalism in the face of its abject failure and mounting catastrophe—what I call the *stasis of neoliberal environmentalism*—begs explanation. Today, consumption of “green products” is exalted as something other and more than mere consumerism. One saves the planet by shopping. How did we get here?

This paper examines the stasis of neoliberal environmentalism by directing focus on an often-overlooked dimension of this problem—namely, the nexus of self and society in advanced capitalism, and how this linkage must be transformed to bring about a less destructive relationship with nature. I begin by outlining key aspects of neoliberal environmentalism and the autonomous eco-consumer. I then engage Marcuse’s concept of repressive desublimation to grasp the psycho-social dynamics that underlie the linkage of neoliberal environmentalism and the autonomous eco-consumer. And finally, I provide an illustrative example of desublimated environmentalist desire in the current recycling crisis.

## Neoliberal Environmentalism

The economic downturn of the 1970s was accompanied by trends that have come to be synonymous with neoliberalism: high unemployment, the growing importance of financialization and a shift toward monetary, supply-side economics bolstered by the nation-state, the transformation of business and labor, and the creation of an infrastructure conducive to the formation of a global economy. The restructuring of capital in the neoliberal form is an attempt to reconstitute the underlying structural preconditions for the capitalist production of value. This view is congruent with David Harvey’s (2007: 22) well-known definition of neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade.”

A political economy account of neoliberalism is important, for it exposes crucial class dynamics and power asymmetries. Yet, as Wendy Brown and others have shown, neoliberalism is not simply a political economic program designed to recapture corporate profitability (it is), but also entails a certain rationality, which has profound implications for subjectivity formation and the linkage of self and society (e.g. Brown, 2005, 2015, 2019; Davies, 2014; Gandesha, 2018; Langman, 2009; McDonald et al., 2017; McGuigan, 2014). Connecting neoliberalism and subjectivity requires directing focus on the psycho-social dynamics of political economy. This section begins with a

brief overview of the political economy of neoliberal environmentalism before turning to discuss parallel processes of subjectivity centered on the autonomous ecoconsumer.

### *Political Economy of Neoliberal Environmentalism*

Neoliberal environmentalism became popular in the early 1990s amid the apparent “triumph” of the Washington Consensus (see Bernstein, 2001), although the intellectual ideas that inspired it had been percolating in the United States since the early 1970s (Asserson, 2007). Reacting against “limits” environmentalism and the ineffectiveness of “command and control” environmental governance that prevailed in the 1970s, neoliberal environmentalists contend that the best way to protect the environment is to clearly define and protect property rights, and that the ability of the state to do so is severely limited (see e.g. Anderson and Leal, 2001).<sup>2</sup> Some early advocates even went so far as to equate government regulation of the environment with medieval feudalism or “market socialism” (see e.g. Yandle, 1997)—hyperbole, which makes sense only from within the ideological context of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> The current emphasis on ecosystem service valuation and environmental finance is an outgrowth of this emphasis (Dunlap and Sullivan, 2020).

Ciplet and Roberts (2017: 149) identify four aspects central to the neoliberal approach to solving environmental problems: (1) privatization, commercialization, and commodification of natural resources and ecosystems; (2) erosion of state governance in favor of market mechanisms and public–private partnerships; (3) increased dominance of the private sector in environmental decision-making; and (4) the bracketing of normative concerns that deviate from market-based or narrowly defined science-based principles.

The emphasis on privatization of natural resources and ecosystems is part of the growing trend, accelerated in recent decades, toward the “neoliberalization of nature,” the socioecological impact of which has been execrable (for a review of this literature, see Castree, 2010). The erosion of state government in favor of public–private partnerships (Bakker, 2007), coupled with the increased dominance of the private sector in environmental decision-making (Corson, 2010), has been equally disastrous. Neoliberal think tanks play an important legitimating role by advocating market-based mechanisms (Beder, 2001; Flynn and Hacking, 2019; Plehwe, 2015). Within this framework, environmental problems are “caused by a failure to ‘value’ the environment and a lack of properly defined property rights”; that is, “a failure of the market to attach a price to environmental goods and services” (Beder, 2001: 132). However, this ideological dimension often remains obscured under the aegis of “market neutrality,” which effectively brackets normative concerns that deviate from market-based principles and, in turn, functions to depoliticize environmental politics (Beder, 2001; Copland, 2019; Flynn and Hacking, 2019).

Neoliberal environmentalism does, in fact, contain norms of justice, accountability, and action. The main principle of which is justice as private property. In contrast to redistributive principles of justice, individual liberties are asserted above all other social and political ideals (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017: 149). As Asserson (2007: 2) notes, neoliberal environmentalism traverses “ideological boundaries to combine the environmental ethic of the left with the economic tools of the right.” Neoliberal environmentalism draws on classical liberalism, and Hayek in particular, to counterpose individualism and collectivist ideologies. According to Asserson (2007: 11), the founders of “free-market environmentalism” in the United States understood themselves as classical liberals by upholding individual liberty in opposition to the coercive power of the state. Yet, the wholesale rejection of morality in favor of the free market, as evidenced by *actually existing* neoliberal environmentalism, is also quite different from Hayek’s views of the relation of markets and morals.<sup>4</sup>

## The Autonomous Ecoconsumer

Of concern for the purposes of this article is how the nexus of self and society might be implicated in the stasis of neoliberal environmentalism. To a large extent, the contemporary self–society linkage is sustained through consumerism (see e.g. Langman, 1992, 2003; McDonald et al., 2017). Market researchers tend to assume a positive relationship between eco-awareness and eco-consumption, which has been supported empirically (Testa et al., 2015), though the nature of this relationship is never direct nor is it always positive (Horne, 2009). Market researchers Toppe et al. (2014) provide a summary definition of the ecoconsumer:

The eco-consumer is the one that has the attitude to select the products he buys and uses. He gives preference to the ones that pollute less, and he also privileges the companies that invest in environmental preservation. The link between the consumer and the ecological characteristics of the stimulus is that no stimuli are arisen if they do not call the consumers' attention. If consumers are interested in the preservation of the environment, and they have a need to take care of nature, as a consequence of an environmental awareness, they will become eco-friendly consumers and will take in account the offer or incentive of companies that produce eco-friendly products. [*sic.*].

In this article I direct focus on the *autonomous* ecoconsumer as the fundamental premise of neoliberal environmentalism. I emphasize “autonomy” in the ideological sense to underscore the obsessiveness, particularly in the United States, of the individual convinced of their autonomy through consumerist activity. Below I elaborate key facets of the autonomous ecoconsumer with respect to (1) citizenship and consumerism; (2) possessive individualism and self-governance; and (3) self-identity and competition.

The psycho-social impact of consumer culture highlights the nexus of the individual and society (McDonald et al., 2017). The nature of the self–society linkage has transformed throughout the post-World War II period. Specifically, with the end of the Cold War, deindustrialization and the emergence of the service-based economy, “citizenship became conflated with the consumer who was encouraged to pursue their self-interest through economic freedoms conferred by the market in consumer choice” (McDonald et al., 2017: 366).

The tremendous spike in human activity and its impact on planetary systems (the so-called Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene) coincides with the advent of consumer culture in the United States—a period in which a particular form of economic growth (premised upon producing “more stuff in less time”) not only became economically necessary, but also politically legitimate and socially accepted (Steffen et al., 2020). The first American Express credit card was issued in 1958. Two years prior Eisenhower unmapped the Interstate Highway System. Both developments not only facilitated increasing fossil fuel consumption, they also came to symbolize American identity, culture, and freedom (Johnson, 2014).

While China currently leads the world in greenhouse gas emissions, their status as top polluter was achieved only recently after leapfrogging over the United States in the 1980s. Because emissions are cumulative, countries such as the United States arguably bear historic responsibility when it comes to climate mitigation. Interestingly, American advertisements respond to pollution with guilt and self-blame, whereas Chinese ads react with disgust and escapism (Li, 2013).

Scholars have long noted the parallel between the modern personality and the market logic of advanced capitalism, identifying two values that are crucial for fitting the self into the market: (1) consumerism and (2) possessive individualism (see e.g., Brulle, 2000: 41). Both values obtain renewed virulence with the advent of neoliberal capitalism. As McDonald et al. (2017: 366) note, “neoliberalism is a philosophy that aims to generate new forms of subjectivity (qua self-identity)

based on a possessive individualism by introducing policies that enable people to freely participate in capitalist enterprise by removing the restraining powers of society.” Neoliberalism abstracts the individual from society. The aim of which is “self-governance (. . .) promoted through various discourses, policies and techniques,” which “figure and produce citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’—their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (Brown, quoted in McDonald et al., 2017: 366). The ideology of individualism informs the autonomous ecoconsumer as well, but less so in terms of the bourgeois ideal of personal freedom, and more in terms of compulsory individualization—that is, individualization as a matter of institutional obligation, not free choice (McGuigan, 2014). Environmental problems are conceptualized as the failure of individual self-regulation, whereas the “free market” is defined as the most efficient mechanism for distributing resources based on individual needs and desires.

Brown (2019: 108) identifies two related processes that work together in neoliberalism—expanding economic privatization and extending the privatization of the person. While such phenomena and resulting stratification are not new, “neoliberal privatization and legitimization of inequality make it more intense, more widely disseminated, and more deeply penetrated into everyday life than at any time since feudalism” (Brown, 2019: 177). In the United States, the incorporation of environmental discontents into the administrative state during 1970s parallels the attempt by big business and political elites to direct focus away from institutional drivers of environmental problems and toward particular individuals, thereby locating the cause and solution to environmental problems in individual action (Feenberg, 1996; Stoner and Melathopolous, 2015). Privatization of the person is extended while privatization of the environment is expanded and, as a result, institutional drivers of global environmental problems are insulated from the critique.

Finally, we must consider how group behavior and self-identity are conditioned by neoliberalism. Self-identity is shaped by group socialization, as individual actors tend to differentiate themselves from others by identifying with particular social groups. Actors also tend to reify the in-group with which they identify. In this sense, neoliberalism facilitates the acceleration of intergroup competition (McDonald et al., 2017: 367). According to McDonald et al. (2017: 366), individuals “adapt to the conditions of neoliberal consumer cultures by viewing or conceiving of themselves as objects or commodities.” Aspects of self-identity are commodified to successfully compete with others in the marketplace (McDonald et al., 2017). Today, there is immense pressure on individuals to take on personality traits that are preferred in the labor market (e.g., adaptability, flexibility, competition, and entrepreneurship). This pressure is greatest among younger generations who are subject to even more uncertainty and unpredictability and must therefore construct a type of self that can cope with these conditions (McGuigan, 2014: 236). While young people are currently socialized into high expectations, they are also increasingly frustrated by dwindling job prospects and lifelong debt. At the same time, the search for self-fulfillment exemplified by the managerial class corresponds with a hedonistic spirit that incorporates critique, disaffection, and opposition, which today are not dysfunction, but rather complimentary to business (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; McGuigan, 2014). Nevertheless, the individual who does not adapt is useless (see e.g. Ehrenberg, 2015).

As environmental attention and concern become more widespread (and as capital-induced planetary destruction accelerates apace), neoliberalism “frees up” the subject whose life-chances are attributed solely to the autonomous individual. Under neoliberalism, subjectivity formation takes place in a societal context in which the grounds for individual rational action are liquidated (Arzuaga, 2018). The neoliberal demand for individual autonomy cannot materialize within this context in much the same way autonomous eco-consumption cannot facilitate movement toward less ecological destruction.

Neoliberal environmentalism prefigures an autonomous consumer whose individualistic market actions appear in opposition to but reproduce the social order whose stability is premised upon the irreconcilability of nature and society. While individuals may feel genuinely good about reusing biodegradable shopping bags, or genuinely bad about not recycling, the idea, promoted by some (e.g. Blau, 2017), that such individual action expresses social solidarity because it promotes the public good, is not true. Such action, premised on the autonomous ecoconsumer, is an expression of competitive individualism; that is, the absence of social solidarity. When disconnected and opposed to one another within the societal context of neoliberal capitalism, actors are more likely to pursue individualistic efforts without calling into question the socioecological tensions that underlie this form of society (Stoner, 2014). The neoliberal attempt to extinguish the social and marketize the political has pitted individuals against one another through increasingly cutthroat competition. We appear to be living in what Wendy Brown (2019) calls the “ruins of neoliberalism,” including affective ruins—namely, free-floating values and the disappearance of conscience.

## Contemporary Ecological Subjectivity and Repressive Desublimation

This section attempts to contextualize the stasis of neoliberal environmentalism by discussing the congruence between neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal environmentalism in the United States. I then engage Marcuse’s concept of repressive desublimation to grasp the psycho-social dynamics underlying the persistence of neoliberal environmentalism.

### *Transformations of Mainstream Environmentalism in the United States*

Following World War II, the scale and scope of technological development expedited unprecedented levels of resource extraction, productivity, and global capital flows. Total energy consumption in the United States alone nearly tripled from 1950 to 1973 (Hobsbawm, 1994: 262). By 1970, American automobiles accounted for over half of the country’s emissions of hydrocarbons and carbon monoxide (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2020a, b). Oil spills, lake fires, and the impacts of DDT brought the environmental impact of industrial society into sharp relief. The rise of contemporary environmentalism in the United States and elsewhere during the late 1960s and 1970s was a response to the tremendous spike in environmental degradation.

Whereas previously, people in capitalist societies tolerated environmental problems as inevitable side-effects of industrial society, the transformation of environmental problems in the twentieth century brought about a new societal response. The post-World War II form of economic growth destroyed the environment, but it also generated *contemporary ecological subjectivity* based on the recognition that the logic of industrial society is no longer adequate to the well-being of the biophysical world.<sup>5</sup> During this moment, it is possible to question growing use-value output and the social necessity of work (Postone, 1978). Contemporary ecological subjectivity is based on a vision of an alternative society and rooted in the recognition that industrial society is not adequate to the well-being of the environment. Hence, at the heart of contemporary ecological subjectivity is the aspiration for an alternative, nondestructive form of socioecological organization.

Contemporary environmentalism in the United States emerged after the post-World War II period of stability amid a generational and ideological shift marked by the questioning of authority.<sup>6</sup> The deployment of the atom bomb brought to light for the first time on a massive public scale the possibility of civilizational collapse. This new prospect was joined by writings that contended

that the American free enterprise system was based on a flawed understanding that humans were somehow separate from the biophysical world. Authors such as Osborn, Vogt, Bookchin, and Commoner criticized American society's misrecognition of the environmentally destructive effects of industrial society (Opie, 1998: 405). It is certainly no coincidence that this criticism was articulated at the time when the material expansion of the post-World War II regime had developed to such an extent that it became possible to question its necessity.

However, the rebellion against environmental degradation failed to liberate humans from heteronomous labor, as the social necessity of "work" reasserted itself in the 1970s when unemployment skyrocketed amid the first big economic downturn since World War II.<sup>7</sup> New environmental needs became possible during a moment in which the prospects for liberating individuals from heteronomous work (a necessary precondition for the liberation of inner and outer nature) fell far short. During the 1960s, technical productivity increases and historically low levels of unemployment made the capitalist work regime appear potentially obsolete. Yet, the basic structure of capitalist society—determined by the drive to produce surplus value and capitalize on labor (measured in socially necessary labor time)—remained the same. As Marx (1973 [1857/58]: 705) noted in the *Grundrisse*, the production of (surplus) value renders people, not wage labor, superfluous (see also Arzuaga, 2018). A more rational socioecological order requires overcoming the relation between capital and wage labor founded on the continued separation of labor from its conditions of production. The realization of this potential would entail the abolition of value and its form of commodity-producing labor, so that labor time would no longer serve as the sole measure of wealth (Marx, 1973 [1857/58]: 704–705).

Environmentalism missed the opportunity to engender changes in social structure conducive to moving beyond the societally induced environmental degradation, which characterized this period. Furthermore, the exact opposite occurred as environmentalist discontents were readily incorporated into the very system they intended to oppose. By 1970, environmentalism was institutionalized—its discontents were managed by the administrative state (via the Environmental Protection Act [EPA]) and controlled through class action lawsuits. While such legislation led to nominal environmental improvements in the United States (and in other wealthy countries where similar measures were employed), environmental problems did not so much improve but were rather accelerated through globalization and shifted elsewhere (Frey, 2015).

The shift from "limits to growth" during the 1970s to "sustainability through growth" during the 1980s paved the way for the dominance of neoliberal environmentalism today. These shifts in mainstream environmentalism index the fusion of environmentalist values to the economic imperative of capital. As a result, the growth of environmental attention and concern does not facilitate critical recognition of the entire socioecological complex, but rather becomes the means that serve capital's own ends. With the formation of the autonomous ecoconsumer, the broader aspirations for socioecological emancipation at the heart of contemporary ecological subjectivity undergo a process of repressive desublimation, as conceptualized by Herbert Marcuse.

### *Repressive Desublimation*

Before discussing Marcuse's concept of repressive desublimation, it will be helpful to review aspects of his interpretation of Freud, especially regarding the internalization of coercion (see also Langman, 2009, 2015). The internalization of external authority gives rise to "a special mental agency, man's superego, [which] takes it over and includes it among its commandments [*sic.*]" (Freud, quoted in Cavalletto, 2007: 14). As a society of "civilized persons" (i.e., with developed superegos) emerges,<sup>8</sup> the predominant form of social control shifts from direct (conformity based on external harm or the threat of such harm) to indirect (an authority seeking superego that ensures

conformity through the internalization of social coercion). The latter form of social control is central to the long-term stability of modern capitalist societies, which requires large segments of the population to embrace certain value orientations that legitimate the relations of domination and exploitation that underlie the social order. For Freud (1961 [1930]), repression is the psychic cost of civilizational progress. The civilized individual is destined to be discontent.

Approaching Freud through the lens of Hegelian–Marxian critical theory, Marcuse analyzes the psycho-social impact of capitalist domination in technologically advanced society. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Marcuse challenges Freud's notion of humanity's inevitable discontent and drive toward destructiveness. Marcuse (1955: 147) argues that the reason the death instinct appears as a biological drive for Freud is because he hypostatizes "a specific historical *form* of civilization with the *nature* of civilization."<sup>9</sup> Marcuse instead attempts to delineate what is historically new in the return of domination and repression under modern capitalist society—namely, a specific form of unfreedom rooted in the structure of alienated labor. With the emergence of "society," both domination and repression are depersonalized: "constraint and regimentation of pleasure now become a function (and 'natural' result) of the social division of labor" (Marcuse, 1955: 89).

Marcuse (1955: 90–91) emphasizes a dynamic of progress *through* domination in Freud's notion of the return of the repressed; that is, the historical reconstitution of domination in *apparently* "higher" forms. For Marcuse (1955: 71), the technological rationality of advanced capitalism explodes another return of the repressed, insofar as the expansion of science, technology, and productivity create the possibilities for overcoming the social necessity of work. Marcuse argues that under such conditions, the perpetuation of repression is increasingly irrational. Marcuse (1955: 35) introduces the key concept of "surplus repression" to denote the portion of repression "necessitated by social domination," which unnecessarily impedes the gratification of instinctual desires. He argues that nonrepressive sublimation is possible and can occur (as a social and individual phenomenon) if alienation is overcome. If freed from surplus repression, Eros would strengthen and absorb the objective of the death drive: "In the liberated state, the instinctual value of death—its biological compulsion—is transformed" (Marcuse, 1955: 235).

For Marcuse (1955: 94), the incorporation of the individual into mass society develops through systematic coordination of external social control mechanisms, which produce an "'automatization' of the superego," thereby liquidating the possibility for individual autonomy. The stability of the social order in technologically advanced capitalist societies, according to Marcuse (1955: 89), depends on the production of "false needs" and new forms of control. What Marcuse calls "repressive desublimation" occurs within capitalist domination as surplus repression is institutionalized and managed by a controlled liberalization, which increases satisfaction with the offerings of society. For Marcuse (1964: 74–75), this process further degrades the capacity for consciousness and therefore eliminates conscience.

With the post-World War II reorganization of power and capitalist social domination in what Adorno termed the "administered world," the gap between what *is* and what *ought* to be is eliminated in favor of the former. Although repression and its return (via the psychological adaptation of individual to society) is not new, Marcuse (1964: 8) notes that the "decisive difference" under conditions of monopoly capitalism is "the flattening out of the contrast (or conflict) between the given and the possible, between the satisfied and the unsatisfied needs." For Marcuse, such "one-dimensionality" comes at a price—namely, the loss of critical thought and the disappearance of conscience. As Marcuse (1964: 10) explains, "the result is not adjustment but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with *his* [*sic.*] society and, through it, with the society as a whole." Central is the rise of consumerism and administrative thought, resulting in an almost total social integration through the coordination of social functions (Marcuse, 1964: 57). As the individual is integrated further into the apparatus of capitalist production, the gap between the present

and its negation is closed, facilitating “happy consciousness” content with the status quo. As Marcuse indicates (1964: 73–74), one-dimensional reality “*limits the scope of sublimation*” while reducing “the *need* for sublimation. In the mental apparatus, the tension between that which is desired and that which is permitted seems considerably lowered (. . .) The organism is thus preconditioned for the spontaneous acceptance of what is offered.”

Wendy Brown (2019) argues that Marcuse’s theorization of the role of the market in repressive desublimation is particularly insightful in the context of neoliberalism. Brown explains the role repressive desublimation plays under conditions of neoliberalism:

Already depleted by desublimation yielding a happy consciousness, the weak remains of conscience are taken over by market reason and market requirements. The real is both the rational and the moral. At once reality principle, imperative, and moral order, capitalism becomes necessity, authority, and truth rolled into one; suffusing every sphere and immune from criticism, despite its manifest devastations, incoherencies, and instabilities. There is no alternative. (Brown, 2019: 169).

### *Desublimating Environmentalist Desire*

As discussed above, the emergence of contemporary environmentalism during the late 1960s gave expression to new environmental needs and the desire for change based on the recognition that the post-World War II form of economic growth was no longer adequate to the well-being of the biophysical world. Yet, as environmental attention and concern became integrated into the political mainstream, the environmentalist desire for change became part and parcel of the environmentally destructive social order it had sought to move beyond.

With green consumerism and the commodification of environmental attention and concern, broader aspirations for socioecological emancipation are decontextualized further and thus made malleable for capitalist production and consumption while the potential for constructive ecological practice is defied. The range and scope of meaningful solutions to environmental problems is limited accordingly (Stoner, 2020).

The process of satisfying desires in consumer society through systematically recognized means limits the scope of sublimation. With neoliberal environmentalism the desire for meaningful solutions to environmental problems is produced by capital and embodied in the autonomous ecoconsumer, who is then free to save the planet by shopping. As individuals are subject to greater demands to conform, neoliberal environmentalism promises ego-enhancement for the autonomous ecoconsumer that derives pleasure from the sort of “environmentally conscious” decision-making described in market research. Individuals feel good about reusing their biodegradable shopping bags, or they derive pleasure from engaging corporate recycling efforts (or experience shame and guilt for not recycling). Through the consumerist act, the individual is brought ever more tightly into a regime of compounded alienation. Although it may appear as freedom, Marcuse reminds us that the liberty to consume as one chooses inevitably results in the same old domination of the status quo.

The adaptation of institutional logics to the imperatives of capital affects cognitive patterns, epistemic capacities, and evaluative powers to produce a state of false consciousness characterized by defective forms of reasoning (Thompson, 2016). As more institutions are harnessed toward the goals of economic logics, social practices are routinized accordingly as more individuals are “reprogrammed” and, in the process, these individuals lose the ability to critically recognize that this is indeed the case. The result is an inability to critically grasp the entire socioecological complex, thereby compounding levels of reification. The mass integration of environmentalism along neoliberal lines illustrates this state of false consciousness.

To be sure, the argument that individual lifestyle solutions are inadequate and recuperative to the social order of capitalist societies is not new (see e.g. Schnaiberg, 1980; Szaz, 2007; Žižek, 2008). However, the concept of repressive desublimation allows for a more nuanced understanding of why the rise of contemporary environmentalism during the late 1960s and early 1970s not only failed to facilitate a shift in environment–society relations toward a less destructive direction, but also why the exact opposite happened as the growth of neoliberal environmentalism throughout the 1970s and 1980s achieved an elective affinity with the emergence and subsequent acceleration of global neoliberal capitalism. While the necessity of economic growth was called into question with the formation of contemporary ecological subjectivity, the environmentalist desire for change and the possibility of liberation contained therein was desublimated with the emergence of neoliberal environmentalism. The concept of repressive desublimation also points to the ways in which environmental discontents are readily integrated back into the status quo. The liberating aspects of environmentalism end up strengthening the cohesion of the social order whose stability is premised upon the fundamental irreconcilability of nature and society. Neoliberal environmentalism does not facilitate critical recognition of the entire socioecological complex but rather becomes the means that serve capital's own ends. Although the young are more likely than previous generations to question the ideology of "growthism," the capacity to imagine a different form of nature–society relations is further diminished with the "triumph" of neoliberal environmentalism.

The environmentalist desire for meaningful solutions does not disappear, to be sure. Because it is impossible for neoliberal environmentalism to deliver on its promise of less environmental destruction via the market, environmentalist desire is constantly frustrated. This thwarting of desire is evident in the most recent wave of climate protests (Stoner and Melathopolous, 2016), which may in turn facilitate a recursive cycle of anxiety (regarding possibility of nature–society reconciliation) and superficial compensatory action(ism). Below I provide an illustrative example of desublimated environmentalist desire at work in the current recycling crisis.

### *Illustrative Example: The Recycling Crisis*

Recycling efforts in the United States are reflective of the more general problems of neoliberal environmentalism discussed above. After decades of public information campaigns—a concerted effort among economic and political elites—Americans are now recycling. Of the so-called three R's (reduce, reuse, recycle), it is recycling that has received the most widespread attention and support.

Environmental sociologists have called the environmental efficacy of recycling into question (e.g., Lewis, 2018; Schnaiberg, 1980; Schnaiberg and Gould, 2000; Weinberg et al., 2000). This research underscores the fact that the environmental *inefficacy* of recycling stems from political economy. Recycling initiatives among local government agencies, environmental movement organizations, and big business owners should not be viewed as mutually beneficial efforts toward negotiating an acceptable alternative to waste disposal (Schnaiberg, 1997). For such initiatives take place within institutions tied to the continual expansion of production, regardless of socioecological limits. Big business benefits disproportionately, while minority and working-class communities pay the socioecological "costs." Recycling initiatives are almost always linked to or outright owned by major for-profit corporations who also reinvest profits elsewhere to expand production further, effectively cancelling out the local, short-term ecological benefits that may accrue. In a short discussion of efforts to reduce ecosystem impact *within* capitalist institutions, Schnaiberg and Gould (2000: 53) note that "while there may be some reductions of impacts per unit produced, the total volume of production [rises] fast enough to offset this effect."

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides waste and recycling data from 1960 to 2017. According to EPA data, the total Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) in 2017 was 267.8 million

tons, of which 67 million tons was recycled and 27 million tons was composted, equivalent to a 35.2% recycling and composting rate. In 1960, the total MSW was 88.1 tons, of which 5.6 million tons was recycled (none of this material was composted), equivalent to a 6.3% recycling rate. Of course, the increase in recycling needs to be seen relative to the roughly 300% increase in total MSW between 1960 and 2017.<sup>10</sup> A *critique* of political economy is necessary to grasp the underlying dynamics at work.

The structure of modern capitalist society, according to Marx, is determined by the drive to produce surplus value and capitalize on labor (measured in socially necessary labor time). The capitalist production of value involves a particular “treadmill effect,” which highlights the specific temporality and directional dynamic of capital (Postone, 1993). The temporality of capital can be defined in simple terms as the necessity to produce as many commodities as possible as rapidly as possible (Stoner and Melathopolous, 2016). Such “capital time” is antithetical to ecology because it necessarily accelerates more rapidly than the Earth’s biocapacity (to reproduce resources used and to absorb our waste).<sup>11</sup> Hence, at the heart of the capitalist production of value is an expansionary “treadmill” dynamic that tends to *accelerate* increasing levels of productivity, biophysical throughput, and environmental degradation (Postone, 1993; Stoner, 2020; Stoner and Melathopolous, 2015). It is this expansion and long-term acceleration of production that renders recycling environmentally meaningless. The current recycling crisis has brought this contradiction into sharp relief.

As Americans create more and more waste, recycling has become less profitable, and recycling markets are drying up. In the past, the United States sent most of its recycling to China, but in 2017 China enacted an import ban on plastic and paper scraps, which was extended in 2018 to include restrictions on other kinds of solid waste (Semuels, 2019; World Trade Organization, 2017). Already losing its low-wage competitive advantage, it is no longer profitable for Chinese businesses to hire low-paid workers to sort through and clean up discarded products from the United States. As the market for recycling continues to diminish, many towns, cities, and municipalities in the United States have stopped recycling altogether. The trash is piling up in landfills, while the populations near these toxic environments are disproportionately poor (Pellow, 2000).

What, then, explains Americans’ overwhelming support for recycling, particularly in the face of its abject failure? The dominance of recycling today resonates with neoliberal environmentalism and the autonomous ecoconsumer, insofar as it functions to direct focus away from the capitalist production of value and instead toward individual action framed as environmentally responsible. The dynamics of repressive desublimation, as outlined above, can help us understand why (some) people think superficial environmental action such as recycling is other and more than what it is.

The environmental need to recycle is “false,” insofar as it is produced by capital (cf. MacBride, 2011). At the individual level, recycling may feature pleasure (e.g. one feels good about recycling), but it does not lead to socioecological emancipation and, as outlined above, is part and parcel of the acceleration of capital-induced planetary degradation. Moreover, the continuation of capitalist recycling depends in part on the repressive desublimation of environmentalist desire.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this process is reflective of the broader workings of ideology in the twenty-first century, which is less about how surface-level activity such as recycling “covers up” capital’s underlying logic and more about how one’s entanglement in the surface-level inhibits critical recognition of this underlying logic.

While efforts directed toward innovation to make recycling more efficient (i.e., less time sorting) have received enthusiastic support from mainstream environmentalists, addressing the recycling crisis adequately requires confronting the sphere of production that generates such waste and overconsumption (see also Clement, 2010). Consumption is not the opposite of production, but rather its dialectical counterpart (Marx, 1973 [1857/58]: 88–99). It is the capitalist production of value, premised upon the objectification of alienation measured in socially necessary labor time,

that must be abolished in any move toward a less destructive and more rational relationship with nature. The problem is not recycling per se but rather the capitalist production of value and its expansionary “treadmill” dynamic, which cancels the potential of recycling as a constructive ecological practice. The role of recycling would remain important in a more rational, postcapitalist order, since a liberated society would still consume goods, and it is better to recycle these goods when they can no longer be reused.

## Conclusion

This paper directed focus on the relationship between self and society in advanced capitalism to highlight the nexus of neoliberal environmentalism and the autonomous ecoconsumer. I discussed how this linkage exposes the problem of ideology that underlies the stasis of neoliberal environmentalism. I then engaged Marcuse’s concept of repressive desublimation to better understand how environmentalist desire is currently being thwarted in ways that inhibit movement toward socioecological emancipation. I also outlined the current recycling crisis to provide an illustrative example of the psycho-social dynamics of repressive desublimation and how these dynamics inhibit the type of change necessary.

An important dimension of this problem is how the nature of the linkage between self, society, and environment must be transformed to bring about a less destructive relationship with nature. The dynamic of alienation, which as stated above, is structured by the capitalist work regime, must be overcome in any move toward socioecological emancipation. It is therefore important to recognize how the environmental consciousness of the autonomous ecoconsumer is the product of alienation and reification. For only based on such critical recognition can the broader aspirations for socioecological emancipation at the heart of contemporary ecological subjectivity be given space to grow. Of course, for this to occur, the pleasure afforded to the autonomous ecoconsumer must be substituted “for a more than private and personal, and therefore more authentic opposition” (Marcuse, 1964: 114–115).

Our current situation is even less optimistic, for humans are not the masters of the earth in the same way that some can be vis-à-vis the products of their own alienated societies. As it turns out, things are getting worse along the road to catastrophe, both in the objective sense of worsening harm to increasing numbers of living beings, human and otherwise, and in the subjective sense of increasing self-deception, which masks the fact that nothing new under the sun ails us but the alienated core of our modern being. Although critical theory provides us with the conceptual tools needed to fully comprehend this situation, it does not, unfortunately, deliver the means to do anything about it. Such action resides within the realm of substantive politics, which concerns the future and, as such, can never be predetermined.

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**Notes**

1. An allusion to Marcuse, who told his students that either there will be a catastrophe or things will get worse.
2. See Cole (2002) on the narrow definition of privatization within “free-market environmentalism.”
3. The demonization of the state and the deification of the market grew alongside the firestorm of debate centered on Meadows et al. (1972) *Limits to Growth*. Much of the debate oscillated between defenders of Meadows’ et al. apocalyptic forecast, on the one hand, and on the other hand, dissenters such as like Julian Simon, who expressed cornucopian views of the future while championing the role of technological progress in staving off biophysical limits to population and economic growth.
4. Brown (2019: 96) explains that for Hayek “markets and morals [are] equally important to a thriving civilization [and] are rooted in a common ontology of spontaneously evolved orders borne by tradition.” However, in the United States, the moral dimension of this Hayekian vision was either ignored or rejected as neoliberalism unfolded. This rejection, according to Brown (2019: 108), “may be why economic privatization remains the familiar face of neoliberalism and keeps more veiled the equally important force of privatization constituted by extending the reach of the personal, protected sphere.” Below I shall return to elaborate the significance of the extension of economic privatization and expansion of the personal sphere in relation to the autonomous ecoconsumer.
5. On the concept of contemporary ecological subjectivity, see Stoner and Melathopolous (2015: 22–23, 62–65, 91–95).
6. American environmentalism is a particular societal manifestation of contemporary ecological subjectivity. The nonidentity between contemporary ecological subjectivity and its societal manifestation is important to retain (à la Adorno, 1973).
7. As Postone (1978: 782) notes, “crises in capitalism, by dramatically reestablishing the ‘necessary’ connection of labor as presently defined and material reproduction, have the tendency to roll back elements of class-transcending consciousness and to reinforce elements of class-constituting consciousness—even if in militant form. The development is anything but linear.”
8. See Cavalletto (2007) on how Freud sees variations in the degree of superego formation between classes.
9. Honneth (2007) argues against the need to posit an aggressive drive and instead derives from object-relations theory a focus on intersubjectivity and the struggle for mutual recognition. Allen (2015) provides an innovative corrective to Honneth, drawing insight from the works of Melanie Klein to reinterpret the conflict of Eros and the death drive. As Allen (2015: 322) explains, “The conflict is not between an inherent anti-sociality within human beings and the demands of social reality to which they must become reconciled but rather between *two competing modes of sociality or social relatedness*” (Allen, 2015: 322). Interpreting Klein in this way “offers critical theorists a more realistic conception of the person than that put forward in either a purely drive theoretical or purely intersubjectivist version of psychoanalytic theory” (Allen, 2015: 325).
10. This problem is related to the issue of decoupling (of environmental degradation and economic growth) through dematerialization (decreasing the material intensity of biophysical throughput). In the public discourse on the role of technology decoupling and dematerialization are often conflated. While technocrats champion the ability of technology and ecologically efficient production to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, such decoupling is *relative* and must be seen in relation to the overall increase in production, which has been far greater than the relatively minimal advancements in ecological efficiency.
11. Even though the retention of direct human labor in the production process becomes increasingly anachronistic in the face of the immense wealth-producing potential of industry, human labor—as that which underlies the value form—remains necessary. In other words, the production of (surplus) value renders people, not wage labor, superfluous (Arzuaga, 2018). This is a crucial component of the treadmill of production of value, an adequate elaboration of which is beyond the scope of this article.

12. For if each of us would understand why and how we are who we are, and why and how we do what we do—then “society” would have an entirely different meaning, and modern societies would be organized differently. For a society to reconstitute itself according to an underlying set of patterns, most of us must be willing to fulfill tasks without questioning our place in society and why we must fulfill the tasks.

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