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COMMENTARY

A potential catch-22 for a sustainable American ideology[☆]

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Abstract

The history of American ideology includes elements of increasing sustainability. Laissez-faire, racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism have been declining throughout the 20th century, as indicated by various social movements and institutional developments. Economic growth has proceeded concurrently and the material standard of living has generally done likewise. Proponents of an environmental Kuznets curve posit that continued economic growth and associated increases in the standard of living will have the effect of, and are required for, producing an increasingly sustainable ideology. Meanwhile, the tenets of ecological economics deny the possibility of perpetual economic growth on biophysical grounds, leading to the conclusion that continued economic growth will have the effect of lowering the standard of living. The convergence of these theories reveals the potential for a sustainability catch-22, whereby a sustainable ideology is required to produce a sustainable economy, but a sustainable economy is required to produce a sustainable ideology. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The United States is a bellwether nation with respect to democratic politics, economic development, and environmental policy. Citizens from many countries aspire to attain American political freedoms and economic well-being. This creates a solemn responsibility for the US. If the world is to

achieve economic and ecological sustainability, it may be a necessary condition that the US does so within its borders, then leads other nations to do likewise. At the least, an ecologically sustainable economy in the US would contribute considerably to a stable and healthy global ecosystem.

Public ideology is influential in determining policy, land use patterns, and ecological sustainability. My objectives are to: (1) trace the history of American ideology as it pertains to sustainability; (2) assess current ideology; (3) explore potential 21st century ideologies based on extrapolations of trends; (4) assess the potential of

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a sustainable ideology (i.e., an ideology of sustainability which, by its nature, sustains its adherents and is, therefore, itself sustainable) to function in a capitalist democracy of increasing economic scale; and, (5) summarize alternative models of political economy for achieving sustainability.

2. History of American ideology

Following the success of the American Revolution, the boundaries of the young nation became the next major dispute to settle. The War of 1812 had to be fought with the British, and France and Spain had claims to the north and south, respectively (Jenkins, 1997). Native American tribes were viewed as a challenge to the security of the US (Deloria, 1988). American policy became focused on situating its citizens throughout the geographic range of its claims. Explorations were carried out by the military, and the findings were used to encourage westward expansion. Fur trappers, traders, miners, farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and associated entrepreneurs were attracted to the vast natural resources of the West. In the eastern cities, equipment and plant proliferated as foods were canned and products were manufactured from raw materials. The economy was *laissez-faire* capitalism.

The ideology of frontier America was penned by John L. O'Sullivan in the July/August 1845 issue of *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, when he asserted US claims to Oregon Territory "...by right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent". Manifest Destiny rapidly became the dominant ideology, and it was an ideology of dominance. Nationalism and racism occluded sovereignty and citizenship for Native Americans. Blacks were denied citizenship, and women denied suffrage. Dominance also extended to the land and nonhuman species. Lund (1980, p. 60) observed, 'If one single incident expresses in a paradigm the public ethos of the period, it is that failed competition for the glory of killing the last surviving American buffalo.'

Manifest Destiny culminated when Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders pushed the Spanish out

of Cuba in 1898. Ironically, as president, Roosevelt did more to curb the American appetite for land than any other figure. He established the United States Forest Service and designated 53 wildlife refuges, 16 national monuments, 6 national parks, and dozens of forest reserves (Fox, 1981). This marked an abrupt turning point in federal land use policy. Meanwhile, homesteading was phasing out as the productive lands were taken up, and hordes of landless European immigrants were populating large cities in squalor (Horder, 1983). The focus shifted from land settlement toward overcoming poverty by developing the industrial sectors. Manifest Destiny was no longer important to national security, but economic growth retained as much importance as ever, and *laissez-faire* remained a prominent philosophy.

World War I required a national economic effort to produce a war machine (Cowper, 1989). Once government made inroads on American economic activity, there was no turning back to *laissez-faire*. Following the Great Depression and encouraged by John Maynard Keynes, President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was marked by macroeconomic manipulation, including relief programs, measures to increase employment, and policies to assist industrial and agricultural recovery from the Depression (Warren and Wreszin, 1968).

The Depression was punctuated in the US by the Dust Bowl, perhaps the worst ecological disaster in American history (Hurt, 1981). Many witnessed the effects firsthand. A conservation ethic was inspired out of necessity and the bureaucracy expanded accordingly (Clarke, 1996). Congress created the Soil Conservation Service (the future Natural Resources Conservation Service), Grazing Service (the future Bureau of Land Management), and Civilian Conservation Corps. The latter wedded the economic and ecological health of the nation for all to see. The Corps employed three million Americans in- and educated the same on- natural resources conservation. The Corps consisted primarily of young adult males, who presumably spread a newly acquired conservation ethic among family and friends.

World War II disrupted the development of a conservation ideology. Again the focus was producing a war machine (Bailey, 1977). The resulting legislative lull in conservation issues lasted more than a decade, as Congress was preoccupied with a post-war economic boom and the Korean War from 1950 to 1953.

Despite the slowdown of policy making, expertise in ecology blossomed and gradually came to the policy forefront (Czech and Krausman, 2001). Mid-century spawned a new breed of ‘politico-scientists’ who ushered in a series of eco-social debates (Fleming, 1972). Prominent among these was Rachel Carson, whose *Silent Spring* (1962) is considered the dawn of the American environmental movement. Statutes that reflected an increasingly sustainable ideology included the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966, the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. Riding the crest of the environmental movement was the Endangered Species Act of 1973, which comprised an unambiguous and comprehensive program for species conservation, ‘the most far-reaching wildlife statute ever adopted by any nation’ (Reffalt, 1991, p. 78).

Other important statutes that reflected an increasingly sustainable ideology included the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1970, Clean Water Act of 1977, National Forest Management Act of 1974, and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. In each case, capitalism was constrained by federal programs to protect the public’s environment and conserve posterity’s resources. The late 1960s and 1970s also hosted a resurgence of Native American sovereignty (Wunder, 1994). Owing largely to the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (Public Law 638) and to a series of court cases centering on water rights and wildlife jurisdiction, tribal land use rights reached their highest level since the early 1800s (Czech, 1995a).

Meanwhile, the program of socializing natural resources conservation and environmental protection caused a backlash among industry and conservatives in general (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1996).

The two terms of President Ronald Reagan saw many attempts, some successful, to unbridle the capitalist enterprise by rolling back environmental regulations. These regressive measures were counterbalanced by rapidly expanding memberships in conservation organizations.

The 1990s were a controversial decade for environmental policy. The Republican Party’s sweeping victory in the 1994 congressional election froze the environmental agenda in the spotlight, but President Bill Clinton’s two terms of presidency prevented some antiregulatory rollbacks. Meanwhile, the natural resources bureaucracy was busy adopting a ‘new’ paradigm of ecosystem management, the novelty of which turned out to be primarily rhetorical (Czech, 1995b; Czech and Krausman, 1997). Ecosystem management inspired little public debate and, therefore, had little impact on public ideology. The most intense land use debate pertained to the rights of private landowners to develop properties where endangered species reside (Echeverria and Eby, 1995), the tension between laissez-faire and the socialization of natural resources continued.

3. American land use ideology at the dawn of the 21st century

There now exists a body of American conservation law that would have been unthinkable 100 years ago (Adams, 1993). Instead of encouraging people to settle and dominate the public domain, forestry and range laws protect public lands from unbridled exploitation. Farmers are paid to keep lands out of production for the purposes of soil and water conservation. Industries are required to retroactively pay the costs of toxic chemical cleanup. Mining companies are required to reclaim terrain and biotic communities to some extent. Fish harvest regulations are continually tighter.

Endangered species issues are highly representative of the sustainability of American ideology. Czech and Krausman (1999) found that an overwhelming majority (84%) of Americans want the Endangered Species Act to be retained as is or

strengthened. They also found that the public values the conservation of species at the same level as economic growth and property rights. This helps to explain why there are over 1200 species of nonhumans protected by the Endangered Species Act, many of which have no known economic value to humans. In a sense, human groups have infused many nonhuman species with political power, too. There are at least 632 conservation organizations in the US (Gordon, 2000), 132 of which are devoted to particular types of species. Clear preferences exist for 'higher' taxa, but lower taxa are gaining consideration (Czech et al., 1998).

These data are consistent with the observation of Kempton et al. (1995, p. 213) that 'environmental sentiments in the US are strong and growing stronger'. Kempton et al. indicated that Americans understand many of the basic principles of ecological interdependence, and that 'environmentalism has already become integrated with core American values such as parental responsibility, obligation to descendants, and traditional religious teachings'.

Kellert (1996) described a set of psychological profiles to describe American attitudes towards nature and, especially, nonhuman species. These profiles included utilitarian, naturalistic, ecologicistic, aesthetic, symbolic, dominionistic, humanistic, moralistic, and negativistic. The utilitarian and dominionistic profiles most closely match the ideology of Manifest Destiny. Kellert found that the utilitarian attitude toward other species has declined since the beginning of the 20th century, although it is still prominent. The dominionistic attitude, clearly a prevalent attitude throughout the 19th century, is one of the least prevalent attitudes today.

Which attitudes best represent a sustainable ideology is not so evident. Clearly, however, the ecologicistic attitude would play a major role, and its frequency has tripled since the 1940s (Kellert, 1996). The moralistic attitude would be associated with a biocentric ideology, and it is the second most prominent attitude in America. The results of this psychological profiling are difficult to interpret, however. For example, the human-

istic attitude, which arguably represents the most anthropocentric ideology (along with utilitarian and dominionistic attitudes) is the most prominent attitude.

Oelschlaeger (1994) documented that the spiritual life of an increasing number of Americans entails environmental protection. He called this spiritual movement 'caring for creation'. Although the number of participants may be increasing, the number or intensity needed for an ecologically sustainable economy is unknown.

Why, with all of the evidence for environmental concern and a sustainable ideology, has luxury spending been increasing so rapidly in the past few years, as documented by Frank (1999)? Czech (2000a) hypothesized that most Americans, especially those who have acquired wealth in the services sectors, do not understand what a unit of money represents in an ecological sense. They are far removed from the agricultural/extractive sectors, the productivity of which is what allows the division of labor and, therefore, the origin of money (Smith, 1976). They, therefore, do not readily understand that their expenditures, especially on 'non-resource' services like entertainment, are responsible for the liquidation of natural capital (e.g. wood, water, soils). For that matter, this appears to be lost on most neoclassical economists, who teach the vast majority of economics in the nation, as well (Daly and Cobb, 1994). A predominantly capitalist democracy may even be susceptible to the formation of an 'iron triangle' of neoclassical growth economists, corporate interests, and political lackeys, all of whom benefit synergistically from theories of perpetual economic growth (Czech, 2000a). In any event, the propensity of neoclassical economists to ignore issues of carrying capacity may account for much of the reason why 63% of Americans believe there is no limit to economic growth (Madrack, 1995). Nonetheless, public opinion data, spiritual trends, and the proliferation of environmental legislation indicate that Americans are developing an increasingly protective attitude towards nature and natural resources; i.e. a major component of an ideology of sustainability.

4. The environmental Kuznets curve in the United States and elsewhere

The propensity of Americans to support environmental regulations as GNP increases lends credence to the notion of an ‘environmental Kuznets curve’ (Vogel, 1999), which predicts that economies in the early stages of growth result in environmental degradation, while later stages with higher per capita incomes result in environmental investment and improvement. While American history tends to support the logic of an environmental Kuznets curve, it also includes exceptions such as the Great Depression, when declining wages and the Dust Bowl gave rise to an ideology of conservation (Clarke, 1996). Apparent ‘exceptions’ today, such as the anti-environmental property rights movement in the midst of rapid economic growth, are not so exceptional when one considers that the proponents tend to come from the agricultural/extractive sectors, where the recent economic boom has not resulted in a proportionate increase in wealth (Echeverria and Eby, 1995).

Sustainable farming efforts in developing countries such as India (Dahama, 1997) are also cited to refute the existence of an environmental Kuznets curve; presumably it was a dwindling standard of living that forced people into conservation. These efforts do not disprove the existence of an environmental Kuznets curve, however, because in these agricultural nations the standard of living is directly and understandably related to quantity and quality of soil, water, mineral, and other natural resources (Rostow and Kennedy, 1990). A decline in the ecological integrity of an agricultural economy will result in a decline in the standard of living for the majority so that declining wages signals the need to manage natural resources in a more sustainable manner.

In highly developed economies with large manufacturing and services sectors, and especially when much of the agricultural produce and other natural resources are imported, gross national product and per capita income may increase independently of the nation’s ecological integrity (Rostow and Kennedy, 1990). In such cases, a share of the profits may be directed towards land

conservation and other sustainability-oriented projects.

In light of this, the Dust Bowl depression era represents less of an exception to the environmental Kuznets curve than a unique and complex situation; the American economy was well developed but was still clearly based on its vigorous agricultural/extractive sectors (Hurt, 1981). There were many people who saw the need to conserve, and especially conserve soil. However, the programs that were so instrumental in precipitating the ideology of sustainability (e.g., the Civilian Conservation Corps) were availed by federal government deficit spending, not generated by the free market (Clarke, 1996). Similarly, many of the sustainable farming practices in less developed countries are funded through international aid programs.

Underlying the logic that low standards of living are not conducive to a socially sustainable ideology is Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: i.e., nutrition, personal security, love and affection, self-esteem, and self-actualization, in that order (Maslow, 1943). Much of the environmental work in the US is probably conducted for purposes of self-esteem and self-actualization; take away an individuals’ food supply and resource extraction will commence for either subsistence or cash-generating purposes. A wealthy sawmill owner may contribute to an environmental cause for a combination of political and altruistic reasons, but the sawyer struggling to feed a family will fell as many trees as possible, finding little time and no financial resources for other pursuits.

A major flaw of the environmental Kuznets curve is that, while rising wages increase the propensity to consume, environmental protection is only one among a long list of ‘amenities’ that may be consumed. While environmental spending may rise, proportionately higher consumption in competing sectors represents a net loss of natural capital (Czech, 2000b). Notwithstanding the weaknesses of the environmental Kuznets curve, it seems most reasonable to conclude that very low wages are conducive to neither social nor ecological sustainability, and that high wages offer the prospect, but do not guarantee the outcome of a sustainable ideology and economy.

5. Twenty-first century ideology

Nineteenth-century American ideology was *laissez-faire*, racist, sexist, and anthropocentric. Throughout the 20th century, each of these characteristics declined in intensity. America's capitalism was increasingly constrained, the polity and its policies were increasingly equitable, and increasing numbers of nonhuman species were protected. These trends encountered turbulence in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s, and relatively static periods, like the 1940s and 1990s, but the overall trend is clear and ongoing. The specter of nuclear warfare, memories of the Dust Bowl, shortages of natural resources, environmental degradation, and perhaps an enlightened social conscience have contributed to the change.

As red flags like species endangerment, power blackouts, and water shortages become ubiquitous in the 21st century, a greater proportion of Americans will recognize the ecological ramifications of compulsive conquest and economic ambition. Ecological content will almost certainly comprise an increasing proportion of economic theory and education as neoclassical economics is revealed to lack ecological prudence (Krishnan et al., 1995). To the extent this occurs, Americans will learn about the 'ecological footprint' and the natural capital requirements of lifestyles ostensibly removed from nature (Rees, 2000). They will learn about the ecological origins of money and understand that all forms of consumption are ultimately responsible for the liquidation of natural capital (Czech, 2000a). Concurrent with growing ecological awareness, Americans may begin to view inconspicuous consumption as an indicator of spiritual health (Chapman et al., 2000). Their ideology may continue to grow more socialistic, equitable, and biocentric (Kellert 1996). They will presumably elect leaders who embrace the principles of ecological economics. Such leaders will be called to administer conservation programs and pass laws that will encourage a stable population and a steady state economy, laws that will be complemented by citizen activity, all motivated by a sustainable ideology.

6. A catch-22 for a sustainable ideology

Standing on its own, the aforementioned 21st century scenario appears logical. The ecological sustainability of the American economy is far from assured, however, because of factors other than the majority's increasingly sustainable ideology. For example, an opposing and crucial minority of capitalists may prevent the fruition of the majority's ideology unless the latter is manifested in law. To illustrate via extreme example, there may even exist people of extreme misanthropy, who would liquidate all the world's natural capital for one huge cash reserve (which would then be relatively worthless), if it were possible. Along the spectrum from posterity-friendly to wantonly wasteful, the 'average' may be consumptive enough to tip the scales towards unsustainability.

Ideology and practice are not perfectly correlated, either. Despite the indications of an increasingly sustainable ideology, many American consumption trends indicate a movement away from conservation. Disposable diapers and desert golf courses proliferate, while the paucity of solar panels and public transit endures. While ignorance about the ecological origins of money may explain much of this, some obviously sustainable moves are not being made.

It has long been assumed that economic growth was prerequisite to a materially comfortable, politically stable, and intellectually refined society (Berger, 1976). For those who believe in a pure environmental Kuznets curve, growth beyond a threshold level will, therefore, only produce increasing returns to the environment. Classical economists recognized, however, what ecological economists recognize today; i.e., that there are biophysical limits to economic growth (Daly, 1993). With limits to growth, the challenge is to accomplish enough material comfort, political stability, and intellectual refinement to engage an ecologically sustainable economy before the depletion of natural capital stocks causes ecological and economic crises. If the US could accomplish this feat, it would have the resources to lead other nations to do likewise, as it has with democracy in some cases.

Americans have elements of a sustainable ideology, but do not have the scope or intensity of convictions that support a sustainable economy. Is more material comfort and intellectual refinement required, via economic growth, to produce a sustainable ideology? This is a highly disturbing prospect, for it reveals a potential catch-22.

Continuous economic growth and natural capital depletion ensures ecological degradation and the material discomfort, political instability, and intellectual decline associated therewith (Daly and Cobb, 1994; Daly, 1999). This prediction is consistent with the ecological theory of 'trophic levels', i.e., layers of consumption in the economy of nature (Czech, 2000a). The basic set of trophic levels includes the producers, primary consumers, and secondary consumers. Producers are plants endowed with chlorophyll to produce food in the presence of sunlight and water. Primary consumers are animals that eat the plants, and secondary consumers are animals that eat the primary consumers. Trophic levels have been the subject of much study pertaining to energetics, efficiency, and ecological structure and function, but logic alone suffices to conclude that, if the producer trophic level becomes degraded, the entire economy of nature is threatened.

The human economy is a subset of the economy of nature and subject to the same laws (Prugh et al., 1995). The primary consumers (manufacturing) and secondary consumers (services) may become more efficient but never become independent of the producers (agriculture/extraction) (Boulding, 1993). Furthermore, there is a limit to how much the proportion of consumers to producers can increase due to laws of thermodynamics (Georgescu-Roegen, 1993). Ultimately, therefore, increasing consumption becomes over-consumption; natural capital becomes depleted and the entire enterprise from producers to secondary consumers must contract. This scenario has played itself out in relatively isolated economies through the course of history (McDaniel and Gowdy, 2000). Some ecological economists now suspect that our global economy is beyond the scale of sustainability and that it continues to function only because we are still reaping the productivity of past millennia in the

form of fossilized producers (i.e. fossilized plants or fossil fuels) (Goodland, 1992).

Under this scenario, just as America climbs high enough to grab the prize of an ecologically sustainable ideology, the rungs of the ladder break as water, minerals, fuels, timber, and other natural capital stocks collapse. America finds itself with squalid hordes in the cities and a dust bowl or ecologically equivalent crisis on the land, perhaps this time with diminished ecological resilience. The majority is reduced to the lowest levels of Maslow's hierarchy, struggling for nutrition and security with the rest of the animal kingdom. That is not an atmosphere in which to foster an understanding of ecological economics. Anarchy looms, and if there is an organized social program among the masses, it tends toward military revolution. The US finds itself in a sustainability catch-22: a sustainable ideology is required to produce a sustainable economy, but a sustainable economy is required to produce a sustainable ideology.

7. Obviating the sustainability catch-22

Can Americans obviate the sustainability catch-22 by embracing and practicing a sustainable ideology prior to achieving an ecologically sustainable economy? Current ideology is promising in some respects. The challenge to those concerned with sustainability is to facilitate the evolution of that ideology to one that is more clearly sustainable. For example, neoclassical economics texts will have to be replaced by ecological economics texts (e.g. Costanza, 1991), especially for courses pertaining to economic growth. Ideally, the fundamentals of ecological economics would be taught in high schools so that most citizens could make decisions accordingly. For this to occur, books written at the complexity level of Prugh et al. (1995) or lower are needed. Religious institutions could participate in pointing out the evils (literal or figurative) of rampant consumerism (Daly and Cobb, 1994; Oelschlaeger, 1994). Conspicuous consumption would become an emblem of bad citizenship rather than a behavior to emulate, setting up a 'trickle-down' effect in

consumption and drastically altering the political landscape (Czech, 2000a). A host of policy reforms would be part and parcel to these educational and social movements (Krishnan et al., 1995). The catch-22 can be obviated, in other words, by fortitude and hard work in the educational, social, and political arenas.

If these efforts are unsuccessful, the sustainability catch-22 will dictate that there can be neither a sustainable ideology nor a sustainable economy. Populated by citizens with an unsustainable ideology, the only economy possible will be one that results in ecological degradation. Given no reprieve, the ecosystem will be capable of hosting only economic decay and keeping its human populace at a low standard of living, with neither the time nor the education to develop a sustainable ideology. Such an outcome would be generally consistent with the predictions of Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo (Heilbroner, 1992).

A small country might manage to obviate a sustainability catch-22 within its borders, but if the rest of the world does not, history shows that war—actual or ‘cold’—will ensue. Large and aggressive nations depleted of natural capital will commandeer the resources of small, sustainable, resource-rich nations (Milbrath, 1989). A global sustainability catch-22 may be obviated only if a powerful nation establishes a sustainable economy, defends it, and leads other nations to do likewise.

8. Alternative political economies for sustainability

The economic might of the US, especially in light of the Soviet collapse, suggests that capitalist democracy is the superior system for engendering economic growth. To be the champion of economic growth is a dubious distinction, however, through the lens of a sustainable ideology. The prospect of growth-caused ecological deterioration is so terse that no form of political economy should be overlooked in considering ways to obviate the sustainability catch-22.

Some think that anarchy would be sustainable because disorganization is not amenable to the

massive man-made capital accumulation that has proven so efficient at liquidating natural capital. However, given the propensity of humans to organize and govern, anarchy is probably not an alternative. Furthermore, the concept of ‘planned anarchy’ is profoundly oxymoronic. As Guérin, (1970, p. 12) noted, ‘Anarchism is really a synonym for socialism. The anarchist is primarily a socialist whose aim is to abolish the exploitation of man by man’. Yet, anarchy per se and as referred to in the vernacular, i.e., as an economy distinguished by an apolitical essence, is more likely to result from a massive socioeconomic ‘trainwreck’, not obviate one. Ironically, this type of anarchy would be scarcely distinct from *laissez-faire*, therefore its conduciveness to sustainability would be highly questionable.

Theoretically, an environmentally benign dictatorship would be capable of constraining the scale of an economy and protecting a nation’s environment. However, even a casual glance at the exploits of dictators show that the environmental results have been spectacularly, if not invariably, negative (Chirot, 1994). Where dictatorship is not the harbinger of environmental degradation, it is more likely to represent the aftermath of unsustainability than the obviator thereof (Barkstrom, 1998). That this tendency to arise in the wake of intense resource shortages characterizes both anarchy (per se) and dictatorship is probably not incidental because dictatorship is a likely successor to anarchy. In any event, dictatorship is the political system most anathematized by Americans, who would probably rather doom posterity to unsustainability than subject posterity (knowingly) to dictatorship. Even were it desirable, dictatorship in the US does not appear to be a realistic prospect in the near future.

Socialism is another alternative. While an environmentally benign dictatorship would solve the problem of a democracy destroying its own ignorant citizens, environmentally prudent socialism would solve the problem of capitalism destroying its own self-interested profiteers. In either case, personal liberties would be lost. However, in the case of socialism, liberties would be devoted to the public weal, while in the case of dictatorship, liberties would be surrendered to the dictator.

Relative to anarchy (*per se*) and dictatorship, socialism is a legitimate candidate for a sustainable political economy (Brown, 1995). John Stuart Mill, one of the classical economists most concerned with sustainability, wavered in his assessments of the relative merits of socialism and democracy (Mill, 1987; Heilbroner, 1992), and his wavering occurred at a point in history long before 6 billion humans occupied the planet. Perhaps it is no coincidence that much of the evidence for an increasingly sustainable American ideology coincides with the constraint of capitalism and the socialization of natural resources (Czech and Krausman, 2001). On a spectrum from *laissez-faire* to socialism, capitalist and socialist democracies are but two intermediaries that differ less in type than degree (Adler, 1991). Clearly, the US falls closer to these alternatives than to either end of the spectrum, which probably says less about the historical efficacy of socialist politics than it does about the demonstrated shortcomings of industrial aged *laissez-faire*. Does the US need to proceed further along this spectrum to achieve sustainability? If so, the bigger question is whether it can happen prior to engagement of the sustainability catch-22.

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