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**Review of *Sustainable Failures: Environmental Policy and
Democracy in a Petro-Dependent World*. Sherry Cable. Reviewed
by Chris Williams**

Chris Williams

The Columbia School of Social Work

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other accounts that transcend the tendency in social policy to regurgitate simplistic models. Although limited to Europe, its analytical sophistication should be emulated in social policy analysis in other parts of the world as well.

James Midgley, *School of Social Welfare,*
University of California, Berkeley

Sherry Cable, *Sustainable Failures: Environmental Policy and Democracy in a Petro-Dependent World.* Temple University Press (2012). \$29.95 (paperback).

When one examines the ever-deepening state of our global ecological crisis, environmental policies aimed at stemming ecological degradation and growing climate instability have self-evidently failed. Hence, our ability to successfully interrogate why is of critical import if we are to extricate ourselves and heal, in Marx's words, "the metabolic rift" between human society and the biosphere. Sociologist Sherry Cable, in her new book, *Sustainable Failures*, attempts to address this important question of why, despite a host of environmentally-oriented legislation stretching back many decades, neither United States domestic, nor inter-governmental international environmental policy, has been able to move society onto a more environmentally benign pathway.

Domestic and international policy does not conform, as Cable outlines, to leftist ecologist Barry Commoner's *Four Laws of Ecology*, upon which Nature operates in a sustainable manner. Cable seeks to delineate, via extensive exposition of legal examples, why environmental policies focus far more on mitigation of pollution after the fact than on prevention. Her training in sociology propels her to bring to bear an historical, cultural and socio-economic analysis that synthesizes literature from a diverse array of fields, including select case studies, in order to craft an answer.

In a book divided into four sections, Cable begins with a brief and thereby necessarily schematic overview of two million years of human social development, with the emergence of hunter-gather societies, through to today's world of "petro-dependency," which she argues commences in earnest in 1945. Part Two convincingly elucidates the failure

of U.S. domestic environmental policies to curb ever-accelerating environmental degradation, while Part Three accurately describes the environmental failures of international environmental policies, most recently through the United Nation's Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the multi-decade process of international negotiations via the mechanism of the Conference of the Parties (COP). The real question, however, remains: why?

All of these failures are ultimately ascribed to living in a "petro-dependent world." A world which began, post-1945, with the intensification of mechanization in agriculture based on energy and other inputs furnished by petroleum, and the production of novel, increasingly toxic, long-lived synthetic products derived from oil. In turn, this decisive shift to petroleum dependency begat an increase in population and economic expansion, neither of which were cognizant of environmental limits to growth and the ecological principles outlined in Connor's *The Closing Circle*.

As Cable makes clear, her analysis, in contrast to many other sociological writers in this area, eschews a clear and distinctive break in modes of production between industrial and pre-industrial societies. Rather, industrialization for Cable merely represents an acceleration of the accumulation and transformation of nature in the interests of human social development that began with the transition from hunter-gatherer societies to civilization based on agriculture. Cable justifies her unorthodox approach on the basis that she is interested in humanity's use of the biosphere in relation to how we acquire the resources and energy needed to stay alive, and how they are obtained, whether that be from machines or animal/human labor, and energy from wood, coal or oil.

Unfortunately, Cable's chosen methodology obscures more than it reveals. While certain chapters of her book, particularly her analysis and the attention she pays to environmental racism, are important and refreshing, her overall analysis fails to indicate the systemic root of the problem, which remains hidden within the structural dynamics of capitalism.

Petro-dependency, in and of itself, is not a social force and there is a clear social, economic and political break between pre-capitalist and capitalist-oriented societies which cannot be overlooked when seeking answers to the ideological and

economic underpinnings of society, and the resultant attitude and impact with regard to nature. Without indicating from whence the driving force of economic expansion and the reactive nature of environmental policies and their often abused or routinely ignored regulations emerge, the nature of the state, and democracy under capitalism, there is no underlying social rationale for an ultimately irrational socio-political system hell-bent on short term objectives and growth, impelled by profit maximization. Her analysis begs the question: would capitalism be sustainable if it could change to non-fossil fueled sources of energy?

Furthermore, like so many other environmentally-themed books describing the global ecological crisis, Cable, as she declares in the preface, has learnt precious little about "how to get out of it." Hence, the final part of *Sustainable Failures*, "And So...", is all of ten pages. Within those ten pages, however, she makes concrete and clear her proclivity for a human declensionist argument from the origin of our species until today. A graphic of an ever-thickening spiral, titled "Downward Spiral to Premature Human Extinction," shows the social evolution of humankind as a continuous process of increasing environmental abuse, ending with our "suicidal path of petro-dependency" (p. 197).

Cable's briefly posited solutions, due to her mistaken analysis of the root of the problem and disregard of the social system of capitalism, end with utopian calls for a society based on localism and bioregionalism that mixes contradictory goals such as local sustainability via chartered corporations, national service in agricultural knowledge, "just" discrepancies in wealth and the bolstering of the institution of the family. All of these are to be based on something she describes as a "perpetual energy source" (p. 198) of locally grown and distributed food, human labor power and the reduction of toxic inputs, processes and products. Along with her outdated focus on the immanence of "peak oil" and, to her mind, the dire problem over-population, her mode of analysis and alternatives end up failing to adequately tackle her original purpose.

*Chris Williams, Department of Chemical and Physical Science,
Pace University*