

Capitalism and Industrial Pollution: Theorizing capitalist pleasure and pain from a utilitarian perspective

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Abstract

Market-oriented industrial capitalist production has inflicted so much excruciating pain on humanity that some are raising doubts about the future of organic life on planet earth. Environmental impact assessment, is an internationally standardized tool for measuring the possible, real and subtle negative outcomes of industrial production as an integral component of the development of capitalism. This paper theorized on the global reality that industrial development comes with the indispensable contradictory effects of pleasure and pain. It investigated the negative dimensions of the celebrated wonders of capitalist industrial production. It also argued that efforts at the mitigation of environmental pollution through impact assessment policies would not achieve much success due to the functional dynamics of the capitalist market that control and direct global industrial production and consumption patterns. It is an essentially qualitative study that relied on secondary sources of data with textual analysis of published works as its method of analysis. The theory of utilitarianism by Bentham and Mill was adopted as its theoretical framework. The paper concluded that environmental impact assessment *per se* does not guarantee sustainable development and therefore recommended that peoples' environmental rights should be adequately protected despite the lure of industrial investment and development.

Key words: Environment, Industrialism, Capitalism, Pollution, Development

Introduction

Three key issues this paper seeks to address are those of the innovative capacity of capitalism, the profit-motive of industrial production and the pleasure and pain nexus in utilitarian theory. They would be approached theoretically to analyze the problem of environmental impact assessment for sustainable development. The contemporary quagmire of global environmental degradation is viewed as an indispensable component of capitalist production. Marx (1977, p. 111) applauded capitalism for having "accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals". Characteristically, this process of capitalist accumulation, expansion and integration is stupendously pleasurable and desirable with the sophistication, durability, portability, convenience and comfort that its products afford. Its strength is embedded in the interminable capability of its merchandise to satisfy the needs of humanity. The development of capitalism in Europe had coincided with the Industrial Revolution from the fifteenth century, during which there was an upsurge in the growth of scientific and technological knowledge (Kemp, 1993). As Gamble (1981, p. 131) luridly captured it:

Liberalism and socialism have triumphed. The agricultural economy and the absolutist states have vanished; a new society and a new politics have emerged . . . What originated as creeds of revolt against authority, inequality and injustice, have become the officially approved ideologies of established regimes. In their origins they were crusading doctrines rooted in the new philosophy, the new economic relationships of civil society . . . and the possibility of transforming human societies and human beings

for the better . . . Industrialism triumphed, but not in a form which many of the early devotees of industrial progress would have welcomed.

Capitalism, liberalism and industrialism arrived with loads of lofty promises in their philosophical creeds to launch an egalitarian society liberated from the feudal and sacerdotal captivity of the medieval epoch (Sabine & Thorson, 1973). Over time, however, rather than universal prosperity and freedom; they created enclaves of slavery, servitude and misery (Ogali, June 2014, Vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 34-64). Williams (1944) established a direct link between plantation agriculture, with the use of African slave labour in Latin America and the Caribbean, and primitive accumulation which funded the development of capitalism in Europe. Marx (cited in Ogali, 2014) evinced that; “Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry”. Capitalism, industrialism and liberalism succeeded feudalism as a more progressive and prosperous mode of production driven by the principles of liberty, equality, human rights, etc. All these and much more it afforded humanity doubtless while concealing a dark side that systematically eroded the pleasures so lavishly delivered. Worried about the negative outcomes of capitalism, Wood (2003, pp. 265-266) expressed her pessimism thus:

I am convinced . . . that capitalism cannot deliver world peace. It seems to me axiomatic that the expansionary, competitive and exploitative logic of capitalist accumulation . . . is and will for the foreseeable future remain the greatest threat to world peace. Nor do I think that capitalism can avoid ecological devastation . . . the essential irrationality of the drive for capital accumulation, which subordinates everything to the requirements of the self-expansion of capital and so-called growth, is unavoidably hostile to ecological balance.

Capitalism, liberalism and industrialism have revolutionized the world in terms of material wealth, pleasure and comfort but also constantly threaten humanity with the pain of environmental pollution.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study is essentially descriptive, qualitative and historical and therefore depended mainly on secondary sources of data such as internet sources, books and academic journals, newspaper reports and news magazines. Data generated were analyzed qualitatively through textual analysis of published works.

Results and Discussion

1. Capitalism and the Political Philosophy of Utilitarianism

This study is predicated on the theory of utilitarianism by Bentham (2002) and Mill (2016), who argued that human actions are weighed against the intensity of the pleasure derivable from them and the avoidance of pain. There is a moral obligation on citizens to take actions or decisions that bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number. “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure” (Bentham, 2002, p. 1). It is the thesis of this paper that the choice of the principles of pleasure and pain was a perfect description of the true nature of the capitalist, industrial and liberal society that was taking shape after the demise of feudalism in Europe. Like Bentham, Hobbes argued that; “That which men desire, they are also said to love: and to hate those things, for which they have aversion” (Hobbes, 1968, p. 119).

Under feudalism learning, thinking and scientific investigation of natural and even social phenomena were adjudged heretical. Eventually, the Thirty-Years war (1618-1648) and the various revolutions (English 1640-1660; French 1789; American 1775-1783; Russian 1917) created the pathways, identified by Moore Jr. (1993), as the routes to modernity. From a utilitarian standpoint war and revolution may be adjudged painful conditions, and therefore apparently morally wrong. However, from a consequentialist normative philosophical perspective, the bourgeois revolutions in Europe brought about the liberation and, therefore, the greatest happiness of the greatest number in modern consumptive capitalist society. As Gamble (1981, p. 131) correctly observed: “What originated as creeds of revolt against authority, inequality and injustice, have become the officially approved ideologies of established regimes”. The liberator of the past has become the new oppressor. Capitalism and industrialism have created so much opulence, pleasure, happiness, comfort, desirable luxury, market freedom and success, but the challenge is how to effect or ensure Hobbes’ “aversion” of the current doom, or Bentham’s “pain”, of global industrial pollution.

2. The Creative Pleasure of Capitalism

Capitalism is a mode of production driven by the profit motive, meaning not just making profit but also ensuring that the profit margin continues to widen (Macpherson, 1972; Ake, 1981; Brenner, 1998). Adam Smith’s (2012, p. 19) famous assertion that: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest”, is the most practical demonstration of the dynamics of capitalism. The capitalist’s primary motivation for engaging in production is not to satisfy human needs but rather to make profit by taking advantage of their situation. He seeks not just profit but, really, profit maximization and there lies the reason for his innovativeness, ingenuity, rationality and constant revolutionization of the means of production.

The liberal scholar, Rostow (1953) categorized the stages of economic growth under capitalism into five (5), viz., the traditional society, the preconditions for take-off, the take-off, the drive to maturity, and the age of high mass consumption. This last stage is characterized by industrial boom in automobile, petroleum, electric-powered household devices and gadgetry, computers, mobile phones, spacecraft, iPhone, iPad, cashless financial services and the ATM, biotechnology, entertainment industry, the military-industrial complex, etc.

3. The Toxic Pain of Industrial Pollution

Capitalism (or industrialism) is the greatest pollutant as well as the greatest beneficiary of environmental pollution, a form of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 87). Industrial pollution is increasing in complexity and inscrutability owing to the predatory disposition of companies to conceal their culpability. The drive for profit maximization is undoubtedly the reason for the duplicitous and manipulative character of capitalist investors and manufacturers on issues of environmental protection. Pollution prevention often involves the adoption of cleaner and more environmentally friendly technologies such as electric cars, wind and solar power, which is usually not a cost-effective undertaking as it eats deep into the profit margins of companies. Industrial pollution is the painful and pernicious aspect of the utilitarian trajectory and aversion is accordingly difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, pollution is not always visible and could involve series of technical tests before culpability could be established. Some of the measures that have been put in place to control industrial pollution in the US include the Community right-to-know Act, which has two main purposes: to provide communities with information about potential chemical hazards; and to improve planning for chemical accidents. The Nigerian equivalent is the ineffective and largely ignored Freedom of Information Act. The Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) contains information on annual releases of toxic

chemicals into the environment, while the Aerometric Information Retrieval System (AIRS) is the management system of the US national database for ambient air quality, emissions, and compliance data. The Human Health and Ecotoxicity Database (HHED) contains a number of indices of toxicological potency.

Most developing countries have little or no industrial pollution data (Hettige et al, 1995). The World Bank has developed the Industrial Pollution Projection System (IPPS), a database created by merging Manufacturing Census file data with US EPA data on air, water and solid waste emissions. It can separately project air, water, and solid waste emissions, and incorporates a range of risk factors for human toxic and ecotoxic effects.

4. Obstacles to Environmental Impact Assessment

The Climate Accountability Institute in the United States, the world's leading authority on big oil's role in the escalating climate emergency reported from a study that "the top 20 companies on the list have contributed to 35% of all energy-related carbon dioxide and methane worldwide, totaling 480 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (GtCO₂e) since 1965 (Sobowale, Vanguard News, October 10, 2019). They include Chevron, Exxon, BP, Shell and state-owned Saudi Aramco and Gazprom. Chevron, Exxon, BP and Shell alone account for over 10% of the world's carbon emissions since 1965.

Michael Mann, one of the world's leading climate scientists said, "The great tragedy of the climate crisis is that seven and a half billion people must pay the price – in the form of a degraded planet – so that a couple of dozen polluting interests can continue to make record profits. It is a great moral failing of our political system that we have allowed this to happen . . . spend billions of pounds on lobbying governments and portraying themselves as environmentally responsible . . . \$200m each year lobbying to delay, control or block policies to tackle climate change" (Sobowale, Vanguard News, October 10, 2019).

Companies often support environmental protection but act differently in defense of the higher value of profit maximization. "The technology and best practices are readily available to make refineries safer and cleaner, if not exactly safe and clean. Big Oil's executives and its lobbying organisations take every possible opportunity to fight for fewer environmental and safety requirements, less oversight, and less regulation. More often than not, they succeed" (Juhasz, 2009 p. 198). The question remains the possibility of successful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in the face of global capitalist drive for profit maximization.

Government's joint-ownership of projects with multinational companies on the basis of which profits are shared imposes extremely difficult regulatory challenges. Such governments tend to protect the companies rather than the citizens. In most cases they compromise standards and policies to protect the companies and the sharing interests.

A vibrant and well-informed civil society keeps companies constantly on their toes, when civil society is weak, uninformed, dependent on the government and therefore gelatinous, as in the Third World countries, polluting companies do not feel threatened and therefore trample upon environmental laws with impunity.

It is extremely difficult for an illiterate and poverty-stricken local community to rise against companies and demand environmental rights and justice. Such communities are often disunited and therefore easily bribed or intimidated into silence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, environmental impact assessment driven by regulatory agencies is necessary and expedient if the human race could hope for a cleaner environment. As cleaner sources of energy, such as solar energy, are discovered and utilized, a safe global environment is possible. But capital accumulation and profit maximization remain the most enduring obstacles to a healthy living environment.

Recommendations

Based on the aforesaid this paper recommends as follows:

1. Industries must show commitment to a cleaner environment.
2. Environmental impact assessment and corporate social responsibility must be relentlessly and vigorously pursued.
3. Environmental laws should be strengthened for more effective regulation.
4. Peoples' environmental rights should be adequately protected against capitalist profit.
5. Capitalist production should be more humane and guided by ethical values and principles. Capitalism 2.0, as the new trajectory that points in the direction of a genuinely fair and progressive society for the 21st century, is the right trail.

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