



Moving Beyond Capitalism to *Sustaining All Life*

Capitalism, the world's dominant economic system for the past 250 years, has proven itself to be incompatible with human well-being and sustaining the environment. This has become glaringly obvious in the last decade. Capitalism's drive for constant growth—through overconsumption and exploitation of natural and human resources—has created the climate emergency.

Capitalism organizes societies to extract maximum profit for the owners and managers of resources and wealth—without concern for the future of life on Earth. This system is not natural or inevitable—capitalism had a beginning and it will have an end.

However, to solve the climate emergency, we need to speed up the end of capitalism. We need to replace capitalism with an economic system that can provide for the basic needs of all humans while protecting the natural environment and its ability to sustain life on Earth. Our connections with each other and with the environment need to be central to this new system. It needs to replace individualism and the exploitation of people and natural resources to create profits for a few. With a humane and sustainable post-capitalist economy it will be possible to eliminate all forms of oppression as well as sustain all life on Earth.

Replacing capitalism with a fair and sustainable economic system is an enormous challenge. But capitalism itself came into being only a few hundred years ago. It replaced economic systems that were as dominant in their times as capitalism is today—slavery and feudalism. Capitalism functioned alongside these older systems for some time. However, it didn't actually become dominant until the old ways of doing things—the old ways of thinking and feeling—had been replaced by the logic of capitalism.

Internalized Capitalism

Several generations later, we have accepted many ways of thinking and feeling that reflect the logic of

capitalism: beliefs, values, and attitudes that justify the capitalist mode of production and consumption. They limit our thinking and undermine our ability to create a more humane and sustainable economic system.

Examples of these "internalized attitudes of capitalism" include the following:

- The Earth belongs to us. We can take from it endlessly without regard for humans and other life forms. We are entitled to whatever the Earth produces.
- Capitalism is the only economic system that makes sense; it is the best system possible, and there is no other sensible option.
- Everything can be bought and sold. It is acceptable to commodify everything—land, food, water, health, sex, education, information, human life, animal life.
- Economic inequality and greed are part of human nature.
- Accumulating endless wealth is rational.
- Consumption can make people happy (less scared, less bad) and more desirable.
- More is better. Having more than you actually need is a sign of success and will bring security.
- One's value as a human being is measured by one's material wealth.
- Meritocracy—anyone can be "successful" through hard work and intelligence; if you have not been successful, then it means that either you have not worked hard enough or that you are not smart enough. In other words, it's your individual failure if you are not "successful."
- If "getting ahead" means competing with and defeating others, that is okay. Leaving others behind is acceptable as long as one is taking care of one's self and one's family.



- Oppression (racism, sexism, and so on) is an inevitable and acceptable consequence of the profit system.
- It is okay to exploit people and take advantage of their vulnerability.
- What is mine is mine—personal ownership is highly valued (in many Indigenous cultures there is no concept of personal property).
- Seek all kinds of distractions to avoid facing reality;
- Care first and foremost about oneself—individualism reigns. It is okay to be indifferent to the needs of others.
- Those who are wealthy are natural leaders.
- Colonization, imperialism, genocide, and war are acceptable means of getting ahead.
- Wealthy capitalist nations can dominate and rule poor nations.
- Anyone or any institution that questions capitalism is dangerous.

These ideas and assumptions are not our own rational thinking. They are justifications for the current oppressive system. Every child growing up under capitalism is bombarded with them and pressured to accept them. We inevitably and unconsciously internalize them. They masquerade as “human nature” when they are nothing more than capitalist ways of thinking and feeling.

Internalized attitudes of capitalism have harmed us emotionally. We may feel alone and bad, disconnected from other people and other forms of life, superior or inferior to other people, hopeless about change, grief stricken, scared, and powerless to change inhumane conditions.

Overcoming Internalized Capitalism

We want rational thinking and good decisions for ourselves, for the good of other people, and for the good of the planet. We can help each other rid ourselves of these internalized attitudes that limit our



Sustaining All Life (SAL) is an international grassroots organization working to end the climate emergency within the context of ending all divisions among people. *United to End Racism* (UER) consists of a wide diversity of people in many different countries, who are dedicated to eliminating racism in the world and supporting the efforts of all other groups with this goal. UER and SAL are projects of and use the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling. Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) is a well-defined theory and practice that helps people of all ages and backgrounds exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from emotional harm resulting from oppression and other hurts. By taking turns listening to each other and encouraging the release of painful emotions, people can heal old hurts and become better able to think, to speak out, and to organize and lead others in building a world in which human beings and other life forms are valued and the environment is restored and preserved. Re-evaluation Counseling currently exists in 95 countries.



SustainingAllLife.org



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thinking and activism. Then we can more successfully address the climate emergency and the transition to a new economy.

As a starting point, we can examine everything that we take for granted about the capitalist economic system. Do the assumptions listed above really reflect “human nature”? Do they reflect a rational way of organizing ourselves and the systems of production and consumption?

We can counter these oppressive assumptions by offering a perspective outside the logic of capitalism. For example, we can replace the concept of exploitation and domination with cooperation and mutual assistance. The following ideas challenge usual ways of thinking and acting under capitalism:

- Enough is enough—how much do we really need for our lives to go well? We can distinguish between wants promoted by capitalism and its advertising, and our real needs. We can consider cutting our consumption in half—what would you have to feel if you were to do this?
- Every human being, every human mind, is equally valuable and is equally deserving of caring and access to resources.
- It is the capitalist economic system that is responsible for systemic poverty—it is not anyone’s individual fault.
- Economic inequality does not make sense. It is natural to feel heartbroken and to grieve about it. It is appropriate to be outraged and furious about the massive unequal distribution of resources.
- There is enough to meet everyone’s needs. With cooperation, everyone succeeds. There are no “losers.” There are no inherent conflicts among humans.
- What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine—what would it look like to live this decision? How would you feel if there was no such thing as private property and personal possessions?
- Give up all forms of distractions—including addictions to always acquiring more and to running away from your emotions. We can face our uncertainties and fears and not rely on the pseudo-security promised by consumerism.
- Notice that we are actively and unavoidably involved with the capitalist system, that every purchase makes profits for the owning class.

- Work to eliminate all forms of humans harming humans. Act on the belief that everyone is your potential ally and that you can be an ally to everyone. Refuse to be divided from other people.
- Promote the leadership of young people, Native and Indigenous people and Global Majority people,* poor and working-class people, women, and people from the Global South.
- Connect with the earth on a daily basis. Notice the air, the water, the wind, the trees.
- Consider that there are alternatives to capitalism that would improve the lives of all people.
- Reclaim play, joy, and happiness.
- Care deeply. Love people. Love the earth. Caring is the antidote to indifference. When in doubt, choose to care.
- Consider opposing wars and standing with every human. There are no human enemies.
- If ever in doubt, choose to unite the human race and to sustain all life.

Healing from the Internalized Attitudes of Capitalism

As we fully understand the extent to which we have internalized capitalist messages, and how oppressive that mindset is, we will likely uncover deep hurts. As we heal from these hurts, as we heal from internalized capitalism, we will think more creatively and rationally about our economic system and the climate emergency and act more powerfully.

* The peoples of Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, and Latin America, and those descended from them, are over eighty percent of the global population. These people also occupy most of the global land mass.

Using the term “Global Majority (GM)” for these people acknowledges their majority status in the world and interrupts how the dominant (U.S. and European) culture assigns them a minority status.

Many Global Majority people living in dominant-culture countries have been assimilated into the dominant culture—by force, in order to survive, in seeking a better life for themselves and their families, or in pursuing the economic, political, or other inclusion of their communities. Calling these people “Global Majority” contradicts the assimilation.





The Work of *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism*

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment—if we make some very large changes in our economy, our energy systems, and our lives in the next five to ten years. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* believe the environmental crisis can be resolved only if we simultaneously address racism, genocide of Indigenous peoples, classism, sexism, and other oppressions. The impact of environmental destruction and climate change falls most heavily on the groups targeted by these oppressions, and on other vulnerable populations (including populations of people who are elderly, disabled, and very young). Making the changes needed will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people of every background fighting the effects of climate change, racism, and exploitation.

In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we believe that the barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include (1) longstanding divisions (usually caused by oppression, and especially racism and classism) between nations and between groups of people, (2) widespread feelings that it's too late and any actions will be ineffective, (3) denial of or failure to engage with the climate emergency, and (4) difficulties in effectively addressing the connections between the environmental crisis and the failures of our economic system. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* work to address these and other issues.

The role of oppression

The economic and political forms of our societies demand growth and profit with little regard for people, other life forms, or the earth. This results in exploitation and oppression. Oppressions (such as racism, classism, sexism, and the oppression of young people) target everyone, inflicting tremendous injustices, limiting access to resources, and damaging the lives of billions of people. Once targeted by oppression, we tend to act toward others in ways that repeat the hurts that we have experienced. Much of the mental and emotional harm we experience is the result of this passing on of hurt. Our experience is that though people are vulnerable

to acting in oppressive ways, oppressive behavior is not inherent, but arises only when a person has been hurt emotionally. Oppressive societies manipulate this vulnerability to establish and maintain economic exploitation.

The importance of healing personal harm

The mental and emotional harm done to us by oppression and other hurtful experiences interferes with our ability to think clearly and sets groups of people against each other. This makes it difficult for us to think about and respond effectively to the climate emergency.

Healing from the hurts that help to hold oppression in place and lead to other harmful behavior is neither quick nor easy work. Many of us resist this personal healing work. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the harm done to us by oppression. Some of us assume that we will never be free of this harm. In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we have learned that it is possible to free ourselves from these hurts and address barriers to effective organizing. We can heal from hurtful experiences if someone listens to us attentively and allows and encourages us to release the grief, fear, and other painful emotions. This happens by means of our natural healing processes—talking, crying, trembling, expressing anger, and laughing.

By releasing emotional pain in a supportive network, we can stay united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. This in turn strengthens us in building our movements to stop the effects of climate change and racism.



For more information, see:

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