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TITLE

Capitalism as if the World Matters by Jonathon Porritt
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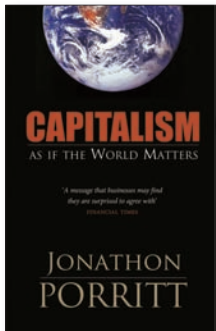
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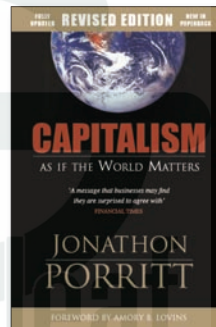
42

Capitalism as if the World Matters

Jonathon Porritt



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Key ideas

- ▶ It is impossible to deny the need for profound change in the face of today's ecological crises, which threaten the economy and the well-being of global society.
- ▶ The pace and scale of change to date has been inadequate and conventional environmentalism has failed to win over hearts and minds.
- ▶ Change has to be seen as desirable (i.e. about creating a better future) and will not come about by threatening people with ecological doom.
- ▶ We should embrace capitalism as the only overarching system capable of both reconciling ecological sustainability and reforming it.
- ▶ However, we need an evolved, intelligent and elegant form of capitalism that puts the Earth at its centre and ensures that all people are its beneficiaries.

Synopsis

Capitalism as if the World Matters starts with the sobering message that, despite growing interest in sustainability, things are still going from bad to worse. This is caused by population growth, a consumption-driven economy and our inability to accept that there are ecological limits. According to Porritt, this reflects the prevailing culture of denial within business and government – ‘not so much denial of the empirical and social data, but denial of the implications of that data’. He cites corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a typical ‘band aid’ approach, rather than a strategic commitment to becoming genuinely sustainable.

Porritt also acknowledges the failure of the environmental movement to move beyond a single-issue focus. Often it gets caught up in technical discussions and campaigns and fails to engage with all of us on the level of values and beliefs. Conventional environmentalism has so far failed to win over hearts and minds either within the electorate at large or within today’s political elites. So profound change is needed, but it will succeed only if we adopt a different approach from that of the past. And, since capitalism ‘is the only game in town’, this should be the focus of our efforts, rather than pursuing utopian dreams.

Porritt proposes two strategies for reforming capitalism: extending the concept of capital, and changing sustainability into a positive agenda. The first involves reinterpreting capital to mean more than financial and manufacturing capital. Hence, we must also take into account natural capital, which is any stock or flow of energy and material that produces goods and services, human capital, consisting of people’s health, knowledge, skills and motivation, and so-

cial capital, which concerns the institutions that help us maintain and develop human capital in partnership with others.

Regarding the second reform strategy, Porritt argues that we cannot scare people into change. Sustainability needs to be reframed as a positive agenda. It must be as much about new opportunities for responsible wealth creation as about outlawing irresponsible wealth creation; it must draw on a core of ideas and values that speaks directly to people’s desire for a higher quality of life, emphasising enlightened self-interest and personal well-being of a different kind.

A key part of this change is to begin focusing the sustainability discussion more on well-being. Hence, governments should be measuring and reporting ‘progress’ in terms of total well-being, rather than just growth that brings benefits but also unwanted social and environmental costs. The public should also be made aware that individuals who are focused on extrinsic goals (money, power, affluence) tend to have a lower quality of life than those driven by intrinsic goals (good relationships, personal growth, a meaningful job, being useful to others).

Porritt concludes that only this message – of economic opportunities and human well-being despite natural limits – is likely to provide any serious political alternative to today’s economic and political orthodoxy. And, unless it aligns with this kind of progressive political agenda, conventional environmentalism will continue to decline, as will our quality of life and the Earth’s life-support systems.

From the book

- We've wasted the best part of 20 years pursuing to the point of utter exhaustion a model of capitalism that can only succeed by liquidating the life-support systems that sustain us, and systematically widening the 'inequity gaps' upon which any kind of social cohesion depends in the long run.
- Servitude to detached and indifferent shareholders . . . has led to a pattern of self-serving, irresponsible and illegal [corporate] behaviour that would beggar belief if it was not such a logical consequence of everything that's been going on.
- The very fact that the majority of companies still opt for CSR as the self-contained box into which to pack all their 'good stuff', while they continue to pursue their core business without the remotest likelihood that they or their products/services will ever become genuinely sustainable, reveals all one really needs to know about the empty, seductive illusion that is CSR.
- The notion of 'capitalism as if the world mattered' demands a reform agenda, not a revolutionary one. But it requires a different level of engagement and a much greater readiness to confront denial, to challenge the slow, soul-destroying descent into displacement consumerism, and to take on today's dominant 'I consume, therefore I am' mindsets and lifestyles.
- We are so preoccupied with avoiding nightmares in the future that we have pretty much given up on offering our dreams of a better world today.
- If we don't learn to live sustainably within the natural systems and limits that provide the foundations for all life forms, then we will go the same way as every other life form that failed to adapt to those changing systems and limits. Deep down in our collective psyche, after hundreds of years of industrialisation that systematically suppressed a proper understanding of our continuing and total dependency upon the natural world, that atavistic reality is beginning to resurface.

About the author

Jonathon Porritt (born 1950) is an English writer, broadcaster and commentator on sustainable development.

Porritt was educated at Eton College and Magdalen College, Oxford. Despite training

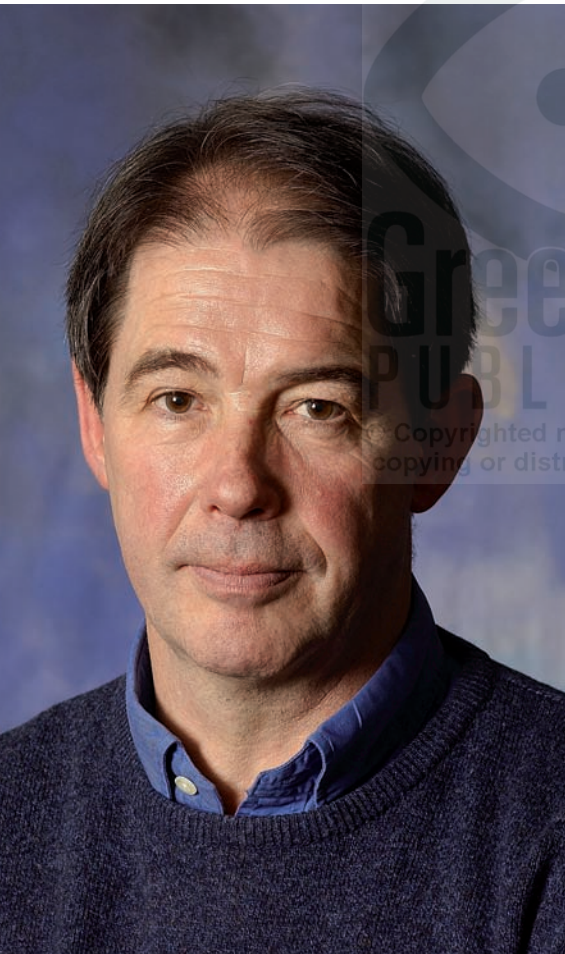
as a barrister, he decided to become an English teacher at St Clement Danes Grammar School (later Burlington Danes School) in Shepherd's Bush, west London, in 1974. He was chair of the UK Ecology Party (now the Green Party) from 1978 to 1984 and, in

1984, gave up teaching to become Director of Friends of the Earth in Britain, a post he held until 1990.

In 1996, Porritt co-founded Forum for the Future, one of the UK's leading sustainable development charities, where he currently serves as Founder Director. In 2000, he was appointed by the Prime Minister as Chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, a post he held until 2009. In addition, he has been a member of the Board of the South West Regional Development Agency since December 1999, and is

Co-director of The Prince of Wales's Business and Environment Programme.

In 2005 he became a non-executive director of Wessex Water, and a trustee of the Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy. He is also Vice-President of the Socialist Environment Resources Association (SERA). He was formerly Chairman of UNED-UK (1993–96), Chairman of Sustainability South West, the South West Round Table for Sustainable Development (1999–2001) and a Trustee of WWF UK (1991–2005).



In his own words (2008 interview)

Reflections on the book

The purpose of [my first book] *Seeing Green* was really to demonstrate that green politics was a distinct, radical, progressive way of looking at the challenges at the time . . . *Capitalism as if the World Matters* was a much more ambitious endeavour, which was to try and open up the investigation around the degree of compatibility between sustainable development and capitalism.

The book is a pragmatic acceptance that, looking at people all over the world today, rich and poor, they are not remotely close to a state of mind that would call for anything revolutionary. There's no vast upheaval of people across the world saying, 'This system is completely and utterly flawed and must be overturned and we must move towards a different system.'

This is not the time for revolution, so what do we do? The dominant system is capitalism. The choice, therefore, if you're not going to erect barricades and overthrow capitalism, is to firstly explore what sustainable capitalism would look like, and then commit wholeheartedly to a set of radical reform processes that would convert today's capitalism into a kind of capitalism that would deliver a sustainable world.

The role of business and policy

The new energy source is about coupling up with the business community's interest in sustainable wealth creation, and combining with politicians' emergent realisation that the progress model they have to offer isn't really cutting it for people today. We do not have hundreds of millions of happy bunnies all over the world. If those things can be brought together, then you could see how you could aggregate up to a tipping-point moment which would provide a new kind of momentum. Whether we can get there building gradually over a period of time, or whether we need some shocks in

the system to accelerate that, that is still a hard one to call.

Looking to the future

There are some breathtakingly inspiring people who have very powerful visions of a better world. However, we have not collectively articulated what this better world looks like: the areas in which it would offer such fantastic improvements in terms of people's quality of life, the opportunities they would have, the chance to live in totally different ways to the way we live now. We haven't done that. Collectively we've not made the alternative work emotionally and physically, in terms of economic excitement. We've just not done it. So my feeling is we're going to have to get a lot smarter at that, because otherwise all we'll have is this rather half-hearted set of incoherent thoughts about what living in a sustainable world would look like. They won't be substantive enough to persuade people that this is much better than the way we're living now. And that means we'll drift until disaster compels an emergency response, which won't be pretty.

OTHER BOOKS (SELECTION)

Seeing Green: The Politics of Ecology Explained
(Cambridge University Press, 1984)

The Coming of the Greens (with David Winner;
Fontana, 1988)

Save the Earth (Angus & Robertson, 1991)

Captain Eco and the Fate of the World
(illustrated by Ellis Nadler; Dorling Kindersley
Publishers, 1991)

Playing Safe: Science and the Environment
(Thames & Hudson, 2000)

MORE INFORMATION

Forum for the Future:
www.forumforthefuture.org.uk

Jonathon Porritt's blog:
www.jonathonporritt.com

*Prince of Wales's Business
and the Environment Programme:*
www.cpi.cam.ac.uk

UK Sustainable Development Commission:
www.sd-commission.org.uk