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### Neoliberal Sustainability? The Biopolitical Dynamics of “Green” Capitalism

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# Neoliberal Sustainability? The Biopolitical Dynamics of “Green” Capitalism

Karijn van den Berg

## Abstract

*This paper explores the various discursive strategies that are employed by governments and corporations to stimulate sustainability on an individual level. It critically examines the notion of “sustainable citizenship”: the idea that individuals should increase social justice and safeguard nature through individual and collective practices (Micheletti, 89). Big corporations, celebrities and activists certify consumer products as a way to take responsibility for (food) production and consumption in a sustainable way. Such activities increasingly reflect the ways in which individual citizens can, and are expected to, become caretakers of the planet in their daily lives. This is for instance reflected in current trends such as eating organic, local and Fair Trade, and in supermarket campaigns to be more sustainable. Such campaigns seem to urge individuals to become sustainable and responsible actors in contributing to the well being of our “Mother Earth”, but only in a manner that seems to be tightly interwoven with neoliberal capitalist agendas, as this paper will explore. To what extent is such an idea and promotion of sustainability actually sustainable and can it contribute to decreasing climate change? Or can and should it rather be dismissed as a neoliberal strategy to control consumers and their choices? And which subjects do actually get such citizen responsibilities? These and other questions will be explored in this paper through the notion of “biopolitics” as conceptualized by Michel Foucault, to look at governing practices, while additionally shifting focus to the actual subjects and actors that are affected by climate change and often left to die. Moreover, in order to move towards a less daunting approach to these pressing issues this paper will bring in feminist approaches, such as Isabelle Stengers’ “cosmopolitical proposal” as a possible entry point and lens onto the contemporary issues of climate change, environmental degradation and the idea of sustainability.*

**Keywords:** sustainability; climate change; neoliberalism; biopolitics; feminist theory

## Introduction

In the summer of 2015 I spend some time in New York. On the first night, upon arrival in my hotel, I noticed a green card lying on the hotel bed, which read: “Help us save Mother Earth”. At first, I was struck by the holistic rhetoric it used, of a female nature to be protected, as well as positively surprised by such a big hotel like this that seemed to consider the environment and urged their customers to be thrifty with clean towels and sheets. However, almost at the same moment I realized that “saving Mother Earth” was probably not the real aim of the hotel. Rather, they intended to save money by having to wash fewer sheets and thus use less staff. Still they convincingly represented that through a green and sustainable rhetoric, which despite saving them money, now also made them look responsible and carefully considerate of their environment, a practice that can be called “greenwashing”. Greenwashing cleverly connects environmentalism to capitalism through multiple strategies to market certain products and activities as sustainable, thereby masking a largely unsustainable discourse (as) green.

Besides as a form of greenwashing, this green card on the hotel bed can be seen as an example of “sustainable citizenship” the idea that individuals should help increase social justice and safeguard nature through individual and collective practices (Micheletti, 89). Big corporations, celebrities and activists certify consumer products as a way to take responsibility for (food) production and consumption in a sustainable way. Such activities increasingly reflect the ways in which individual citizens can, and are expected to, become caretakers of the planet in their daily lives. This is for instance reflected in current hip trends such as eating organic, local and Fair Trade, and in campaigns such as Albert Heijn<sup>1</sup>’s “Doe maar lekker duurzaam” (translated as “Just be nicely sustainable”), which is paradoxically sponsored by Unilever and the postcode lottery. Such campaigns seem to urge individuals to become sustainable and responsible actors in contributing to the well being of our “Mother Earth”, but only in a manner that seems to be tightly interwoven with neoliberal capitalist agendas, as this paper will explore. To what extent is such an idea and promotion of sustainability actually sustainable and can it contribute to decreasing climate change? Or can and should it rather be dismissed as a neoliberal strategy to control consumers and their choices? And which subjects do actually get such citizen responsibilities? These and other questions will be explored in this paper through the concept of “biopolitics” as conceptualized by Michel Foucault, while additionally shifting focus to the actual subjects that are disproportionately affected by climate change and often displaced and left to die. Moreover, in order to move towards a less daunting approach to these pressing issues, this paper will bring in alternative feminist approaches such as Isabelle Stengers’ cosmopolitical proposal as a possible entry point and lens onto the contemporary issues of climate change, environmental degradation and the idea of sustainability.

## 1 Neoliberalism and Biopolitics

In order to get an idea of neoliberalism and how it is linked to biopolitics, it is essential to turn to the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In his lectures on “The birth of biopolitics” from 1979 it becomes clear how intimately intertwined the two are: rather than explicitly referring to biopolitics, Foucault mostly focuses on the behaviour of “neoliberals” and goes into the shift from (late) liberalism to neoliberalism. As he argues, theories and practices that we name “neoliberal” mainly emerge out of the intensifying theories and practices of classical liberalism. Nevertheless there are some key differences between these two paradigms that become clear in the shift from one to the other, as gender theorist Shannon Winnubst explores in her book *Way Too Cool: Selling Out Race and Ethics* (2015):

the sites and mechanisms of truth (from the contract to the market; from the protection of ownership to the expansion of maximizing interests); dominant social values (from utility to human capital); concepts of freedom (from Rights of Man to

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Heijn is one of the biggest (as well as probably the most expensive) super market chains in the Netherlands.

subjects of interests); concepts of subjectivity (from ‘citizen’ to ‘entrepreneur’); and modes of rationality (from juridical to calculative). (Winnubst, 21).

Hence, where in liberalism governmental action still functioned in terms of rights, now, in the neoliberal regime, this governmental action has shifted more and more towards strictly economic and market terms. In this context the central figure of neoliberalism is now the *homo oeconomicus* who is “an entrepreneur of himself”: a producer of his own satisfaction (Foucault, 226). As a result, notions of subjectivity shift, where being a subject is recognized only in terms of being a “good” citizen and the punishment of those who are not considered good citizens: all forms of life that are not “organized on the basis of market values” then become “characterized as a potential security risk” (Povinelli, 22). The subject itself thereby only is visible and recognized from an economic angle, as Foucault wrote: “the kind of network of intelligibility of his behavior as economic behavior. ...[T]he individual becomes governmentalizable, that power gets a hold on him to the extent, and only to the extent, that he is a *homo oeconomicus*” (Foucault, 252). This shows that even the non-economic behaviour of subjects is analyzed through economic comprehensibility and the action of public authorities in market terms.

However, in trying to *define* neoliberalism, a barrier occurs, as neoliberalism has become such a buzzword that it now has become something of a blur. Neoliberalism has become only “more and more difficult to pin down, especially if we assume fixity as a necessary condition for precision – an anachronistic assumption, at best, in the world of hyper technological speed” (Winnubst, 8), as such it has become a “floating signifier”. But what is inevitably clear, whether we name it neoliberalism or something else, what is taking place right now can be seen as a “new form of governmentality, namely a new way in which power over and through life and death is being organized and expressed” (Povinelli, 22). Such a governing of life and death, that increasingly influences subjects on an individual level in the private sphere, is what constitutes biopolitics; it involves the expansion of economic analysis into formerly unexplored areas (such as life and death), as well as the possibility of strictly economic analyses of such areas that were formerly considered as non-economic (Foucault, 219).

Hence, in this new form of governmentality this focus on economic aspects has resulted increasingly in the privatization of funds, goods and resources that previously were public and equally accessible to all, something that can be considered a global challenge for human rights. Especially “nature” seems to literally have become commodified, as it is now privatized, exploited and mainly owned by individual states and corporations.

### *Commodification and Biopolitics*

Such processes of commodification and privatization are often accompanied by an increasing power division: what before was accessible to all is now only available to a happy few. Subjects now have to pay (or have to pay more) for what before was easily accessible. By turning resources into commodities, the responsibility and cost of maintaining and sustaining these resources is now shifted towards individual consumers who can decide on the price of their personal investment and involvement, thereby increasing individualism and the idea of “personal responsibility”. The self has become an enterprise, a process of neoliberalism and biopolitics that Shannon Winnubst traces through the history of “coolness”. As she writes, “[w]hile we may think of ‘cool’ as hip and ironic, various advertising machines and markets have been packaging and selling it to us for some time” (Winnubst, 2). However, the origin of “coolness” comes from the black aesthetics of jazz and blues after the World War II in the U.S. Not only does it carry the connotation of ironic detachment, it can also be seen as a skill for protection and resistance. As such, it is much bigger than an aesthetic or pose of youth culture; it was a form of resistance, both to “white supremacy and the exploitation of globalized capital” (Winnubst, 2). Notwithstanding we risk becoming “way too cool” as Winnubst argues. Coolness has been appropriated and co-opted by neoliberal markets, “commodifying black resistance”, turning it into an emptied, generic posture of nonconformity: “first into white masculinist postures of detachment and irony (James Dean, Marlon Brando) and then, through the advertising machines of the 1970s, into contemporary white, consumer-class aesthetics of hipster rebellion, it becomes

commodified” (Winnubst, 3). This emptying out of coolness has as a result that all connotations of resistance are lost; all historical, political and ethical connotations of being “cool” have been erased: “The commodification of cool thereby becomes not merely a generic operation of capitalism, but a performance of the very evacuation of history” (Winnubst, 4). This results in a formalizing of social differences, which Winnubst terms “the fungibility of difference” (Winnubst, 3) through which terms such as “diversity” and “multiculturalism” thus lose the positive meaning they suggest to have.

This process of the commodification of coolness, can, as I argue, to a certain extent be applied to the rhetoric surrounding “sustainability” as well. Like the terms “multiculturalism” and “diversity”, the term “sustainability” now seems to have become an empty buzzword, often strategically employed within neoliberal discourses by governments and corporations. In order to explain why I see a similar process concerning sustainability as a discourse of “green” capitalism, I bring in “social cathexis”, a term Winnubst uses to refer to social dynamics that influence how we relate to the world (Winnubst, 5). Thinking in terms of social cathexis helps us understand why certain behavioural patterns are popular, which is especially relevant in the context where sustainability and living a sustainable life seem to have become cool and give individuals the idea of being connected to the world they live in, as well as having a say in making it a better place to live in. It can help to explore why and how “we”, as individuals as well as on a collective level, relate and feel connected to certain things and bodies and not to others; “It’s what makes us tick. Freud called it libidinal preoccupation. Neoliberals call it personal investment” (Winnubst, 5). Hence, a new form of neoliberal “social” rationality is established in which only certain kinds of “social investments”, norms, values, ideas and ways of living are seen as worth pursuing in society and orient us towards these particular social preferences “without our consent or knowledge” (Winnubst, 5). This is often part of larger biopolitical dynamics, where subjects feel like they have the possibility of making their own choices concerning life, while these choices are in fact oriented in a certain direction, thus creating only the illusion of choice.

Such an orientation towards particular choices is particularly reflected in the idea of sustainable citizenship, as I argue in this paper. In their article “Sustainable citizenship and the new politics of consumption” (2012) Micheletti and Stolle refer to sustainable citizenship in terms of practices of consumption in everyday life that reflect and enforce effects on the well being of others and animals. While initially sounding sympathetic – for who would not want to contribute to the well being of the world? – it creates new expectations and responsibilities for individuals and institutions to take on. Such a sustainable citizen is expected to make the world a better place to live in, based on the idea of a general human well-being that gets transferred to its daily practices, that should contribute to global sustainable development (Micheletti, 90). As Milstein and Dickinson argue in such discourses “a gynocentric communal and embodied human orientation to ‘mother nature’ is favourably fore fronted, yet an androcentric individuating and frontal orientation to a consumable nature is overwhelmingly practiced”. (Milstein and Dickinson, 511) As consumers can gauge for themselves what their level of involvement is, in some cases this is pure self-interest and related to health rather than environmental motives. Hence, while advocating it as a form of selfless caring for your surroundings and environment, self-interest actually plays a big role in this kind of citizenship: it “formulates a new politics of consumption by demanding that production and consumption be evaluated as part of the responsibility of citizenship” (Micheletti, 111). As such, sustainable citizenship seems to be much in line with the way neoliberal hegemonic discourses seem to encourage and manage specific kinds of subjects.

But at the same time, Winnubst rightly points out that neoliberalism is more than the manipulation of our ideas and choices, and that we should be careful not to reduce it: “That is, if we frame neoliberalism exclusively as a matter of ideological manipulation, we may inadvertently naturalize the very phenomena (say, the free market or the savvy consumer) we are hoping to call into question” (Winnubst, 10). Hence, we should not overlook the “noneconomic language and social values of neoliberalism”, such as its focus on individual interests and the maximization of choices that now unconsciously circulate as “the lingua franca of mainstream culture in the United States” (Winnubst, 11). A similar argument can be made for the Dutch context where our current state is no longer referred to as simply a “welfare” state, but additionally coined a “participation” society, indicating an

increase of community feeling and involvement, while in fact cutting funds on health care, moving care into the informal sphere and encouraging citizens to care for their family members and friends. The idea behind such strengthening of family and friends bonds and to care for one another seems nice at first, but it bears all too familiar similarities with the mentioned hotel in New York: what seems a nice idea is in fact more likely to be a strategy to save money. Thus, while the Netherlands might be seen as a welfare state from the outside, this becomes more and more based on membership in this society in the form of conforming behaviour: “society appears as the producer of conforming behavior with which it is satisfied in return for a certain investment” (Foucault, 256).

## 2 Sustainable Citizenship as Biopolitics

This ‘certain investment’ and increasing responsibility can be seen as a form of biopolitics as the responsibility for the flourishing of the planet and the lives of others and animals is now placed in the hands of individual consumers. It can even be seen as a particular “biopolitics of cool” in which the flexibility to become this neoliberal cool “allows the expansion of social life and the incitement to make one set of people live (in very particular and normal ways), while the failure to become the neoliberal cool, despite having birthed cool, becomes a mode of social abandonment and lets another set of people die” (Winnubst, 24). As in the history of coolness described by Winnubst, the illusion of resistance is back in the rhetoric of sustainability as being the new cool. As part of and beyond this new form of “hipster rebellion”, sustainability is now to be found in supermarkets (promoting organic products, and “super foods”), hip coffee places (where Chai lattes and soy milk cappuccinos are extremely popular) in the promotion of recycling and the popular idea that now every individual can change the world by making the “right choices”. Even vegetarianism has changed from merely the political motive to boycott the production and consumption of meat, to what now seems to have turned into a marketable thing (a whole new niche of veggie burgers and meat replacers is now sold and marketed at supermarkets, while no one actually knows what ingredients they contain), while many issues remain on the ground in terms of sustainability. As Slavoj Žižek argues in his book *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009) consumption has increasingly become a means to sustain the quality of life, in the form of ‘quality time’: “the time of authentic fulfilment of my true Self, of the sensuous play of experience, and of caring for others, through becoming in charity or ecology, etc” (Žižek, 53). As an example Žižek refers to the coffee chain Starbucks and its advertisements as being an example of “cultural capitalism”, where it’s not merely about what you are buying, but rather “what you’re buying into” (Žižek, 53). For instance, at Starbucks, consumers buy into a cultural surplus under the guise of its “coffee ethic”; including Fair Trade beans, social responsibility and a place to participate in communal life. As Žižek argues, this is precisely how capitalism integrates the idea of “authentic experience”:

Who really believes that half-rotten and overpriced ‘organic’ apples are really healthier than the non-organic varieties? The point is that, in buying them, we are not merely buying and consuming, we are simultaneously doing something meaningful, showing our capacity for care and our global awareness, participating in a collective project. (Žižek, 54).

The question thus becomes whether such choices actually make a difference and for whom. Does it matter whether this is a neoliberal strategy that reduces subjects to consumers, or the result, that more and more people become vegetarian or vegan and thus try or aim to “contribute” to a greener and more sustainable way of living? Who has or gets such citizen responsibilities and what does it take to be a good citizen? Who does the privilege to become a sustainable citizen belong to? What forms does or can sustainable citizenship take? Who actually uses these concepts? And how are these concepts evoked by different actors? Taking such questions into account it is significant to critically explore what forms sustainable citizenship can take as an ethical, real life experience and who actually makes use of these concepts to change their lifestyle choices.

I argue that the rhetoric of sustainability on a citizenship and individual consumer level is a harmful one, as it creates a division between those that make the “right”, sustainable choices, and those who do not. Using such moral terminology increases a division between “right and wrong” and gives power to

those who make such a distinction and is harmful towards those that are unable to make those “right” choices, which is problematic as “we cannot rely upon invoking guilt or shame as a mode of ethical response” (Winnubst, 19).

Hence, while such political consumerism might aim at political effects, it is not in its dynamics. Choices are created, but individuals seem to be reduced to consumers, herded into particular choices by the government, supermarkets, and other institutions and corporations, through which political consumerism remains very much in line with capitalism rather than contesting it. Governments shift responsibilities to an individual level, to individuals that can make choices that are sustainable. But sustainability has become an empty buzzword without significant meaning, employed by big corporations that seem to focus on economic sustainability only. Moreover political consumerist ideas like sustainable citizenship prioritize personal life style choices over real political action. As such it accepts capitalism’s reduction of subjects to consumers and reduces political action to either consuming or not consuming. This is not to say that consumer choices such as recycling, reducing waste, supporting local markets rather than big chains, or not eating meat do not have any effect. Although such choices can make a difference and to a certain extent can also challenge existing food systems and be considered a form of activism, they should not be mistaken for revolutionary change-making choices. Personal change is not the same as social change, and reinforces the anthropocentric idea that humans can ‘fix’ it again. It thus falsely assigns blame to the individual, particularly to individuals that are already powerless. Therefore probably most problematic are the different ways in which sustainable citizenship is predicated on privilege and takes citizenship for granted, thereby erasing its socio-political implications.

### *Citizenship and Privilege*

Who is included in this idea of sustainable citizenship and who is left out? More specifically, who are recognized as citizen subjects and who are rendered invisible? What does possessing sustainable citizenship entail? In order to explore such questions it might be helpful to go back to the notion of citizenship itself, which can be seen as the protection of entitlements and rights as part of being a member of a particular nation-state. But, as Aihwa Ong argues in her article “(Re)Articulations of Citizenship” (2005), this no longer works as such in practice in current regimes of power: “entitlements and benefits are realized through specific mobilizations and claims in milieus of globalized contingency” (Ong, 697). With the increasing occurrence of new areas of political mobilization, often separate from the state, the definition of citizenship is rearticulated and disarticulated from the state. Through this process certain “rights and entitlements once associated with all citizens are becoming linked to neoliberal criteria”, hence rights and entitlements normally implicated by citizenship now become disentangled through neoliberal criteria (Ong, 697). Subjects are being governed more and more through an idea of freedom and of choice, rather than through clearly identifiable mechanisms of oppression, as is also reflected in Foucault’s and Winnubst’s conceptualizations of neoliberalism and biopolitics. Moreover, this rhetoric of freedom and choice is exactly what is also reflected in sustainable citizenship. If sustainable citizenship is about enriching our lives by making the right choices to help others, whose enrichment and human “flourishing” are we actually talking about? To what extent is ‘human flourishing’ even an accountable and justifiable focus? What about environmental flourishing? And how about the non-human actors that get affected by climate change?

As such, the idea of sustainable citizenship is largely predicated on privilege, as only certain subjects can be included in the notion and only certain subjects benefit from it. This is well explained by Janani Balasubramanian, part of the trans of colour spoken word duo *DarkMatter*, in their opinion piece “Sustainable Food and Privilege; Why Green is Always White (and Male and Upper-Class)” which calls out the whiteness and inherent privilege of a lot of “green” movements. As Balasubramanian points out the food reform movement today “is predicated on rather shaky foundations with regard to how it deals with race and other issues of identity, with its focus on a largely white and privileged American dream” (Balasubramanian 2015a, 399). This is not to indicate that such activists are not concerned with issues of identity at all, but rather to point out how their discourse tends to “disallow discussions on race, history and food in a number of ways” (399). This is problematic as food justice is

mostly an issue of class and race, aspects that are often not taken into account. Moreover, the current state of consumption is often situated within a patriarchal paradigm, and the emphasis on “supporting your locals”, although attractive, can have certain “anti-global and overly nationalist undertones” (400). Instead, if we really try to produce and consume sustainable food we have to let go of the image of the white, male and conservative farmer and acknowledge that the face of farming is not fixed and instead increasingly done by and dependent upon women and people of colour. Hence, we need to accountably consider the actual impact our consumerist choices could have, and stop mindlessly buying (as well as buying into) products that are labelled as local, Fair Trade or organic and should not be too quick to reject globalization all together.

### **3 Identifying the Issue at Stake**

In order to come to more real sustainable approaches, the focus needs to be shifted away from the “sustainable” rhetoric of finding “solutions” and responsibilities for individuals to perform and take on, and draw attention to the actual issue at stake. Rather than presenting solutions we need to take time to concentrate on and expose ourselves to the issues that are at stake. Where is the ‘problem’ coming from?

Most of the current processes of climate change and environmental degradation are caused by CO2 emissions by big companies, governments and corporations resulting in environmental degradation and climate change. These emissions and ways of polluting do not only affect the environment and many of its species, but also have an effect on the lived realities of a lot of people, often on subjects located outside of “the West”. Therefore, the global emphasis of “*global warming*” is problematic and needs to be challenged as “many assessments of ‘global’ environmental problems rely too much on projections of biophysical changes across the globe, rather than through understanding the ways in which these changes may be experienced, or present problems for different people”, as political ecologist Tim Forsyth has argued (Forsyth 2003, 200). Instead, environmental vulnerability should be reconsidered along different intersections of power, by bringing in an actor-centred approach that concentrates on the subjects involved whilst avoiding to replicate a focus on “local” or “authentic indigenous” knowledge from the assuming and exoticizing view of the researcher. This exemplifies the significance of focusing on this “structured production of gendered and racialized poverty, along with horrific human rights violations, by the widespread embrace of neoliberalism’s economic mantras of deregulation and privatization” (Winnubst, 14). Closely linked to such mantras, as Elizabeth Povinelli has pointed out, is the displacement of peasant populations that has been occurring throughout the last three decades, in countries where many of the common resources such as water have been privatized and “brought within the logic of accumulation”: displacing peasant populations resulting in a landless population: accumulation accompanied by dispossession (Povinelli, 18).

Such patterns of displacement and dispossession that occur as the (in)direct results of climate change and environmental degradation have made me wonder whether they could be considered “necropolitics”, a notion that was conceptualized by Achille Mbembe (2003) in relation and response to Foucault’s biopolitics, in order to argue that current power regimes increasingly use techniques of rendering dead and making die. According to Mbembe, Foucault’s notion of biopolitics – which entails “dividing people into those who must live and those who must die” (Mbembe, 17) – is insufficient to analyse contemporary exercises of power and politics in times of terror and war. As Western societies have largely build themselves around (neoliberal) criteria of modernity, reason, individual autonomy and freedom, politics has become the exercise of reason within the public sphere and sovereignty, having power and independence, now is exercised through such societies’ self-creation (Mbembe, 13). Even the “historical self-creation of humankind”, such as the commodification and selling of coolness that I described earlier in this paper, is, according to Mbembe in itself a life and death conflict: “that is, a conflict over what paths should lead to the truth of history: the overcoming of capitalism and the commodity form and the contradictions associated with both” (Mbembe, 20). These times are particularly “necropolitical”, as Haritaworn et al. argue in following Mbembe’s line of thinking, as they see the peculiar “symbiotic co-presence of life and death, manifested ever more clearly in the cleavages between rich and poor, citizens and non-citizens (and

those who can be stripped of citizenship); the culturally, morally, economically valuable and the pathological” (Haritaworn et al., 2). In this context different processes of “letting die, abandonment and differential belonging” are directly linked with neoliberal forms of governance that establish certain subjects as “morally deserving, while simultaneously justifying punitive measures on those deemed undeserving as necessary, just and rational” (Haritaworn et al., 7-8). Such a framework of the necropolitical is thus particularly relevant to analyze the contemporary times of crisis where we see the occurrence of “livability alongside killability, rescue alongside disposability, protection alongside abandonment and celebration alongside violent erasure” (Haritaworn et. al., 5), in order to bring everyday death worlds into view.

As Janani Balasubramanian argues in “Why Climate Change is a Human Rights Violation” the rise of sea levels can actually be seen as a “man-made weapon”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, along similar lines as Mbembe’s necropolitics of letting die, they describe climate change and environmental degradation as a violation of human rights. As Balasubramanian argues, rising oceans might seem like a natural phenomenon, but are in fact generated through the domination of common resources such as water and air by specific world powers: profit-making, Western controlled governments and corporations. Hence climate change is not just about “the temperature heating up a few degrees or the polar bears finding new homes – though if you go by media coverage, polar bears are a bigger story than the mass death and displacement of people – largely poor, mostly brown – across the world” (Balasubramanian 2015b). Climate change, according to Balasubramanian, can in fact be considered a force of “death, impoverishment, and displacement”. This is enforced by the fact that the subjects who get affected and experience the consequences of these climate dismantling decisions are the ones who did not have a say when those decisions were made and neither share in the profits that come from them. In this way, corporations and governments can continue to excessively use fossil fuels and carbon emissions and exploit resources in other parts of the world, where it disproportionately affects poor people that live in areas with the least production, who additionally work in largely vulnerable industries such as fishing and agriculture, making the poorest regions the most vulnerable ones. Therefore neglecting these issues on a governmental and corporate level is a form of violence towards the people that are affected by climate change. An example that Balasubramanian goes into is the refusal of a climate refugee appeal case that happened in New Zealand. The appeal was requested by a man living on the South Pacific island of Kiribati, which will be underwater at the end of the century according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Balasubramanian 2015b). His appeal was refused by the government, simply because they argued that many people were in the same situation and that if they accepted his claim, many more people facing economic deprivation or the consequences of war would be entitled to protection under the Refugee Convention, thus failing to acknowledge that what is facing the inhabitants of this island is the direct effect of environmental harm that New Zealand itself, together with other world nations, has brought about (Balasubramanian 2015b).

Instead, as Balasubramanian maintains, victims of climate change should be protected by migrant and refugee claims: “understanding the rise in sea levels as solely an environmental phenomenon prompts us to try to save polar bears and ocean water. Understanding sea level rise as a weapon makes us wonder ‘who’s pulling the trigger?’ and ‘who designed the gun?’” (Balasubramanian 2015b). Hence, the knowing failure on behalf of governments and corporations to stop and prevent climate change is an act of violence; reinforced by the use of acts of violence to silence those who are most vulnerable, thereby further decrease the lives of present actors as well as future generations. Seeing climate change as violence can thus help explain why stories like the island of Kiribati or the displacement and homelessness of 200.000 people in Malawi (as a result of one of the biggest floods in 50 years) remain silent, while international bodies postpone the limitation of their emissions or the actual offering of homes and resources to such displaced communities. Additionally, treating environmental degradation as violence and force of death can change our approach to governments and nations in holding them

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<sup>2</sup> Balasubramanian, Janani. “Why Climate Change is a Human Rights Violation”. *Fusion Media Network*, LLC. 27 February 2015. Web. 23 September 2015. <<http://fusion.net/story/53741/why-climate-change-is-a-human-rights-violation/>>.

responsible. As “citizens of the world” (rather than citizens of a specific nation with specific entitlements) we need to press charges for human rights violations, beyond merely environmental degradation, in order to open the conversation to include the people that are left to die, are dispossessed, displaced or homeless, in order to find ways to make the actual emitters pay.

And indeed, as Mbembe elaborates, such an “extraction and looting of natural resources by war machines goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people”, or even conflictually, to let them loose and forcefully divide them over large areas that are no longer included by territorial boundaries (Mbembe, 34). As a political category, such populations hence become disposable: “disaggregated into rebels, child soldiers, victims or refugees, or civilians incapacitated by mutilation or simply massacred on the model of ancient sacrifices, while the ‘survivors’, after a horrific exodus, are confined in camps and zones of exception” (Mbembe, 34). From such a point of view, dealing with issues of climate change and environmental degradation needs to encompass a biopolitical consumer level of Fair Trade coffee, recycling and eating organic, which can only ever entail an anthropocentric view of “saving the planet” for a very specific, elite “us”. Climate change should instead be considered a form of violence: against places, species and humans. Therefore resistance against such abomination needs to start by resisting and dismantling the very language that hides this cruel treatment. This can be achieved by including the integration of political analysis with the understandings of ecological reality, in order to show that the concepts that we use to talk about climate change are themselves political terms and should not be seen as natural (Forsyth 2003). Additionally, the focus should be shifted to the actual damage that is being done which should be seen as the real consequence of unaccountable and irresponsible pollution by corporations and governments that not only affect our “Mother Earth”, but also many of its peoples, and push aside the representative and social justice dimensions at the heart of environmentalism. In such times of crisis, the question remains how to go about this and where to go from here?

#### **4 Where to Go from Here?**

As Povinelli rightly asks in the context of our world’s “scenes of abandonment”: “where are we left?” and “What should an ethically informed politics be?” (Povinelli, 129) I would like to move towards the conclusion of this paper by offering some possible approaches to such a politics and intervention in the current geopolitical situation.

An example can be found in Isabelle Stengers “Cosmopolitical Proposal” that aims to arouse a “slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us” (Stengers 2005, 994). This proposal aims to “slow down the construction of this common world, to create a space for hesitation regarding what it means to say ‘good’” (Stengers 2005, 995). Creating this different awareness thus entails a process of overthrowing any binary between good/bad, right/wrong that allows for more space in between: for the questioning of how these concepts are constructed and by whom. In order to configure this, Stengers makes use of the figure of “the idiot”, someone who slows others down and shows that there is no common world to be proposed. The idiotic figure is thus incapable of giving a “good” definition of what a “good” common world should look like: “the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don’t consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know” (Stengers 2005, 995). If we try to inhabit the figure of the idiot while looking at the geopolitical issues at stake, we start to realize that there might be no clear solution, no right or wrong consumerist decision politics, and the idea of a “sustainable”, good and responsible citizen can be thrown away altogether. Rather we can admit that the whole system is currently out of balance and be exposed to the situation that we, as well as our environment, find ourselves in. The slowing down of things, as Stengers suggests, might be the only thing to do: to allow ourselves to open up the question of politics again. Such a process of slowing down can for instance be found making room for matters of (self) care – whilst being aware that such an idea of care is also appropriated very easily by neoliberal market discourses – that can be vital when self-care is the only form of care one gets in a system where such care is unevenly distributed. However, we should not neglect who actually has the time to slow down, as this is predicated on privilege as well. Slowing down is precarious for precisely those groups of people that are not involved in the decision making, that do not get a say in how the game is

played, although Stengers herself asserts that “the concept of practice I introduce generically demands that nobody is able to set the rule, to appropriate the norm, and to a priori silence hesitation” (Stengers 2010, 16). Still, there is the need to critically reflect upon this idea of slowing down in times where there is a heightened urgency to direct attention to the actual populations that are left to die because of climate change.

Taking this into account, the process of slowing down and the embodiment of this accountable idiot can help in moving beyond the anthropocentric stance in considering sustainable futures, as current neoliberal sustainability discourses continue to hold frontal and individualist stances by referring to a vulnerable and feminine nature to be protected, through masculinist science models and aggressive consumerism. Especially since dominant sustainability discourses maintain a nature/culture binary that distinguishes human from the non-human world and puts them on the pedestal of saviour, a binary framework that only reinforces the idea of nature as an Other, leading to its degradation. It leaves “the paradoxical framing of “mother nature” intact by fore-fronting a nurturing and respect-demanding “mother Earth” figurehead and obscuring the ruling practice of exploiting earth as product.” (Milstein and Dickinson, 526) This results in the widespread appearance of sustainability, while “anthropocentric power-over orientations” in fact dominate (512).

Making such a distinction between a “nature” to be explored, preserved or even ‘fixed’ by a “culture”, is never innocent, in the same way as unquestioningly distinguishing between humans and non-humans never is. Instead, we should develop a different approach to both humanness and the environment, one in which what is “human” is undecided, and the so-called “nonhumans” must be dealt with as existents too (Stengers 2010, 3). Hence, Stengers cosmopolitical proposal can help to re-orient sustainability discourses, both in deconstructing anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism, as well as by fighting systemic discrimination and dehumanization of populations that never solely human.

This critique on human exceptionalism is also reflected in the environmentalist feminist politics of Stacy Alaimo, who argues for “insurgent vulnerability” as ethical political approach that involves a “recognition of our material interconnection with the wider environment” and counters the “hegemonic masculinity of aggressive consumption” and impenetrability of big science (Alaimo, 26; 33). She uses the concept of trans-corporeality which blurs the boundaries of the human as such and reconsiders the aims of environmental preservation and protection, not merely as referring to resources for human use but considering different human and non-human actors as valuable in and of themselves.

From such a point of departure and by taking nonhumans into account it becomes possible to design politics in such a way that “collective thinking has to proceed ‘in the presence of’ those who would otherwise be likely to be disqualified as having idiotically nothing to propose, hindering the emergent ‘common account’” (Stengers 2005, 1002). Following this idea of politics thus reconfigures the principle of equality from all having the same say in the same matter, to the requirement that all “have to be present in the mode that makes the decision as difficult as possible, that precludes any shortcut or simplification, any differentiation a priori between that which counts and that which does not” (Stengers 2005, 1002). Such a multiplying of voices and perspectives is also proposed by Balasubramanian, who sees the reaching of such different voices as a powerful and essential goal, as it will enlarge the group of possible activists and allies: “feminists, anti-racists, interfaith leaders, and so on – [all] interested and involved because food justice speaks to the needs of their communities and their call for action (activists: this is on you too – get on board!)” (Balasubramanian 2015a, 400). If we manage to create such a multiplying of lenses, we can start to demand that the main players in the food world diversify and expand their representations. This can be done by shifting responsibilities away from an individual (consumer) level towards those who are actually doing the damage, and to create such awareness by politically and collectively organizing, pamphleting, boycotting, protesting and lobbying. Hence, there are not necessarily answers to be proposed, in terms of where to go from here, but there certainly are many possibilities.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the discourse that has been explored throughout this paper of green capitalism and sustainable citizenship form a harmful discourse, a new biopolitical strategy, that both sustains the neoliberal principles and agenda, as well as gives subjects the illusion of sustainable choice-making on a consumer level, only available to certain specific subjects. Through these “cool” choice-making practices neoliberalism gets green credits, for promoting a form of sustainability that in fact has a hidden agenda. And although appearing sympathetic it does not change the root causes of environmental degradation such as exploitation, profiting, injustice and overconsumption. It creates the illusion of sustainability, while the only thing it seems to sustain is a neoliberal economic situation, as it shifts responsibilities for climate change and environmental degradation to an individual level. On this level the individual is reduced to a consumer, through the promotion of trendy “green” lifestyles without any real effects, while actual people die and are scattered over a warming planet. Sustainable citizenship thus seems to sustain neoliberal principles by giving subjects, and only those who obtained this “citizenship”, the illusion of and responsibility for sustainable choice making on a consumer level. This is hugely problematic as the focus on “green” lifestyle choices is largely predicated on privilege and incorrectly assigns blame to individuals, who become redefined and recognized as consumers only.

Hence, the terminology of sustainability cannot be embraced mindlessly and has to be engaged with in critical ways. We need to accountably consider the actual impact our consumerist choices could have, and stop mindlessly buying (as well as buying into) products that are labelled as local, Fair Trade or organic. We have to stop believing that this neoliberal “green” capitalism, can save “us” and “our” planet from a crisis situation that was brought about by capitalism itself.

Rather than sustaining the current political and neoliberal economic situation through this terminology, the discussion should be shifted to actual environmental thinking that prioritizes the actual actors and agents that get affected by environmental harm. As there is no longer a clear idea of how the planet is going to react, it is therefore much more important to make alliances between different actors on the planet. Moreover, if we move away from the individualist line of thinking that seems to dominate in neoliberal globalization and make more room for communitarian thinking then we can see more and more that individuals do not exist on their own, but rather in conversation and through interconnection with others. Instead we can shift to an interconnectedness between all beings, amongst nations, people, nature and the planet and thus find solidarity between and with those different actors.

Therefore, different forms of socio- and geopolitical thinking need to be developed that take the environment, its (human and nonhuman) actors and the distribution of power involved in both, into account. This can be achieved through collective action by taking multiple voices into account in decision-making processes, in order to horizontally and collectively organize actions that are based in solidarity and care, in order to shift focus to the root of the problem and to try to transform it. In doing so, moving with feminist theories, like Stengers cosmopolitical proposal, can help to let go of any suggestions by others on how to live our lives in the “right” sustainable way, in order to achieve intersectional climate justice and find transformative answers collectively.

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## **About the Author(s)**

**Karijn van den Berg** is a Dutch Master's student in Gender and Ethnicity, based in the Netherlands. She is a feminist scholar focussing on the intertwinement of feminism and environmentalism, which she brings together in her thesis on eco-feminist and new materialist approaches to the environment. Additionally she uses an actor-centred approach that focuses on the subjects that get affected by climate change versus those that cause it, in order to concentrate on the power dynamics at play. Her research is informed by feminist and postcolonial theory and entangles theoretical, practical and political realms.