

Sustainable Justice

You may have heard this piece of wisdom in Econ 101. "There is no such thing as a free lunch." Someone is footing the bill.

The mass material affluence that characterizes much of American society is a testament to the power of our economic and political system. The cities we inhabit, the cars we drive, the gadgets we use, the ways we communicate, the food we eat, and the energy we consume are all products of its success.

But remember, "There is no such thing as a free lunch." Someone is footing the bill.

Allow me to modify that statement. There is no such thing as a dollar menu. Transactions inflict costs on the real world that are not reflected in a market pricing system.

A friend of mine is particularly fond of McDonald's Dollar menu, and makes a habit of ordering \$1 cheeseburgers. The \$1 he spends covers the costs McDonald's has incurred - buying the ingredients, shipping, operational, and labor costs - and of course a slice of profit. However, those are only a fraction of his cheeseburger's true cost. Enter the world of externalities.

The Economist defines an externality as "An economic side-effect. Externalities are costs or benefits arising from an economic activity that affects somebody other than the people engaged in the economic activity and are not reflected fully in prices." (1) My friend's dollar spent does not include the side-effects of cheeseburger consumption, such as longterm costs of carbon emitted by transport and methane toots of former cows. Entirely unconsidered is the irreversible loss of biodiversity from the conversion of rain forest to industrial soy-bean monocrops to feed the hamburgers-in-waiting of American factory farms (2). Humans and nonhumans alike bear the cost of our externalities.

To call carbon emissions and rain forest destruction external, however, is simply misleading. It implies that they are at most tangentially related. However, had industrial monocrops never replaced native biodiversity, cows could not be fed on a scale to bring the price of their flesh to less than \$1 per patty. If there were no fossil-fuel-powered transportation network, it would be uneconomic for hamburger-patties traverse continents. The \$1 cheeseburger's existence is predicated on the burning of fossil fuels and the destruction of biodiversity.

A \$1 cheeseburger from McDonald's is easy to scape-goat. In bringing attention to it my aim is not to single out McDonald's \$1 cheeseburger, but to use it as a window through which the much larger shortcomings of our economics can be seen. All material goods are intertwined in a labyrinthine web of externalities. Externalities are the bedrock on which our system of production and consumption stand.

Adbusters is an anti-corporate magazine that aims to break the insanity of contemporary consumer culture (3). Recognizing the dangerous disconnect between the market price of a

good and the true costs it inflicts in reality, they advocate for the implementation of true cost economics (4). True cost economics claims that it is possible to eliminate this gap by internalizing externalities through regulation and taxation. For now, leave aside the monumental question of economy-wide implementation and turn your attention to a bin labeled "externalities." It's tucked away under the desks of economists, business-men, politicians, and citizens where we can toss the "side-effects" of our past, present, and possibly future economic and political actions. What's in the bin?

Near the top sits greenhouse gas emissions. This one has garnered enough attention that it may soon move to the bin labeled "regulated." Under greenhouse gases, you will find global deforestation and habitat destruction. Destroyed mountaintops. Beside this wreckage are cancer victims living in the shadow of industrial facilities. Casualties of war can be found in much-honored, yet rather gruesome, patriotically-draped clumps. Do not avert your eyes. The dead water of one-hundred-forty-six oceanic deadzones, where marine life cannot survive, dampens everything. Smog-suffocated children and elderly cough in a corner. Careful not to get lead poisoning as you rummage. Pesticide-poisoned farm workers wash their hands, but it is futile. Do not drink the water - it is polluted. Children in sweatshops. Men and women in sweatshops. Do not shut your ears. Sprinkled throughout are the countless species driven to extinction, and thousands more on the brink. Sense the human lives spent and lost in factories, mines, and labor for an insufficient wage. Homeless people live in the bin. Slavery. Four-hundred years of race-based slavery. The harvesting and harnessing of humans to build the foundation of our economy. To dig through this, you must also uncover the perpetual economic, political, and social disenfranchisement of people of color down to this day. It runs deep. You near the bottom, but first there is genocide. Systematic genocide of indigenous people and cultures world-wide. The economics and politics we've inherited had no need for them, but it coveted their land, so here they lie in the bin. Many are beyond resuscitation.

Consider these words. Extinction. Slavery. Ecological Collapse. War. Climate Change. Exploited Lives. Toxic waste. Genocide. Open your heart.

Externalities or Atrocities? Do not underestimate the power of semantics. Words can illuminate or obfuscate.

We are not evil, yet our political and economic system does not account for the true cost of "external" atrocities. Why? A central problem of true cost economics may point to the reason our economic system does not internalize "external" atrocities. In a true cost economic system, how would you include the cost of a life cut short? What is the price of biodiversity? A life stolen by slavery? Generations damned by climate change and ecological collapse? To internalize "external" atrocities through pricing or taxation is to say that all this has an abstract monetary value. Ask a child, ask yourself. There is no alchemy to transfigure life's beauty, degradation, or destruction into economic terms. Infinite value defies quantification. The calculus of our politics and economics cannot internalize the unquantifiable, so the infinite is made non-existent. Ours is an economics of denial.

The cities we inhabit, the cars we drive, the gadgets we use, the ways we communicate, the food we eat, and the energy we consume are all products of economic success. Definitely in sweat and perhaps in blood and carbon, someone has, is, or will foot the bill. Mass material affluence is predicated on the denial of real mass atrocity.

I believe that we can have a carbon-neutral society. I believe that we can have a just society. However, the two are not synonymous. Carbon-neutral atrocities can underpin carbon-neutral mass material affluence. Or the vision of Sustainable Justice can underpin the end of atrocity.

Sustainable Justice is a vision of cultural transformation. In Sustainable Justice we step from the reality of atrocity and into the dream of justice and sustainability. This is not an abstract eco-utopian dream. It is a reawakening to the ecological relationships that bind all beings.

The society we have inherited and continually mold is but one possible collective manifestation of human nature, and it is far cry from Sustainable Justice. Climate Positivity recognizes the multiplicity of human potential with the statement that not only are we the cause of climate change, we are the solution. If this is true, then it is also true that we are the seeds of Sustainable Justice.

We are participants and teammates, not enemies and slave masters. We are beginning to awake from our denial and realize this truth. For many of our human and nonhuman teammates, this awakening is already too late. Our role, as a movement, is to bring society into a conversation that will catalyze the awakening before it is too late for us all.

The infinite is at stake.