For as long as capitalism has been the dominant mode of production, the wealth it has brought to the world has raised concerns about the effects of economic accumulation on the environment. But while the project of capitalist growth has long been understood as one of enabling us to rise above the depredations of nature, questions about global warming, the acidification of the oceans, and the sustainability of water supplies around the world have begun to destabilize this orthodoxy. Capitalism may continue to make our societies richer, but the environmental consequences of carbon-based economic growth are growing ever harder to ignore.

This seminar explores the state of capitalism and its futures as we move into the twenty-first century, with a particular focus on the tensions between economic growth and ecological sustainability. It therefore begins with an examination of the history of growth as a concept and its place in modern economic thought. By now we tend to take growth for granted, but it was not always so—a long line of philosophers and economists once assumed that we would eventually become so wealthy that the economy would no longer need to grow. How did growth become a de facto assumption of modern economic policy? In what way is growth important to our thinking as regards global warming and other environmental issues?

The scope of the seminar is not limited, however, to the questions of growth and its place in our future. It also examines the consequences of ecological crisis for critiques of capitalism as they have developed to this point. It is certainly the case that capitalism in its current global form has done much to accelerate the problem of global warming, but can socialism still provide a compelling critique? What do contemporary crises of capitalism mean for the way we read Marx and those who have followed in his wake? Can the basic categories of Marxist thought come to terms with the specter of global ecological crisis? Or do such problems demand a rethinking of the foundations of Marxist critiques of capital as well?

Finally, the seminar examines the social, economic and ecological assumptions behind a term that cannot easily be separated from the discussions of growth and alternatives to it, namely the idea of “sustainability.” The concept is ubiquitous in discussions surrounding economic and environmental policy, but what does it mean? What economic assumptions lie behind it? What ecological thought is implied in it? And what, in particular, does “sustainability” mean when viewed from the perspective of the global poor, those that have contributed least to the problem of global warming but stand to lose the most from its effects?

Through a careful engagement with the related concepts of growth and sustainability, the seminar therefore hopes, first of all, to come to terms with the past, present and future of terms that have become so familiar and so widely used that their precise meanings are often obscured. At the same time, however, the seminar also hopes to begin to chart the outlines of capitalism’s possible futures, and in doing so to contribute to the work of re-imagining them as well.

Presenters will include Fredrik Jonsson (History), Liz Moyer (Geophysical Sciences), Kenneth Pomeranz (History) Moishe Postone (History), Mark Lycett (Environmental Studies) and Marshall Sahlins (Anthropology).