

Essay

# How Sustainable Is Human Resource Management Really? An Argument for Radical Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Sustainability has become an increasingly popular concept in relation to contemporary organizational life. The current paper reviews the concept of sustainability in relation to Human Resource Management [HRM] and poses the question whether HRM can become truly sustainable. Analyzing the notion of sustainability as an empty concept, this paper searches for new and radical meanings for sustainable HRM. Anchored in a radical understanding of sustainability as the protection and promotion of the dignity of people and the planet, this paper reviews the state of the art of contemporary HR systems and practices. It also positions sustainable HRM in the context of planetary survival and the role organizations may play in the transformation to sustainable economies. To conceptualize sustainable HRM, it is necessary to integrate new meanings through postulating appealing narratives around non-capitalist sustainable living.

**Keywords:** sustainable HRM; dignity; ideology; radical



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## 1. Introduction

The world is continuously confronted with the paradoxes resulting from organizational practices, and their exploitative and destructive effects on the planet and people across the world, especially in the Global South [1]. The world continues to rely on fossil fuel companies that invest in oil, gas, and coal [2], cheap clothing chains that employ slave labor in South-East Asia [3], and phone companies assembling their phones using children mining the necessary minerals [4]. Debate on such concerns is present in the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Strategy literatures. Many of the exploitative practices used by organizations have a strategic underpinning and purpose, and therefore are studied by these literatures e.g., [5,6]. Nonetheless, such practices are directly related to the use and abuse of people within and beyond organizations, and therefore HRM plays a key role in perpetuating the unsustainability of contemporary practices through focusing primarily on the efficiency and effectiveness of HR systems [7]. This unsustainability is amplified through the bureaucratization [8], and consequent dehumanization, of work [9,10]. Mainstream HRM focuses on this achievement of efficiency through bureaucratic means, an approach that is 'ethically blind' [11], p. 15 and has led, and continues to lead to, catastrophic consequences. Yet, the HRM literature has largely refrained from discussing the paradoxes arising from organizational practices. Instead, contemporary HRM literature and practices continue to portray organizational financial purpose beyond human and planetary concerns see also [12].

Recent HRM literature has commenced to explore the inherent paradoxes of HRM and its potentially exploitative and unsustainable nature, especially when perceived at a global scale [13,14]. Aust and colleagues (2021) [13] identified the problematic nature of sustainable HRM conceptualizations, and argued for a Common Good HRM, which should be centered around the dignity of employees and other stakeholders within and beyond the organization see also [9,15]. To do so, workplace democracy should achieve fairer organizations which take into account the needs and interests of the various stakeholders

and protect the dignity of people see also [16,17]. However, despite these encouraging analyses by earlier scholars, there are two fundamental problems that scholars and organizations still face, and which we will address in the current essay. First, while there is an emerging understanding among HR scholars of the need for global societal change and the adaptation of HR models to address these concerns, the literature on sustainable HRM for the Common Good [13] remains within the margins, and represents a rather small fraction of the total body of literature on HRM, most of which remains firmly based on the instrumental model of human-as-resource to be used for organizational profit [12,18–20]. The same holds for organizations, which continue to operate within a globalized capitalist system, in which profit-seeking remains the ultimate organizing principle from which few organizations can actually sustainably escape [21]. Second, while workplace democracy has been presented as a panacea by scholars towards greater dignity and sustainability e.g., [17,22], few answers have been provided as to how the social transformation can take place through which organizations can actually reform to viable democracies, without the hijacking of democratic agendas for nondemocratic purposes (e.g., the maintenance of the hegemonic status quo, in which corporations remain effectively in control of key resources), or outright resistance from those in power, who have little to gain and much to lose from democratizing organizations.

This essay addresses both questions, through an analysis of the fantasies underpinning Sustainable HRM. Fantasy is a key concept in modern psycho-analytic theory, and it explains why and how particular beliefs emerge in society, and how fantasies become a crucial part of the functioning of ideologies e.g., [23,24]. Through the analysis of the fantasmatic underpinnings of sustainable HRM, we are able to explain why sustainable HRM remains marginalized, and why actual transformation of HRM systems and practices towards sustainability is not yet happening. It also helps to explain why workplace democracy functions as a fantasy that is not materialized. Subsequently, the paper discusses the need for radical sustainability, as current attempts towards sustainability are *not nearly radical enough* to actually make the necessary changes in society and workplaces [25]. We finish with an outline for social transformation, highlighting the role of dreams, fantasy, and imagination.

We adopt an interdisciplinary approach, grounded in critical realism, in order to generate novel and meaningful knowledge about this complex multi-layered phenomenon of sustainable/unsustainable HRM [26,27]. To achieve this, we draw on, and synthesize, literature from beyond the mainstream HRM canon, particularly political theory and critical sociology, in order to generate new insights and explanations. Our aim is to problematize HRM and build a theoretical framework to explain why the transformation towards sustainability is not yet happening. This paper is written as an essay, and hence, while building on existing research, we also have taken the liberty to explore questions which have been rather absent in the field of HRM, in order to enrich the debates in the field, and to enhance the social and societal relevance of the field. This means that some of the essay will be based on the experience and expertise of the authors, having been HR scholars for many years, and therefore in the position to reflect upon the state of the field and introduce new questions relevant for the progress, meaning, and impact of the field of HRM. Although this is a predominantly conceptual paper, it nevertheless draws on empirical examples as part of the problematizing and theorizing process of knowledge production.

## 2. Sustainable and Unsustainable HRM

During the last 20 years, we have witnessed a rising literature around sustainable HRM, and the need for HRM to focus increasingly on ‘long-term influences such as climate change, biodiversity and urbanization’ rather than a myopic focus on market-driven, short-term financial gains [13]. In the face of major global issues, such as climate change, pandemics, income inequalities, and exploitation of workers, there is a great need for more sustainable HRM models [28]. Organizations are at the basis of the global economic system,

and contribute to all these global issues by perpetuating their practices and their very slow uptake of ‘truly’ sustainable business models (e.g., workplace democracy) [13].

While the recent calls for more sustainable HRM models and theorizing, which move away from the exploitative model of the worker e.g., [12,13], are not new and have been uttered for many years, there is still little progress made in the field. Attempts to make the HRM model ethical [29,30], democratic [16], and dignified [9,13] have been worthy but at the same time not yet integrated into mainstream HRM theorizing and practice. In contrast, sustainable forms of HRM have remained in the margin, even though such models may be received sympathetically [28]. This may be surprising, as the variety of alternative models of organizing the HR function are generally consistent in their emphasis on respect for human beings and their needs, and the democratic approach necessary to institutionalize respect for people e.g., [15,22].

In contrast, we can observe that the dominance of status quo approaches to HRM remains intact. Emerging ethical or sustainable models have not yet been able to make a dent in the fabric of hegemonic HRM theory e.g., [31]. Such hegemonic theory postulates that workers are employed by organizations to contribute to organizational (financial) goals. Individual or collective employee goals (e.g., training or personal development) may be respected, as long as it contributes to or does not damage organizational goals [9]. These organizational goals are set within the broader political–economic environment, and usually include profitability, shareholder value, efficiency, market share, or customer satisfaction [32]. This widely shared notion has two dimensions which are necessary to understand. The first dimension is that people are being hired by organizations, and thus by nature are considered a ‘human resource’, alike any other type of resource, be it natural, capital, or animal. The very process of how employees enter organizations through recruitment and selection processes already indicate the relevance of getting the right people to enhance organizational performance. This also means *excluding* people who would not fit within the organization, or who are not ‘productive’ enough. This instrumentalization of labor comes at the price of a loss of human dignity [15], as people are no longer used as means in themselves, but only as a means towards an end (i.e., organizational performance) [22]. Even when the organization has an ‘enlightened’ director or management team who ‘truly’ believe in human dignity, the employment relationship is nonetheless still defined within principles of instrumentalization of labor towards organizational goals [31]. It is noteworthy that it is especially those organizations who respect the dignity of employees *and* are successful in terms of profitability which are often praised as examples of the sustainable organization [33]. Nonetheless, instrumentalization leads to alienation, or a loss of meaning for the workers themselves, who can no longer identify with work as having an inherent quality [19,23].

However, mainstream HRM theory maintains that it is possible to have high organizational performance *and* high employee well-being and dignity [34]. This highlights a view of the HRM function [i.e., the employment of workers in an organization] as being able to find the fantasmatic win–win situation, in which both the dignity of employees is promoted and the organizational performance is sustained over time [18]. Big Tech, Big Pharma, and Big Oil companies would be examples of such organizations, whereby (enormous) profit is generated and, at the same time, employees are treated well and with dignity. The question here, however, pertains to the blind spot of these industries: Big Tech earns their profit through exploitation of users’ privacy and agency while contributing to the surveillance state [35], Big Pharma profits from global pandemics and health crises at the expense of disease and death [36], and Big Oil makes their money through the destruction of the planet [37]. Hence, the extent to which a win–win situation is truly possible in the scope of broader ((environmental or social) sustainability concerns remains a question, or perhaps a fantasy [38]. This is because the underlying notion of instrumentalization of labor, resources, and the planet itself is not challenged in a meaningful way [22]. This can also be observed in the recent reporting on Shell, the oil multinational which failed to achieve its own green investment targets for 2020 [39]. They failed to invest in their own

green targets because it was ‘simply not profitable enough’. This exemplifies how a logic of instrumentality dominates in decision making, and that, ultimately, people and the planet are instrumentalized and commodified for organizational purpose.

The second dimension pertains to this very purpose of HRM within organizations, and is often overlooked in HRM theory and practice. As organizations are operating in a globalized neoliberal capitalist system [16,18,40], it is this very system which dictates the functioning of organizations. Capitalism remains the dominating social–economic–political force which imposes structure, functioning, and culture on organizations and employment relationships [41]. The HRM function exists within, and sustains, the corporate mode of organizing that dominates contemporary economies. The corporation, as a social technology, has been a hugely successful means of generating wealth but at the price of the destructive impacts on wider society and the environment [42,43]. The primary purpose of mainstream HRM is to serve the narrow profit-driven interests of these corporations, as most conceptual models in HRM aim to predict performance on the basis of HRM systems and practices [31,32]. However, it is not merely HRM that has prioritized the role of HRM in relation to organizational performance, it has also been under influence of the dominant societal–economic paradigm of neoliberal capitalism [41]. While there are many different varieties of capitalism, it is especially the neoliberal version which has become a dominant force in society [18,40]. Moreover, neoliberal capitalism is not merely a political–economic system which is externally imposed upon people and organizations to comply with and adapt oneself in order to fit within the system. Neoliberalism has become an *ideology* [18,44], which is internalized into the core beliefs of people around how the world is structured and, therefore, determines the spontaneous reactions of people to the world and events cf. [24,45]. Hence, neoliberal capitalism no longer serves as a pair of ideology-glasses that obfuscates one’s view of reality, but offers reality itself [25,45]. In other words, neoliberal ideology is deeply held as core beliefs of people about the world, social life, and the organization of the economy.

It is this neoliberal capitalist ideology which dictates the core functioning of organizations and individuals in contemporary society, whereby principles have become axiomatic, and thus integrated into the hidden assumptions about society and the economy, and therefore no longer questioned [12,22,46]. This also explains why sustainable HRM has not made a deep impact on the dominant HRM theorizing, as it never truly engaged with the hidden, underlying assumptions of the functioning of HRM within capitalist organizational life. While respect for human beings and the planet has emerged as a superficial layer covering organizational practices, it never addressed the fundamentals of organizational life in contemporary capitalism [13]. Accordingly, sustainable HRM always risked to perform a function of concealing the more problematic nature of dominant practices in and by organizations [1]. Powerful global corporations have been able to shape and sustain the widely held myth that markets and consumption are the solution to the world’s sustainability crises [47]. HRM is grounded upon this ideological assumption that corporate capitalism is the solution to, rather than the primary cause of, social and environmental destruction [32]. At the same time, capitalism necessitates perpetual economic growth [24,45]. Through competition for market share, profitability and resources, capitalism differentiates between the winners and the losers of the economic struggle. In such a system, organizations are always competing for survival, notwithstanding their actual position and financial situation. For instance, Meta (the administrative entity behind Facebook and Instagram), which is one of the largest and most powerful Tech firms in the world, faces a perpetual legitimacy crisis when people stop using their products and switch to more innovative platforms. Hence, Meta continuously faces the risk of being made redundant (like how Nokia was outcompeted in the race for smartphones), and of declining. As a result, all organizational practices become legitimate in their fight for survival, including mass breach of privacy, collaboration with authoritarian regimes, and the facilitation of the growth of conspiracy theories e.g., [48,49].

Rooted in the Enlightenment, capitalism developed as a political–economic system based on rationality, the notion of the human being as a *homo economicus*, and unitarism [50]. HRM as a scientific discipline, and as practice in organizations, has always aligned with such notions, and can be understood as striving for efficiency, control and effectiveness [30]. Reducing ambiguity is therefore the primary aim of HRM models, and offering stability and predictability through a streamlined model of organizational practices that allow employees to maximally contribute to organizational goals, including profit [32]. Accordingly, the HRM function in organizations became more and more professionalized, focused on maintenance of the status quo, rather than creating the space for revolutionary transformation of the organization itself towards workplace democracy and truly sustainable organizations (i.e., systematically protecting the dignity of people, the planet, and resources) [22]. This inherent conservatism, dominant in HR literature and practice, reproduces systemic, neoliberal capitalist features of HR models and thinking without allowing for a more nuanced, non-rationalist view of HRM as a discipline that occupies itself with the complexities of organizing and the role of people in such processes. However, so far, many attempts to conceptualize sustainable HRM have not yet engaged with the underlying economic logic of HRM.

### *2.1. HRM as an Enabler of Unsustainability*

There is a strong case for arguing that HRM is neither radical nor sustainable—rather, it is conservative, conventional, and unsustainable [29,51,52]. This is supported by numerous examples where HRM practices are unethical and lead to harm being caused to humans and the environment. For example, during the period of COVID-19 lockdown, the practice of ‘Fire and rehire’ [53] was widely used by employers, affecting nearly 1 in 10 workers in the UK. This practice is legal but is wholly in the interests of the employer and can only have detrimental impacts on the employee, in terms dignity and well-being [22]. This practice can be considered unjust and unsustainable, yet it continues to be implemented by HR professionals on behalf of their employers. Pay and reward systems, designed and implemented by HRM professionals, can also result in unsustainable outcomes. These systems serve to perpetuate social and environmental injustice as shown at Southern Water where the CEO received a bonus despite the organization demonstrably failing to meet its environmental responsibilities as evidenced in a GBP 90M fine for the company [54] for continuing to discharge raw sewage into rivers and other waterways. Such lists of unethical and unsustainable (people) management practices, designed and administered by HRM professionals, continues to grow: for instance, HR directors at a French telecom company who were jailed after institutional bullying led to employee suicides [55] and more. Hence, there is evidence at a daily level of the unsustainable nature of contemporary HR practices in organizations. Despite growing academic interest in sustainable HRM, we are still confronted with the unsustainable nature of many HR practices.

### *2.2. The Institutionalization of Unsustainability in HRM*

There is an extensive body of existing literature that critiques HRM and highlights the extent to which supposedly benign people management practices are, in reality, instrumental and serve as control mechanisms that seek to maximize the value extracted from ‘human resources’ in service of the organization’s goals e.g., [16,22,29,51,52]. The rising levels of work-related stress and ill health [56] are evidence that practices that purport to improve employee well-being are not about human dignity at all but merely instruments to maximize efficiency. Unsustainability has been institutionalized within contemporary organizations and HRM has been one of the primary organization vehicles or instruments that have enabled and continue to perpetuate this situation. The predominant, conventional HRM theory and practice is grounded upon the technical–rational paradigm that conforms to the view that “the quintessential role of management is control” [30]. HRM has not evolved as a separate specialism but is a functionary, or disciplinary, arm [57] of the employer, and its *raison d’être* is to serve and protect the organization’s interests, irrespective



of the unsustainable impact this may have on other organizational stakeholders and the environment. For HRM, the organizational goals are reified, rather than being social and political constructions, and have a separate existence beyond critique [31]. Professionalization of the HR function further embeds these ‘anti-sustainability’ assumptions, a conservative institution rather than a radical institution, that exists to sustain the status quo [51]. HRM therefore acts as a vehicle to hypernormalize and reproduce existing (and unsustainable) organizational forms [58], and its deference and subservience to management has become deeply institutionalized within the mindset and logics of the HRM profession. This also partially explains why HRM in its current form is powerless to engage in any meaningful transformation and transition to sustainability. Rather, HRM is one of the institutions that sustains the contemporary neoliberal capitalist system that is the primary cause of social and environmental injustice.

### *2.3. Corporate Social Irresponsibility*

Contemporary HRM is a complex phenomenon, so to generate a greater understanding of its relationship to sustainability requires a deeper consideration of its ontology [29]. The reality of HRM can be conceptualized as existing across different ontological domains: embodied HR practitioners and organizational managers; organizational and HR practice; and organizational and HR discourse (formal practice, theory, rhetoric) [32]. The extent to which HRM is strategic resides primarily within the domain of discourse, rather than it being realized in embodied HR practitioners or their actual day to day practice [20]. A reflection on how HRM is embodied and practiced reveals the administrative and operational nature of HRM and the reality of contemporary workplaces. This conception of HRM as a strategic organizational actor is therefore a fantasy, existing only in the imagination and rhetoric without it being realized in concrete practice [38]. The institutionalized role and purpose of HRM to maximize human resources in the service of managerial goals is deeply embedded across all three of the ontological domains i.e., in the beliefs of embodied managers and HR practitioners, in the actual practices and formal practice and in the discourse (conventional theory, professional standards etc.). Sustainability and its relationship to HRM exists primarily in the domain of discourse, a comforting rhetoric that treats sustainability as an abstract concept [1,59]. This leads to the situation where HRM feels no connection or responsibility for the harmful and unsustainable impacts of the organizational practices that it explicitly enables as shown in the earlier examples. Human Rights, dignity, and ethics of care are fundamental to a radical, sustainable HRM, yet they remain within the confines of a critical discourse of HRM making little impact on the embodied or practice domains.

In the above-described economic logic, there is no guaranteed protection and respect within HRM for human beings and the planet. People, animals, and the environment are principally voiceless towards the logic of economic survival and market dominance [22]. Business corporations, and the HRM function within them, are legally constituted in a form that enables enormous profits to be generated without being responsible for the full costs of the production [43]. These destructive ‘externalities’, such as the health costs resulting from Big Tobacco, are picked up by society at large. This raises two fundamental questions: (1) Why do people accept their inferior and marginalized status, and maintain their beliefs in the system and the promise of a sustainable HRM that protects their well-being and dignity? (2) How could organizations be redesigned within the fundamentals of the capitalist hegemony? In the following, we address both questions. To understand why people accept the current status quo and dominance of capitalism at the expense of their own well-being and dignity, we use the concept of ideological fantasy. It is at this level that transformations towards radical sustainability are possible, and thus change in society is only possible when people are able to fantasize differently and responsibly. In the next section, we will further unpack this argument.

#### 2.4. Fantasmatic Involvement in Unsustainable HRM

While interest in Sustainable HRM is increasing among both HR scholars and the wider HR community including practitioners, the inability of HRM to make a stronger impact on organizations to make the necessary radical transformation to sustainability remains poignant. The failure to take into account the constraints of sustainable HRM within the capitalist system, has elucidated the limited nature of this concept and its potential for meaningful translation into HR practice [16]. What is it, then, that people actually do through adopting contemporary discourse around sustainable HRM, while at the same time, systemic features are not addressed, thereby delegitimizing the very promise that sustainable HRM holds? On the one hand, resistance against radical transformation towards sustainability [e.g., a fully carbon-zero economy, whereby fossil fuels would be entirely banned, including all fossil fuel companies] stems from dominant elite minorities in society, and most notably those in powerful positions in politics and economy [40,60]. As the (radical) sustainability agenda is ultimately threatening the status quo, it is not surprising that elites resist fundamental changes in order to preserve their hegemonic position in society [59]. One of the strategies employed is the capture of discourse, whereby elites adopt emerging discourses in order to maintain inertia and convey beliefs of genuine action towards sustainability, which ultimately remains as empty rhetoric [1,59]. Similar to the previously mentioned example of Shell which claimed commitment to green investment (but only if profitable), the World Economic Forum (2019) [61] hijacked discourses around income inequalities to portray elites as genuinely concerned with addressing income inequalities, thereby obfuscating necessary societal–political pressure to increase taxes on the elites themselves.

On the other hand, resistance from the elites only partially explains the lack of emancipatory potential of contemporary sustainable HRM discourses [60]. This would create an artificial binary distinction between ‘the people’ and the ‘the elites’, whereas this distinction is not helpful in explaining the perpetuation of belief in sustainability-like approaches to HRM e.g., [38]. To do so, we use the concept of fantasy or fantasmatic involvement into sustainable HRM discourse [24,45,62], which adds to understandings of elite resistance towards radical change. In other words, the status quo is not only beneficial to the elites, but also offers security to many groups and individuals in society, at both the upper ends and lower ends of the income distributions. People across society may fear the consequences of a destabilizing society, whereby fundamentals are shaken to the core, through a re-shifting of the capitalist model in lieu of more Communitarian Socialist ideals e.g., [19,63]. Such threat to the status quo may also spur people from across society to resist changes. The Black Lives Matter and #MeToo Movements have shown that protest movements for social justice may be met with great resistance from across society, including, but not restricted to, people representing hegemonic groups in society [e.g., white men]. Resistance may originate from both upper, middle, and lower classes in society, as all groups may fear the potential to lose their relative privileged positions vis-à-vis groups on lower income and with less social status. It was also not surprising that the Yellow Vest (Gilet Jaune) Movement in France originated from protests *against* climate action initiated by the French government (i.e., rising fuel taxes), as such climate actions would bear the costs with the poorest people in society who are dependent upon mobility to work in inner cities, while being forced to live in the cheaper suburbs [64].

Nonetheless, resistance against radical interpretations of sustainability plays out largely in people’s *unconscious* domain; it is therefore needed to integrate a psychological perspective on why people retain their investment in sustainable HRM discourses which do not threaten the capitalist status quo. Hence, it is through the investment into ideological fantasy that people retain their beliefs in sustainable HRM see also [38] on sustainable careers. As argued elsewhere [18,44], neoliberalism functions as an ideology, which as a system of beliefs manifests through concrete practices in society (e.g., competition, transactionalization of employment), but is maintained primarily through a fantasy of normality [24]. In other words, people fantasize about the current capitalist order as taken

for granted, and the way things really are. Thus, the underlying principles of capitalism are implicitly taken for granted and accepted as the core fabric of society. Subsequently, people fantasize about this order as the ‘normal’ state of things, and (unconsciously) adapt their beliefs and behavior accordingly. In society, they function in line with capitalist norms (e.g., follow an education, work, and consume), and new generations are socialized into the neoliberal capitalist system as the natural state of affairs within society [65].

When confronted with the realities of climate change, income inequalities, and poverty, people may feel helpless and unable to make any necessary changes individually [22]. As a consequence, they fantasize about how the current system is fair, that societal problems such as climate change and income inequalities are the byproducts of economic and human development, rather than inherent effects of the system itself. Consequently, they fantasize that fixes can be made *within* the capitalist system, rather than acknowledging that the system itself is the problem [25]. Through fantasizing about how technical fixes can be made in the system for more sustainable societies and workplaces, people disavow the need for radical change [59]. Along such lines, most literature on sustainable HRM plays precisely this role: it describes the ways through which HRM could be made more sustainable, without actually having to address the more fundamental aspects that explain the *unsustainability* of contemporary society and economic order. However, as Žižek [24] has argued, this ultimately constitutes a cynical disidentification, as people know very well that such quick fixes will not truly make workplaces more sustainable, yet they nonetheless pretend as if they would. Organizational actors, for example HR professionals, have to deal with the tensions between their different identities [47]. As concerned citizens they can have a genuine concern about the state of the world and the environment, but at the same time the fear of losing their job or status means that when choices are made they will act to serve the unsustainable interests of their employer. This also explains why literature and discourse around sustainable HRM can be easily adopted into the more mainstream discourses around the need for organizations to be profitable and shareholder focused, as they remain unable in their failure to address the wider capitalist underpinnings of the unsustainable workplace. For instance, sustainable HRM as a concept and scientific notion remains rooted in a fantasmatic logic [44], as it projects an ideal of the sustainable organization [i.e., respecting human dignity, protecting the environment], without confronting the necessary complex questions around how this would fit within the instrumental and the inherent exploitative nature of capitalism. Thereby, people can project an image of themselves as contributing to the greater good, without the necessary reflexivity of how this would actually be achieved.

### 3. Radical Transformation to Sustainable HRM

To be able to safeguard the value of sustainable HRM is to acknowledge the impossibility of integrating sustainability in its widest sense (including environmental, social, human, planetary, financial sustainability) with the larger capitalist system [1,59,66]. To work towards radical sustainability, which offers a holistic approach towards the sustainability of our planet, means to develop ways to find alternatives to the capitalist mode of organizing [63]. This implies a need to disengage from the instrumentalist approach to organizations and human beings in service of perpetual economic growth. The HRM function, therefore, is no longer sustainable when it merely contributes to recruitment of the right people for the job and to fit people within jobs or changing job requirements [32]. Hence, our first argument is that sustainable HRM is ultimately incompatible with capitalist functioning, and that it is capitalism that needs to be addressed before a more sustainable planet can be imagined. Any attempt to integrate sustainability discourses within capitalist mode of production will fail, as sustainability is incompatible with capitalist fundamentals, such as growth, exploitation, and instrumentality. In its dependence upon growth, capitalism moves towards the commodification of everything, whereby increasingly ‘everything’ is drawn into the market, and commodified [11]. As such, the planet itself and its natural resources (including animals, land, minerals, and fossil fuels) have been ‘brought’ to the



market for economic purposes. Similarly, every aspect of human life is commodified, including housing, romance, and friendship networks, all of which have become part of the market, where profit is generated on the basis of basic human needs: the housing market has been privatized and, as such, profit is generated over housing bubbles and people's homes. Romance and friendships have been brought to the market alike, where apps like Facebook, Instagram, and Tinder generate profit over the intimate lives of people. People therefore find themselves in a society in which all aspects of our existence are monetarily defined as capital, having economic value. To identify and conceptualize sustainability beyond capitalist terminology is therefore increasingly complex.

#### *Revolution or Gradual Change*

What, then, is the task of the HR function within the quest of the radical social transformation necessary towards actual sustainable organizations? While sustainable HR can be defined in a narrow sense including the employment and deployment of people within organizations, such a perspective should also incorporate the very nature of why organizations exist. In other words, organizations can *only* exist when people are part of it, as organizations that only serve as financial constructions are inherently meaningless and by nature unsustainable in its exploitation of finance, and deprivation of (tax) income from society. When organizations are defined as spaces where people come together to collaborate and generate meaning, the HR -function also becomes a central element of the organizing principle. Regarding the strategy of how to carry out the social transformation to a more sustainable workplace, we are confronted with the choice between revolution and gradual change e.g., [67], the former seemingly becoming an impossibility in contemporary (Western) society, due to the lack of popular support and experienced collectivity necessary for mass movements [22].

Gradual change, however, risks its progress or lack thereof to be hijacked by hegemonic forces in society and organizational life to delay, postpone, or devalue any sincere movement towards sustainability [60]. Nonetheless, it serves as the primary way through which, currently, progress can be made within society in a non-violent and constructive manner. This gradual change does not equal incremental change, as gradual change indicates a radical transformation which nonetheless manifests through local change processes. Advocates of such change have called for a democratization of work and institutions, through which people would have direct influence in the act of organizing and decision-making processes e.g., [17,68]. While there is a validity in this argument, the question remains how organizations may be transformed as democracies, and thus, how shareholders and owners are persuaded or forced to give up their power to employees, or even a wider group of stakeholders.

In light of the above discussions, to change organizations, it is necessary to address the fantasies that people hold, and determine which underpin the status quo in society. As Bal and Dóci [18], see also [44] argued, it is through the fantasmatic investment into neoliberal ideology that people maintain their beliefs in the current system, and disavow the nature of exploitation [of people and the planet] as inherent to neoliberal capitalism. Hence, it is at the level of fantasy that alternatives need to be constructed, in order to provide people with the possibility of dreams of escaping the capitalist predicament towards a society and workplace which is not exploitative in its design. This means to construct a fundamental premise of the organization not as existing merely for organizational purpose (profit, market share, shareholders), but nonexploitative in design. Such fantasies of sustainability have to be dreamed, written, and narrated.

Therefore, it is first needed to define what *radical* sustainability entails. This paper argues for a radical interpretation of sustainable HRM, and in line with the work of philosopher Žižek [25,64], we propose that existing interpretations of sustainable HRM are *not nearly radical enough*. To radicalize sustainable HRM is to acknowledge that sustainability is incompatible with the inherently exploitative nature of (neoliberal) capitalism, and thus ultimately, sustainable HRM can only be conceptualized *sustainably* within a paradigm

that differentiates itself from a capitalist one, such as a paradigm based on humanism [50], dignity [22], or the organization as a community of persons [69]. While all such conceptualizations of potential alternatives to capitalism have different features and points of emphasis, ultimately, the shared features are combined in an anti-capitalist worldview. This involves a radical re-orientation and re-invention of the principles of living and organizing, in a way that differentiates itself from an emphasis on growth, the centrality of capital for human living, the instrumentality of the planet for generation of economic growth, and the individualism inherent to the capitalist view of the human being [see also 5]. One such approach has been offered through the lens of dignity [9,15,22]. Dignity in the workplace does not merely entail the inherent intrinsic worth of human beings to be treated as an end in themselves rather as a means towards an end (e.g., corporate profit), but it also denotes the intrinsic, inviolable worth of the planet, including all that lives on our planet [22]. While humanity is dependent upon the planet for its own survival, this notion has still not been fully recognized into common sense and decision making. The problem, however, remains that capitalism is incompatible with the need for planetary survival, and that the inherent exploitation of people and the planet within capitalism cannot be addressed within capitalism itself, but only through alternative paradigms [66].

A radical shift is therefore needed within the conceptualization of sustainable HRM. In line with previous work around sustainable careers [38], we argue that sustainable HRM can only be truly sustainable if it systematically respects, protects, and promotes the dignity and sustainability of all relevant living and non-living 'stakeholders' within and beyond organizations. These stakeholders are people within and beyond the organization, but also the environment, natural resources, and animals. HRM as a function within the organization needs to be radically reinterpreted and re-invented. To do so, it is insufficient to conceptualize sustainability as an *add-on* to the existing HR function, but it needs to be radically redesigned.

To make such change happen, it is imperative to assess the underlying fantasies that drive human behavior. To elicit radical change is to change the fantasies of people, while *appealing narratives* may drive such change. Both are needed in the process of transforming organizations and the economy. The first step is to fantasize responsibly, as it is at this level that capitalism manifests e.g., in the fantasy of meritocracy; [18]. This can be achieved through imagination, dreams, and storytelling. Dreams of non-capitalist living may create the space for imagining how society, the economy, and actual workplaces would look like if other paradigms would prevail, such as a dignity paradigm [22]. For instance, this would be the end of intensive farming, which systematically destroys the dignity of the land and of animals, which are treated without respect for their animal-being [70]. Instead, dreams of plant-based diets and bio-farms can shape the contours of such reinvention of food production. Animals inhabiting farms would be able to lead a life that resembles closest to what can be described as their natural tendencies and behavior, while they would never be forced to spend their lives in a narrow cage, to be used as mere dairy and meat production instruments.

Dreams of non-capitalist organization can inspire imagination about how individuals own every aspect of production see e.g., [63] for a proposal, how the hierarchical nature of organizations is reversed through deliberate democracy with dignity see e.g., [22], and how such organizing is by default designed to create greater dignity and community. It offers a chance to dream about lives not perpetuated in insecure, temporary jobs that provide little to no meaning to the individual beyond a precarious income, lives in which organizing is actually a meaningful endeavor, creating possibilities for connection among people, restoration of broken spaces and relationships with the planet (e.g., restoration of forests and nature). Such dreams and fantasizing are not about utopian thinking, in which pictures emerge of the ideal society wherein no suffering takes place. While dreams are also the space where trauma resides, where the unspeakable manifests, it is the fantasy in which trauma will collide with utopian vision. This creates the possibility for synthesis, a space created to allow individuals to get beyond the traumatic experience of neoliberal

capitalism, not by simply stepping beyond it into utopia, but by capturing this trauma into one's own personal history, as a permanent reminder for the need of new dreams and fantasies. These dreams may allow to picture a humaneness which is not utopian, but full in its appreciation of its inherent dignity, which entails both the history of each individual human being (including one's life experiences, both traumatic and flourishing), and a desire for dignity in a non-capitalist society.

These dreams and fantasies may manifest in the night or when daydreaming. It is therefore apparent that they are in need of narration; that is, they have to be converted to actual storytelling. So far, storytelling has been taking place primarily outside of academia, but needs to be integrated in order to capture the possibilities of dreams to be translated into practice. This entails not just stories about the ideal end-state, the aforementioned utopia that seems desirable yet unachievable, but stories about the struggle itself, and the ways through which non-capitalist living can be materialized. It is through such appealing narratives, deliberately aimed at capturing the audience's willingness to engage in dreaming, that the first steps can be taken towards radical change.

Current conceptualizations of sustainable HRM are unable to actually describe sustainability of our planet in an unsustainable capitalist environment. There is a great need for more plural perspectives to more strongly integrate sustainability into HRM. To do so, it is necessary to engage in fantasy and dreaming about how the dignified organization looks like [22], and how they can operate sustainably, with respect for people, nature, and the planet as such. Such dreams have to be narrated in organizations and beyond, so that sustainability can be truly anchored in the functioning of organizations.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper engaged with the inherent shortcomings of contemporary conceptualizations of sustainable HRM, and the need for more radical alternatives. While definitions and literature on sustainable HRM remains firmly rooted in the neoliberal capitalist paradigm see e.g., [38], there is a need to develop alternative understandings of sustainability beyond such conceptualizations. Hence, we have argued for a radical interpretation of sustainability, which entails the respect, protection, and promotion of dignity of people, animals, and our planet [22], which would guide organizations and the economy towards greater sustainability in the long run. To translate such abstract notions (e.g., around the inherent, intrinsic worth of people and the planet) into concrete actions, it is necessary to adapt the fantasies that people have about society, the economy, and their own lives, such that it allows for non-capitalist living. To do so, new dreams and fantasies are needed, and they need to be narrated in society and in academia, such that they can be guiding future research, teaching, and practice. This paper emphasized the socially constructed nature of unsustainability and, therefore, radical sustainability can only be realized through a process of social construction and transformation. This opens up the possibility of further exploration in the form of engaged research where organizational actors, including HRM practitioners, actively engage in a process to reimagine and construct radical, sustainable HRM.

#### *Research and Practical Recommendations*

In this paper, we argued why sustainable HRM is limited to the extent it fails to address the structural constraints which limit sustainable HRM to achieve proper sustainable organizations and workplaces. On the basis of our essay, for researchers, we recommend the following. First, it is of great importance that researchers with an interest in sustainable HRM integrate their theorizing and research within the broader context, and assess how sustainable HRM functions in relation to the broader neoliberal-capitalist ideology, which is dominant in contemporary society. It is also important to be more explicit about the assumptions underpinning our research, and in our work report the values underpinning our research. If sustainable HRM is conceptualized as a concept that aids the performance goals of organizations see e.g., [31], research should be explicit about this, as well as the potential incompatibility of such conceptualizations with dignity of the planet, people,

and animals [22]. Moreover, researchers with an interest in sustainable HRM should also investigate how sustainable HRM is not only contributing to organizational interests, but also, and primarily so, how sustainable HRM is contributing to the dignity of people within and beyond the organization, and to the protection of the planet and everything that is part of the planet [38]. Sustainable HRM has the possibility to integrate environmental sustainability into its conceptualization, and in doing so, has the chance to become more relevant in contributing to sustainability goals, for instance set by the United Nations [71].

For HR practitioners, our recommendations focus on the integration of a much broader conceptualization of sustainability into sustainable HRM. While sustainable HRM has too often only focused on the long-term deployment of people in organizations, while protecting their health, it is necessary to critically rethink how it is implemented in organizations. For instance, sustainable HRM is still too strongly anchored in an instrumental perspective on the role of the human being in the organization [19]. It would be good for HR practice to integrate the dignity and sustainability of the environment, planet, people, and animals into the purpose of HR practices in organizations. The goal, therefore, of sustainable HRM becomes the protection and promotion of the planet itself and the positive contribution that organizations should play in relation to the sustainability of the organization. Therefore, HR practitioners should rethink and revise their roles in organizations, and become change agents for the transformation to sustainable organizations.

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