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Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Navigating the Politics of Climate Change

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Chakrabarty (2014) suggested that human-induced climate change has created conditions in which the “excess” CO₂ we emit now will most likely “clean humanity up” at some point. This essay demonstrates, utilizing historical lenses and critical theory, that instead of speaking of ‘human-led’ climate change, one should speak of ‘capital-led’ climate change. The centuries-long capital expansion and economic prosperity of European empires led to the environmental deterioration that humanity is experiencing now. The impacts of such a crisis, however, are unequal; whereas developed nations in the Global North are the primary contributors to the eco crisis, the effects are mostly felt by impoverished states and rural populations in the Global South, for whom nature is their primary source of survival. This essay recognizes that the environmental struggle entails social and political resistance to the capitalist-led regime, arguing that if capitalist policies of international financial institutions and Western states are considered as the solution to the environmental disaster, we may only exacerbate the crisis. To avoid an environmental disaster, substantial political and social reforms must be adopted; such reforms must include either economic and political reforms to the current capitalist regime or alternative perspectives from the Global South. In this sense, this essay further advocates for the integration of social sciences within environmental studies.

This essay will begin with a comprehensive Marxist critique of the Anthropocene narrative to provide theoretical context for the subsequent analysis. Second, this essay will discuss Nixon’s (2013) concept of slow violence and its relationship to the capital-led environmental crisis, as well as the issues within the current international response to environmental issues and propose ecological modernisation as a potential reform of capitalism and solution to climate issues. Finally, this essay will explain that the climate issue is also a matter of justice, as well as global and class inequality, and will advocate for solutions to the environmental crisis that include socio-economic justice, postcolonial and indigenous struggle.

Climate Change, ‘Anthropocene’, and ‘Capitalocene’

The World Meteorological Organization’s (WMO) The Global Climate 2011-2020 report alarms us that this was the warmest decade on record for both land and ocean, characterized by increase in atmospheric concentrations of the three major greenhouse gases, rates of ocean warming and acidification, and sea levels (World Meteorological Organisation, 2023). The data extracted from the WMO report warns us that the future of life on Earth is bleak; with continued increases in greenhouse gas emissions, Earth’s temperature will rise, followed by rising sea levels and glacier melt, causing extreme climate, and making life on Earth extremely difficult, if not impossible. Environmental crisis is not catalyzed by some ‘laws of nature’; rather it is a product of human activity.

Contemporary environmental changes suggest that Earth may have entered a new human-dominated geological epoch, the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is an age defined by large-scale human modification of the Earth System; through greenhouse gas emissions, species transport and removal, and the development of diverse products (antibiotics and pesticides) (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). In determining the start date of Anthropocene, the academics are generally divided into two camps; the first considers 1610 to be the start date for a new geological epoch, emphasizing the effects of the industrial revolution and extensive fossil fuel use, while others point to the 1964 Great Acceleration, highlighting the major expansion in human population, the development of novel materials, and

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the modernization and nuclearization of warfare (Lewis and Maslin, 2015).

While the Anthropocene cautions of the need for rapid changes in human behaviour, it is not without criticism. Moore (2016) first observes that the Anthropocene argument fails to explain how the alarming changes in global climate induced by human activities arose. According to Malm and Hornborg (2014), the Anthropocene is a product of natural sciences, and hence ignores the historical, political, and social elements that have largely contributed to environmental degradation. Second, Dryzek (2021) observes that embracing the Anthropocene narrative implies that all humans share equal responsibility for the crisis, although this has not been the case. As of 2008, developed capitalist countries accounted for 18.8% of the global population but were responsible for 72.7% of CO₂ emissions since 1850 (Malm and Hornborg, 2014).

From a social science standpoint, this essay highlights an additional fundamental challenge within the Anthropocene – capitalism, as a social and historical structure, is irrelevant in explaining the climate situation. As previously discussed, environmental deterioration began with industrialisation and colonisation. Today, hyper-consumerist lives of the 'developed' world are disproportionately accountable for the carbon emissions, whereas most affected by 'human-led' climate change are not its main contributors, but rather those who cause little in the way of carbon emissions (Parasram and Tilly, 2018). Recognising the interconnectedness of environmental crisis and capital expansion, this essay adapts the Marxist 'Capitalocene' critique of the Anthropocene narrative arguing that the internal logic of capitalist accumulation, as well as capitalism's imperialist inclination towards expansion were and continue to be the primary forces influencing nature, and, therefore, climate crisis (Statgar, 2018).

There certainly are limitations and benefits of adapting this approach which I would like to express; as Dryzek (2021) noted, a complex issue of climate change cannot be interpreted plausibly from the single environmental discourse. According to McAfee (2016), the issue lies in the fact that scientists mostly rely on natural sciences to analyze climate change. She contended that if humanity has become a geological force, we must not disregard the lessons of history, the insights of humanities, and the tools of social science while investigating environmental crisis (McAfee, 2016). Furthermore, as Parasram and Tilly (2018) noted, attributing the study of climate crisis to natural sciences risks adopting Enlightenment reason and imperial logic, which continue to position 'Western' knowledge and its assumptions about human/nature connections as the solution to the climate crisis, while representing non-Western systems of knowledge as insufficient to enter the climate discourse. This essay contributes to the academic debate by examining the intricate relationship between capitalism and climate change, explaining why the contemporary dynamics of capitalism can no longer be considered as a solution to environmental challenges.

Slow Violence, Capitalism, and Ecological Modernisation

In his book *Slow violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon (2013) defines slow violence as a form of delayed devastation that occurs over time, an attritional violence that rarely appears as violence at all. Deterioration of the environment in the form of toxic accumulation, mass greenhouse gases emissions, and accelerated extermination of species are each catastrophic, but they are scientifically complex disasters that delay fatalities for generations. While it can be argued that such acts do not constitute violence per se, my counterargument is that environmental concerns have entered international security discourse, raising dangers to human security by reducing access to fundamental resources such as productive soils, fresh water, and food, causing abuses of human rights, and limiting people's access to the economic and social opportunities they require (Dabelko, 2022). As a result, behaviours that precipitate an environmental disaster may be regarded as violent.

In terms of the environmental crisis, Nixon (2013) observes that the systemic violence displayed by a neoliberal order of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), liberalisation, business conglomerates, austerity measures, and increasing disparities between the wealthy and the impoverished is a form of covert violence itself, frequently serving a catalyst for environmental degradation. I will provide several examples to support Nixon's argument. First, it is frequently argued that the IMF-World Bank SAPs had a degrading environmental impact. Miloon and Ashish Kothari (1993) investigated the effects of IMF-World Bank SAPs in the Global South to warn of potential environmental degradation during SAP implementation in India. Authors found that the IMF's policies on export-oriented economies, liberalisation, and privatisation in the Global South have had a substantial influence on the environment, including

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water pollution, displacement of small peasants, deforestation, disease spread, and destruction of coral reefs (Kothari and Kothari, 1993). Second, Rowland (2001) discovers that transnational corporations have a significant environmental impact, with the top 500 corporations accounting for more than half of all greenhouse gas emissions annually. Third, a 2012 European Public Service Union report found that austerity measures implemented during the Great Recession considerably reduced governmental investment on environmental protection (European Public Service Union, 2012).

Four things can be concluded from the examples above: First, the capital accumulation and tendency of economic growth 'progressively internalises the costs of climate change' (Moore, 2016). Second, as Moore (2016) noted, for capitalism, nature is "cheap" in two senses: through rendering Nature's elements "cheap" in price, and to devalue, deteriorate, or create inferior in political sense, to make nature cheap in price (more about this in the following section). Third, those who are environmentally insecure are also insecure in other ways, such as poverty, health, and displacement (Dabelko, 2022). Fourth, slow violence of capitalism cannot be easily determined, necessitating the incorporation of social sciences into environmental studies to discover the covert causes of prolonged effects of climate change which might pave the way for amnesia (Nixon, 2013).

Some optimists (including international organisations and Western states) argue that capitalism's globalisation encourages prosperity and higher per capita incomes, both of which are necessary for raising funds and political commitment for global environmental management, as well as advocating common ecological norms and passing technology, knowledge, and development assistance in addressing climate change (Dauvergne, 2020). Their argument is reinforced by the green policy accomplishments of Denmark, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland through ecological modernisation, which relates to a reorganising of the capitalist economy in conjunction to more sustainable lines, but not in a way that necessitates an entirely distinct kind of political-economic system (Dryzek, 2021). Critics, on the other hand, contend that ecological modernisation threatens to divert criticisms of industrial culture, releasing the way for the involvement of green organisations in policymaking, but only at the expense of their moderation (Dryzek, 2021). One thing is certain: Capitalism in its current form is not an effective response to climate change. Furthermore, it is often the main cause and contributor to environmental degradation, although the effects of capitalist expansion are postponed. Critics argue that the accumulation of capitalism supports the conventional economic belief that endless economic growth is both feasible and advantageous; however, the final outcome of capitalist policies is to expand individual's ecological footprint by promoting ever more economic growth while also developing an almost prophetic belief in the value of consumerism (Dauvergne, 2020). The issue can only be genuinely addressed either by a radical reform of capitalist political economy or by the adoption of alternative viewpoints, as explained in greater detail in the following section.

Environmentalism of the Poor

In addressing the 'Anthropocene' narrative, Chakrabarty (2014) accurately observes that human-induced climate change raises a multitude of problems related to justice between generations, tiny island nations and polluting nation-states, developed, industrialised nations and newly industrialising ones. Firstly, only a few states (all of them capitalist, and including China and India in the last two decades) and a fraction of mankind (approximately one-fifth) have historically been accountable for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions (Chakrabarty, 2014). Furthermore, as Malm and Hornborg (2014) observed, climate change is disparate; as lengthy as there are human beings on the planet, there shall be lifeboats for the wealthy; however, those who are aggressively affected by man-made climate change are not its greatest contributors, but rather those who cause little in the way of carbon emissions: Pacific Islanders and South Asians whose homes will be destroyed; impoverished agrarian communities, and indigenous people in former colonies (Parasram and Tilly, 2018).

According to McAfee (2016), ecopolitics, like politics in general, is eventually about who gets to enjoy what, who owes what to whom, and who will make the decisions. The ecological split is, therefore, the result of a social division: the dominance of human beings by human beings (Chakrabarty, 2014). It is precisely environmental inequalities generated by imperialism, colonialism and capitalism that have led to an increase in resource extraction conflicts in rural or indigenous populations, ecologically uneven trade, and ecological debt generated by wealthy nations' excessive exploitation of environmental space without repayment (Martinez-Alier, 2014).

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According to Dryzek (2021), the most essential aspect of environmental discourse construction is the ability to produce critical reflection on the trajectory of human societies in an unstable situation. And, while Anthropocene provides the polar opposite, it is ultimately the Capitalocene that recognises that tackling the environmental crisis necessitates enormous political, economic, and social reforms. Rival (2020) asserted that any attempt by the 'Global South', or any of the world's disempowered populations, to resist a dramatic restructuring of global power generated by capitalist production is regarded as exacerbating the climate problem. This is because non-Western knowledge and resistance to present power systems are viewed as backward and traditional, and hence lack validity in the environmental discourse. At least, such was the situation. As capital gradually internalises the costs of climate change, new groups emerge, challenging not only capitalism's unfair distribution, but also the way we conceive about what is allocated to whom (Moore, 2016). I'll briefly discuss two movements discussed in literature: protective ontologies and democratic neo-socialist alternatives.

Protective ontologies stem from indigenous understandings of nature, which encapsulate ways of being in which nature is not largely thought of as land and goods to be possessed and profited from, but rather as one in which the human's role in nature ought to be one of safeguarding and cooperation (Parasram and Tilly, 2018). The Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline are a good illustration of how indigenous people's environmental movement represents both environmental and anti-colonial efforts. The second alternative solution to the environmental crisis can be found in democratic neo-socialist alternatives that advocate for the abolition of nature's exploitation, the preservation of mass awareness to remain within Earth's biological limits, socially owned renewable energy, and democratic planning (Statgar, 2018). While I agree that those affected by climate change must have a voice in addressing the issue, and that the fight against climate change must be social and political, I will also point out, as Dryzek (2021) argued, that a worldwide problem such as climate change, requires global governance, which could also be deliberate and democratic, or, in the other case, discourses in the global public sphere that can coordinate management regardless of formal institutions. Alternative solutions to climate change have not yet entered the stage of being a part of the global debate on environmental politics, which is still heavily controlled by capitalism. And, given Western domination over information and the repression of any other alternative kinds of knowledge, I believe such a mission will necessitate a difficult but necessary social and political struggle.

Conclusion

Finally, we have reached a stage where the climate catastrophe must be addressed urgently. The generally accepted capitalist ecological policies of international financial institutions and Western governments do not tackle the climate issue; rather, they exacerbate the situation. Capitalist expansion, which has produced the conditions for environmental deterioration, can no longer be viewed as a solution in the sense that further economic growth and the distribution of expertise and standards will contribute to environmental politics. The unequal impacts of the global climate disaster across generations, classes, and states necessitate novel approaches to the environmental issue that also address socioeconomic justice and global inequality. Whether such methods involve ecological modernisation or alternative approaches from indigenous communities and the Global South, they must find a place in the global ecological discourse and practice. However, due to the West's eventual centuries-long supremacy in knowledge production, this essay contends that it will not be a simple endeavour.

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