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Environment

Pakistan: Capitalism and climate change

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The week from September 20 till September 27 has been designated as the week of the ‘Climate Strike’. It is an unprecedented event in its ambition to disrupt business as usual.

Over 2600 events are taking place around the globe to demand that world leaders pay attention to the looming climate catastrophe that threatens our existence. The event is also unique as it is being spearheaded by school students, with a 16-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg, emerging as the symbolic voice of the movement.

These radical actions are taking place in the backdrop of “a warning to humanity” written by climate scientists in 2017. These scientists summarized the catastrophic consequences of human activity on the planet, in particularly our civilization’s dangerous addiction to fossil fuels. Humans have already induced about 1 C warming in global temperatures and we are headed to over 2 C in the near future. Such an increase can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of warming on the planet, with melting glaciers and rising sea levels threatening entire eco-systems. The stakes could not be higher.

Yet, the global community remains in denial about the scale of the impending disaster even as it pays lip service to addressing the undeniable science of global warming. The self-designated ‘leader of the free world’, Donald Trump, fails to even recognize climate change as a scientific phenomenon and has consistently promised to increase investments in fossil fuels. China, now known as the chimney of the world for emitting the highest number of greenhouse gases, continues to invest in coal projects in Third World countries, such as the monstrosity known as the Sahiwal Power Plant.

There can no longer be a discussion about climate change without laying bare the system that (literally) fuelled it – ie: global capitalism. What is unique about capitalism as compared to previous systems is its tendency to measure wealth in monetary terms by turning products into saleable commodities. The aim is neither to create material goods nor engage in long-term sustainability but to create private profits through the circulation of commodities. The uniqueness of this system can be gauged by the fact that prior to the advent of capitalism in late 18th century, much of the world’s material wealth was communally owned with detailed codes of rights and responsibilities towards present and future generations.

Capitalism’s advent was a disruptive event in the long course of human history rather than an evolutionary path inscribed in ‘human nature’. Detailing the history of violence and loot that preceded the rise of capitalism, Marx demonstrated how an attack on communal property was central to the formation of a society based on commodity production. It was not human nature but the displacement, abandonment and starvation faced by millions that set the conditions for the emergence of global capitalism.

Capitalism is an expansionary system that cannot remain in equilibrium with its surroundings. The perpetual search for profits requires the extraction of more natural resources as well as new markets to sell their products. John Bellamy Foster, an expert on climate politics, famously called this tendency the “Treadmill of Production” in which one must continue to run, even accelerate, in order to maintain a place on the treadmill.

On the production side, it means engulfing more and more resources for commodification, even if it has negative social/ecological imperatives. On the consumption side, the \$1.2 trillion advertising industry directed at us ensures we feel incomplete without the latest gadgets that we probably do not need. This vicious cycle engulfs not only our environment, but objectifies even our social relations as objects symbolize the social worth of an individual.

In the Third World, capitalism arrived through the force of colonial violence, abruptly breaking our historical trajectories to open natural resources to the ‘free market’. Today, it is the exorbitant debt propelling the deepening of capitalism in poorer countries. In her excellent study titled ‘The Debt Boomerang’, Susan George explains that since the debt crisis of the 1980s, poor countries have been forced to improve their balance of payments ie increase their exports. Since many do not have large-scale industrial production, they are forced to open up their natural resources to foreign companies in order to pay back the impossible debts they have accumulated. Moreover, the drive to increase exports also leads to unsustainable practices of agriculture that produce quick profits in the short term but result in ecological ruin in the long term, adversely affecting the poorest sections in the countryside.

Much of the deforestation taking place around the world is geared towards giving access to mining companies or to the furniture industry in the West. The latest fires in the Amazon also appear to be a deliberate attempt to clear land for cattle grazing in order to export beef to Western countries. That the ‘lungs of the planet’ can be sacrificed to ensure that those living in the Global North can have uninterrupted access to their hamburgers shows the irrationality of a system that weighs private profits above social responsibility.

This explains why we are unable to phase out fossil fuels despite scientific warnings. The big fossil companies have made massive investments and buy the support of Western governments to ensure their future profits remain safe. Third World countries are looking for investments in natural resources to pay back their debt, opening their economies to the worst environmental and labour practices. Capitalism has locked us into a logic that is forcing humanity to participate in its own spectacular self-annihilation.

These examples also show that, while individual lifestyle changes are important, they cannot replace collective action necessary to confront the systemic crisis. Fighting climate change is today inextricably linked to reinvigorating a vibrant democracy that is responsive to the demands of the citizenry.

For Pakistan, climate change and the broader ecological break down are no longer abstract issues. Only two months ago, farmers from Thatta participated in a Long March against the rising sea levels that have engulfed their lands. Last week, we visited the villages of Kulalanwala and Kot Asad Ullah near Lahore, where the waste from adjoining factories is producing bone deformities in children. The villagers know the names of the polluters, but recognize that they are too powerful to be held accountable. Such areas represent what Naomi Klein has called ‘Sacrifice Zones’, as the lives of the locals are sacrificed to ensure that a few can sustain their opulent lifestyles.

UN experts have claimed that we may be heading towards a climate apartheid where the wealthy will cordon off their areas from those affected by the ecological breakdown. That process is already underway and cannot be meaningfully addressed without questioning the underlying logic that propels it. In other words, the key to fighting climate change is not to condemn an abstract process but to identify the social relations of exclusion, domination and exploitation that shape our context. Only a new social system that privileges sustainability and planning over the destructive chaos of late capitalism can provide a way forward.

We can either witness a climate catastrophe that intensifies the construction of walls and borders around the world, sending millions into militarized forms of social control. Or we can build an alternative system that brings back the control of production and consumption in the democratic control of communities across the world. The stakes have never been higher. It is time to organize and fight back.

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