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Climate

Racial capitalism and justice in the era of climate crisis

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We have just a few years to develop a necessary base for the coming struggles over who and what will be secured on this planet.

Why the time frame? The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that we must pursue aggressive, planetary climate action - including halving global emissions - by 2030 simply to have coin flip odds (a 50/50 chance) of limiting climate change to 1.5°C, the level that avoids the worst impacts.

Why climate change at all? What does that have to do with racial capitalism or global justice? Simple: when crisis strikes, elites will scramble to organise the institutions they have captured, to secure themselves. What happens to the rest of us depends on our ability to challenge the aspects of our social system that secure them at our expense, and to win selfdetermination over the ability to secure ourselves and those around us.

The Covid-19 pandemic gives us a less than reassuring preview into what the geopolitics of a climate-burdened world will look like. Rich countries, confronted with the possibility of recession and social unrest, stepped on Third World countries to get supplies for themselves. Sometimes they used power politics as naked as literal piracy. This is despite well-worn talk about a cooperative liberal international order.

While many African countries were spared the worst outcomes from the pandemic, owing perhaps to the wealth of public health expertise on the continent, the latest developments are far from reassuring. The US-based multinational Pfizer corporation is the first to offer a major vaccine, but since it requires storage at -70°C, it remains to be seen what level of access low-income countries will have to the vaccine.

Racism built into capitalism

It is no accident that the world responds this way to crisis. This cannibalistic approach to security is built into racial capitalism.

African-American political theorist Cedric Robinson first encountered the term “racial capitalism” here in South Africa, where activists and insurgent intellectuals were using it to describe South Africa’s economy under apartheid. They had realised something critical about the South African economy that could just as well be applied more widely: that racism was built into the total scheme of social organisation that got spread across the entire planet by European imperial conquest.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains one way to think about how racism was built into the global economic and political systems: racism both produces and exploits group-level differences in vulnerability to premature death (or, you might say, in material security). We can expect climate crisis to provoke this kind of response within countries: for example, we will see policing adapt to redistribute space and safety for elites, while natural disasters, rising sea levels, and supply chain disruption make them harder to come by for most people. Gilmore offered this definition of racism in her book *Golden Gulag*, which explains how overlapping political and financial crises produced the system of mass incarceration in California, the most populous state in the United States.

The political right has already offered us their answer: border militarisation, walls, and the preparation for xenophobic

violence of genocidal proportions. They and the global centre-left are more aligned on these questions than either admit: in the United States, deportations actually declined under President Trump relative to President Obama; the European Union is scrambling to overhaul its migration policy to speed up deportations amid challenges from the far right. Call it climate colonialism, climate apartheid, eco-fascism, or whatever you like - but what it means is perhaps best summed up by the white supremacist David Duke: "Give us liberty and give them death".

Towards a politics of solidarity

What should our answer be? The strategy of elites has been like the system of racial capitalism that elevates them - to jealously guard private interests, even (and often especially) at the expense of others. In such contests, power is decisive: we need only look to the US hijacking Covid-19 supplies on the high seas for evidence of this. But answers based in solidarity and self-determination provide better ways forward.

At *Africa is a Country*, Tshiamo Malatji explains a key aspect of a better left political project: public security and self-determination over material security. Malatji links the attempts to build community kitchens and public food gardens at the University of the Free State to both the wider struggle for food sovereignty in South Africa and the Climate Justice Charter's (CJC) attempt to publicise control over water in South Africa. The CJC goes on to make the same connection between community ownership of renewable energy and the broader response to climate problems.

Even if we root our politics in solidarity, there still must be confrontation: the agricultural industry will not take any of this lying down any more than the police will willingly allow community control over public safety. Nor will fossil fuel companies allow climate policies that transition us away from their source of profit and social power.

But our organising against entrenched interests to win the power to self-determine can match the solidarity with which we should wield that power. Merrie Najimy and Joseph McCartin explain the long history of an approach emerging in US labor politics called "Bargaining for the Common Good". This involves "making demands that reached beyond the narrow compass of permissible bargaining issues and tackled issues of structural racism and classism". Oklahoma teachers demanded that their state institute a higher tax on oil, gas, and motor fuel production to fund education; St. Paul teachers demanded that their school district break financial ties with any bank that had foreclosed on students' families that year. This was in response to the notoriously racially distributed foreclosure crisis.

Whether the crisis is climate related or not, racial capitalism establishes both who is vulnerable and who will be exploited. A politics of solidarity is the best answer.

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