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Environment

The Politics of Climate Looting

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On October 8, 2018 twin disasters were announced on opposite sides of the world:

“ In Brazil, as votes were counted from the first round of presidential elections, Jair Bolsonaro won 46% of the vote “ enough to make it clear he would probably cruise to a second-round victory three weeks later.

“ In Incheon, South Korea, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) revealed the findings of its special report: limiting global warming to 1.5° C “would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” within the current generation. [1]

It was a banner moment for pessimism of the intellect; the years we will need to struggle against right-wing nationalism, defeat its reactionary climate policies, and adopt a sane approach are years we don't have. These two disasters create a feedback loop with each other over time, each making the other more impossible to solve. [2]

As climate change fuels real and imagined social emergencies, in the absence of a mass-based politics of solidarity, fear-based calls to secure resources for one community against the needs of others resonate with many people. Of course, centrist half measures such as the Paris accords were never grounds for much hope “ even if the politics of the world that created them hadn't been thrown off course by the rise of right-wing nationalism.

Bolsonaro has directly targeted the Amazon rainforest and indigenous communities who live there. Shortly after taking office, he signed an executive order transferring the regulation of indigenous reserves to the agriculture ministry, which is controlled by agribusiness interests, though this move later suffered a setback in Congress. Encouraged by his election, illegal logging and land-grabs by gangs of thugs have risen, particularly in districts that voted for him, along with attacks on indigenous communities.

Members of Bolsonaro's government have moved to open farming and mining rights to non-indigenous people, arguing that this will allow indigenous people to reap an economic benefit from their land. One top adviser, General Augusto Heleno Pereira, rejected the idea that the Amazon is a World Heritage site, calling for development and arguing that it “should be dealt with by Brazil for the benefit of Brazil.” [3]

It would be difficult to find a clearer example of what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession,” where public and natural resources are expropriated, using extra-economic and sometimes extra-legal means, in order to facilitate further exploitation. [4]

Harvey argues that legal, regularized exploitation of workers' labor is only one of the dynamics of how capital is accumulated, and that the ongoing processes of capitalism also rely on what Marx considered “primitive accumulation,” accumulation of capital through such means as privatization of public goods, military and paramilitary appropriation, and theft.

Harvey uses this concept primarily to analyze dynamics of neoliberal policy such as privatization and financialization, but it seems equally applicable to the legal and extralegal seizures of natural resources by various private interests (usually with strong connections to elements within national governments) in the face of climate crisis.

Resource Pillage Meets Climate Denial

Around the world, Bolsonaro's explicit agenda to pillage the world's natural resources, and ensure the survival and wealth of "us" vs. "them" in relation to climate change, is not an outlier but a salvo as the nationalist, far right's approach to climate change transforms along with the planet.

Traditionally, climate change activists demanded that the world wake up to the reality of climate change, while climate change denialists stuck their heads in the sand. Big oil companies and industrial polluters that used to drag their heels or promote climate change denialism today have embraced the language of mitigating environmental harm and pricing it under capitalism, while denialism has become the refuge of open revanchists like Donald Trump.

Even for them, however, denialism has become a message for a niche audience — red meat to fire up the base, while behind their backs they direct a pillaging form of accumulation. For many leading social groups that are leaning in the direction of neo-fascism or right-wing nationalism, facing the reality of climate change is less about stopping it and more about jockeying for political and economic power, safeguarding control of resources and seizing more.

The imperative of "economic development" and establishing control of resources as a way of arguing about climate is coming more into the open as human-triggered climate change has accelerated.

For example, just a few weeks before the IPCC report was released, the Trump administration's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration released a report based on a scenario that global temperatures would rise a staggering 4°C (more than seven degrees Fahrenheit) by 2100, [5] The rationale here was supporting Trump's decision to freeze federal fuel efficiency standards.

The NHTSA realized that limiting the damage of climate change to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society — and concluded, well, since obviously that's not going to happen, we might as well go ahead and keep burning fossil fuels, as the overall portion of that rise caused by relatively lax U.S. fuel efficiency standards would be small.

Similarly in May, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo suggested that melting sea ice in the Arctic represented not a crisis but an opportunity for trade between Asia and the West, provided that Western countries act assertively with respect to competing territorial claims with rivals such as Russia and China. [6]

Vying for a prize for the agency determined to push this to the farthest extreme, the Department of Energy has started referring to fossil fuels as "molecules of U.S. freedom to be exported to the world." [7]

Conflicting Reactionary Extremisms

Far-right responses to the reality of climate change vary, of course, between nationalist heads of state and online extremists of various stripes. On the genocidal fringes of the far alt-right, eco-fascism is an emergent trend. It burst into the real world with the Christchurch shootings in March 2019. The shooter's manifesto identified himself as an "ethno-nationalist, eco-fascist."

While environmental radicals and even eco-terrorists have most often been motivated by ideologies that derive from the left, eco-fascism imports ideas from deep ecology into a white nationalist value system.

Eco-fascists have developed an anti-immigrant form of “lifeboat ethics” which holds that races of people should stay in their traditional homelands, that society should adopt a vegan, preindustrial way of life, and that in the face of environmental collapse, some people should be allowed to die.

“What to do,” asks Finnish deep ecologist Pentti Linkola, a favorite theorist of eco-fascists, “when a ship carrying a hundred passengers suddenly capsizes and there is only one lifeboat? When the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try to load it with more people and sink the lot. Those who love and respect life will take the ship’s axe and sever the extra hands that cling to the sides.” [\[8\]](#)

It isn’t hard to point out obvious inconsistencies in this argument, for example when white nationalists claim some kind of natural dominion over colonized lands such as Australia or New Zealand. The point here is taking these ideas seriously not as a value system that must be answered, but rather as an ideological symptom.

While even the farthest right of parliamentary parties would reject mass shootings, the prevalence of increasingly virulent forms of anti-immigrant rhetoric within mainstream political discourse across Europe, North America and Australia have allowed fetid corners of the internet to gather confidence and take action in the world. They have taken inspiration both from less overtly political mass shooters in the United States and from media-savvy, ultra-violent terrorists such as ISIS. Eco-fascism and “lite” forms of an ecologically aware, white nationalist right may solidify their niche in far right subcultures. [\[9\]](#)

Social Stress Multiplier

Effects of climate change have already contributed to the social stressors that have driven large numbers of migrants and refugees from their homes. A drought in Syria from 2007-2010 exacerbated rural poverty and migration to urban centers, contributing to the factors that drove the 2011 uprising, and eventually, of course with a host of other factors, civil war and a refugee crisis. [\[10\]](#)

Droughts in Central America have made life harder in an already impoverished region. Bangladesh is expected to be hit hard by climate change, suffering from severe flooding, and the area of Cox’s Bazaar, where Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are living, may be especially vulnerable.

India expects changes to its monsoon season. Rising temperatures and water scarcity in Kashmir could contribute to India-Pakistan tensions. [\[11\]](#)

North Africa is expected to get dryer and hotter. Crises in Darfur, Nigeria and Somalia have been exacerbated by drought and food shortages. An interdisciplinary group of scholars suggested in 2009 that climate change could contribute to a more than 50% rise in armed conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. [\[12\]](#)

It would be a mistake to rest the blame for particular conflicts largely on climate change when a host of political and economic factors which are more easily within short- to medium-term human control are also critical. However, looking at the global picture, it is clear that, barring structural changes to society, we should expect more rather than fewer of these human crises in years to come.

Over both the short and the long term, a feedback loop starts to emerge between the politics of immigration and refugee crises on the one hand, and the crisis of the rise of far-right nationalist and neo-fascist politics on the other.

For example, Donald Trump's border crisis was, during his campaign and the first two years of his presidency, more rhetoric than reality. When Trump took office, apprehension of undocumented people crossing the border had declined for years, and there was a net outflow of immigrants returning to their home countries during and after the economic crisis of 2007-09.

In the 2010s, economic and political crises in Central America have worsened, fueled by U.S. foreign policy, drought, and political impasses. In a short-term example of the feedback loop, Trump turned his attention from the travel ban to the border, ratcheting up threats to build a wall and separating families.

Word started to spread in some Central American communities that if you were considering joining a caravan, now was the time "before" Trump was successful in closing the border completely. All this has contributed to a dramatic spike in undocumented border crossings, though levels are still well below pre-2008 levels. [13]

In much of Europe, the feedback loop between climate change, both the real presence and the specter of migrants and refugees, and far right politics is already quite open, although the form of this varies widely across the continent. Brexit was driven in part by xenophobia, although this was directed partly against Eastern Europeans coming for economic opportunities as well as European Union refugee policies.

Italy's Matteo Salvini has risen to prominence in Italy, eclipsing his more environmentally friendly coalition partners of the Five Star Movement, by emphasizing hard-line and often dramatic anti-migrant policies.

In France, the National Front has staked a claim to being the strongest single party, even if the political mainstream can still unite to deny it real governing power. The crisis that led to the Yellow Vests movement shows how technocratic plans to mitigate the harms of climate change by increasing the cost of living for working- and middle-class people may face protest and popular rejection.

In Denmark the nativist Danish People's Party faded in the polls as mainstream parties embraced xenophobia. The Social Democrats won a resounding victory in June, stealing the right's thunder by endorsing anti-migrant policies. [14]

In Greece, Golden Dawn activists regularly engage in physical attacks against migrants. Meanwhile, migrant support and solidarity work have become a key component of the work of the activist left as hopes of any kind of parliamentary or mass action solution to Greece's economic woes have faded.

Hungary's Victor Orbán has finally gotten a bit of international legitimacy with a visit to the Oval Office, and Poland's ruling Law and Justice party rails against immigration even though Poland has seen very few migrants or refugees.

Anti-federal government ranchers and rural business interests in the western United States and Australia associated with the "sovereign citizen" movement have been among the staunchest holdouts of climate change denialism. The underlying issue here mirrors Brazil: a battle over the use of public lands, whether they should be managed in the public interest or submitted to "Wise Use" by private interests. [15]

The logic of freeing up public lands for drilling or grazing "in the face of competing demands to leave fossil fuels in the ground, fight climate change and drought, and respect indigenous sovereignty" reflects the same logic of accumulation by dispossession: establishing control of resources by any means necessary, up to and including the use of extralegal militias.

Climate Change Gentrification

The politics of expropriation and exploitation of land and natural resources and strict border regimes, in the face of climate change and the specter of migrants, fit as an archetype with the ascendant far right around the world. However, they do not always take this form; they can take the genteel, liberal form of “climate change gentrification” as well.

Real estate prices have doubled in Miami’s Little Haiti as residents with sea-level homes sought to escape rising waters. [16] Flagstaff, Arizona has seen an influx of people escaping rising temperatures in Phoenix.

As wildfires in California threaten to become a way of life in wealthy areas like Malibu, and insurance companies charge astronomical rates or refuse to subsidize rebuilding yet again, many residents will decide to relocate to “gem in the rough” neighborhoods farther from the forests, with the real estate industry eager to facilitate.

This raises the question of how liberalism and much of the left respond to the rise of right-wing nationalism, neo-fascism, and climate catastrophe. At its worst, there can be a tendency to isolate ourselves in silos of partly rhetorical or cultural resistance without realizing that we have limited ourselves to an enclave.

The easy targets here are policies such as banning straws as a way to address climate change, but it goes much further. The notion of ethical consumption as “voting with your dollars” for “things you can control” can be related to the logic of the enclave if it stays as it is and does not open onto a systemic understanding.

Liberal cities in California like San Francisco and Santa Cruz have become gentrified to the point that they may lack an objective basis for the progressive politics they have long symbolized. If a border relies on agencies such as ICE and the border patrol, and secessionist land holdings rely on a militia, the enclave relies similarly on the police.

There becomes a tacit understanding: you can have your free speech, your rich cultural world, your ethnic and gender diversity, and your oppositional politics within the enclave, but policing is going to maintain a fundamental economic and racial order. Thus in some ways the liberal enclave can be objectively on the side of “fortress Europe” barring its doors to migrants or areas controlled by western U.S. secessionist militias.

The mainstream and organized radical left has mostly ignored these changes in rhetoric and practice by the far right and right-wing nationalist leaders. At times, it seems like we are still fighting a battle of ideas against yesterday’s climate change denialism. Relatedly, outmoded ideas about how “climate change effects all of us” sometimes get repackaged as new ideas in the environmental movement.

For example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, a historian who writes on subaltern studies and ecology, argues that even though the impact of climate change will be experienced differently by rich and poor, climate change transcends the class dimension of Marxism, because, “Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged.” [17]

This may be true in the sense that the children of today’s wealthy and middle-class people will inherit a world that is biologically impoverished compared to the world of their grandparents, but it misses the ideological aspect of the environmental crisis. It also did not see how fraught the “lifeboat” metaphor would become.

Even if lifeboats won’t work well, in the end, fascist logic would dictate beating someone else over the head to ensure you have a lifeboat. This lifeboat logic extends to some proposed technological “fixes” for climate change which are

less about making the world a better place and more about creating a post-human future in which a wealthy few can escape a doomed planet.

Some, hopefully many wealthy and middle-class people may essentially become class traitors and push for a better world for everyone, but the path of least resistance will be for them to embrace the looting of remaining environmental resources, using the borders of nation-states and enclaves, whether urban or rural, to keep out the rabble.

Climate crisis does not transcend the class element; it exacerbates it, stokes the neo-fascist element of it, and makes the alternatives of ecosocialism or ecobarbarism incredibly stark. The neo-fascist impulse is accelerationist with respect to climate change even as it promulgates fantasies of restoring control and making the nation-state great again.

Confronting the Death Wish

Rei Terada pointed out that dealing with the politics of looting and border violence “needs a language for how fascism engages people’s death wishes that most politics doesn’t have.” [\[18\]](#)

One can catch a glimpse even in the most quotidian rhetoric. “Make America Great Again” is often traced to its Reagan-era origins, but one striking difference was Reagan’s capacity to project an infectious optimism to his supporters.

If you were one of the others of Reagan’s America, it was vomitous, but it was a story about America’s role in the world and “free-market” capitalism that supporters could cheer without irony.

In contrast, Trump’s “we’ll win so much you get tired of winning” has an edge of the heroic “Lost Cause” rhetoric of irredentism. It’s impossible to return to the “glory days” of 1950s USA, whether one takes this to be about Keynesianism and secure jobs or a “gentlemanly” form of white supremacy and respect for traditional gender hierarchies.

The consciousness of Trump supporters may be willfully ignorant about some things, but it is not naive; it is in fact world-weary at least among the alt-right and the broader millennial and Generation X milieu from which the alt-right is drawn.

These Trump supporters don’t think we can really go back. They want someone to fight for them (the perceived “we” of whiteness and traditional gender/family values); and they want someone to see their enemies suffer. It may be horrible to watch the world burn, but they embrace what they find thrilling in the prospect.

To return to a rather tired phrase, engaging the battle of ecosocialism or ecobarbarism will require escaping the logic and the limits of the enclave. Fighting for an ecologically just future can no longer be seen as an alternative to immediate environmental justice struggles.

The view that climate change can provide a common cause for humanity needs to be understood as a form of idealism, which may be useful for galvanizing class traitors but will stand in the face of a scramble to accumulate control over land and resources. Environmental justice is the class-driven, racialized here-and-now of climate

struggle.

Standing Rock was perhaps the inaugural political struggle of this era. The Lakota Sioux Tribe and environmentalists from all over the country converged in a political fight that symbolized the close of the Obama administration and the beginning of the Trump era.

Around the world, young people have gone on strike from classes to call for radical action to confront the climate crisis. Today's fights such as the Green New Deal must be seen not as a legislative package that would be sufficient to solve or mitigate the harms of climate change within a capitalist framework, but as a transitional demand in the old sense, linking the present impossibility of full climate and social justice with a program for much more fundamental changes which allow for the possibility of solidaristic life on a damaged planet.

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