Chapter Fourteen

Climate Debt: An Overdue Balance

Who's the Real Debtor Here?

Throughout this manual, we've been examining the many ways in which the wealthy and the powerful use claims of debt to steal from and exert control over the vast majority of us. No matter how destructive the results, we are constantly told (and tell ourselves) that such a system is morally just because of a supposedly simple, eternal truth: *Money owed must be repaid*. This deeply entrenched and widely held belief in the black-and-white morality of debt is the linchpin that holds the debt system in place.

But nothing is ever as simple as it seems. At their core, monetary debts are extremely narrow and simplified ways of representing what are often very complicated relationships between creditors and debtors. If we can zoom out from the simple calculation of money owed and look at the broader histories, human relationships, and power dynamics that lie behind a debt, it quickly becomes clear that there are countless ways to imagine who owes what to whom. Seen in this expanded context, a claim that repayment of a debt is morally just can begin to seem absurd. (And yet, despite the often-questionable moral legitimacy of their claims, the harsh truth is that it's usually the ones with the most powers of economic coercion and brute force at their disposal that get to decide which debts are legitimate in the end.)

Nowhere is this dynamic better represented than by the sovereign debts imposed on the people of the global South, as discussed in the previous chapter. For decades, northern banks, the IMF, and the World Bank have demanded that residents of much poorer countries be held responsible for the repayment of loans taken on in their names, often by undemocratic regimes and under outrageous terms that might make a Goldman Sachs banker blush. Under the simple logic of debt, the failure to repay such loans has been used to justify the imposition of harsh, undemocratic "reforms" that have caused immense suffering.

But if we pull back and begin to look at the long history of domination, exploitation, and destruction imposed on the people of debtor nations to the benefit of their so-called creditors, it immediately becomes apparent just how questionable the morality of these simple calculations is. For instance, how many dollars should Great Britain pay African nations for the approximately 2.8 million people they abducted into the transatlantic slave trade? What should the annual interest rate be on the debt Spain owes, say, Peru, for the tons of silver it extracted through forced labor, and what should the penalty be for five hundred years of late payment? Though such calculations could never account for the true cost of centuries of suffering and oppression, when confronted with the simple morality that states "all debts must be repaid," it's important to think for a moment about who is really the debtor, and who is the creditor.

Along those lines, as the effects of human-induced climate change have begun to wreak havoc on a global scale, global justice movements have formulated a vitally important question in response: How do the South's monetary debts to foreign creditors compare with the North's liabilities for environmental impacts since the dawn of industrialization? The resulting concept of climate debt, first introduced almost twenty-five years ago, has provoked a powerful ongoing dialogue, elucidating stark disparities in how climate change is caused and experienced around the world.

After over two hundred years of humans spewing massive amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the earth's atmosphere, the planet is on the verge of an unprecedented ecological catastrophe. We've already seen record-breaking droughts, superstorms, hurricanes, heat waves, and floods. And that's just the tip of the (quickly melting) iceberg. But, historically, people in what have come to be known as "developed nations" are by far the largest emitters of greenhouse gases and have reaped the lion's share of the economic benefits when compared to those of the global South. And although the whole planet is experiencing rising temperatures, the impact is far from equal. Both the IMF and the World Bank have acknowledged that the brunt of the impact will

be borne by some of the poorest populations in the world, further immiserating them.

To say nothing of the human misery, suffering, and death wrought by climate change—past, present, and future—surely even just the simple monetary costs to the South of repairing damage, adapting as possible, and mitigating future damage must be considered a massive debt owed to them by the North. In demanding repayment of this debt, movements for climate justice have done much to highlight the economic forces that compel the destruction of the environment for the benefit of the few at the expense of all—but particularly the world's poorest. To truly understand the nature of the debt that's owed, we'll need to understand the origins of the climate crisis a bit more thoroughly.

Growth, development, and the origins of climate debt

The current vast disparities in wealth, power, and standards of living between the people of developed nations and those of the global South reflect long histories of colonial domination and, later, exploitation through the neoliberal global economic order. In many ways, this centuries-long dynamic has been intensified, shaped, and transformed by industrialized nations' utter addiction to carbon-based fuels.

For most of human history, the naturally renewable energy sources humans used to sustain ourselves were readily found on the earth's surface: firewood, wind, water, animal power, etc. But, at around the turn of the nineteenth century, as the industrial era was dawning, new technologies made it possible to mine massive quantities of carbon-based fuel in the form of coal. Suddenly, people in the industrial centers of northern and central Europe (and soon the United States) were able to tap into extraordinarily potent stores of energy that had accumulated below the earth over millions of years (Mitchell 2011, 15).

The introduction of such an intense productive power into Europe's mix of industrial capitalist and colonial enterprises created enormous amounts of wealth and began a stretch of growth in productive output unparalleled in human history. It also had profound impacts on the way Western societies developed, continually transforming everything from modes of transportation, agriculture, and the organization of cities, to legal systems, forms of government, and the division of labor (Harvey 2010, 203). Colonies, mobilized to provide critical raw materials for Western industry, were industrialized at a much slower pace and, over time, the disparity in wealth between them and their colonizers increased exponentially.

In various ways, the large-scale transition of Western economies from coal to oil and the emerging global economic order of the mid-twentieth century greatly reduced the political power of labor and increasingly freed capitalist interests from the control of nation states. With capitalist profit-seeking behavior liberated and further intensified by uninterrupted flows of carbon in the form of oil, it became possible to imagine a global economic system based on growth without limits—though that growth was increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few, at home and abroad (Mitchell 2011, 15).

By the time the era of direct colonialism came to an end in the decades following World War II, carbon-rich industrialization had so thoroughly transformed the entire "Western way of life" that traditional ways of living in far-less industrialized countries of the global South stood in stark contrast. Without irony, industrialized governments seeking to extend their economic and political control pointed to the disparity in wealth between the "developed" North and the "undeveloped" South as justification for the imposition of unsustainable and paternalistic economic development programs through institutions like the IMF (Escobar 1995, 17). Promising investments and improvements in material conditions, "development experts" were deployed across the global South to push for the top-down implementation of economic, technological, and social changes, dismissing indigenous traditions and worldviews that might conflict with their visions of "progress."

But, to many, it's long been clear that Western-style economic development is as unsustainable as the Western way of life itself. In 1972, the influential Club of Rome think-tank published a groundbreaking and disturbing report titled *The Limits to Growth,* which concluded that the current rates of industrial growth could not be sustained ecologically in the long-term (Meadows et al. 1972). Subsequent surveys, drawing upon a wider range of experts and a more comprehensive network of scientific data, amplified the 1972 warning about the ruinous impact of unrestrained growth. Thirty years later, the *Limits to Growth* team reprised their study, confirming the original predictions of economic and civilizational collapse in the course of the twenty-first century (Meadows, Randers, and Meadows 2004).

Despite these and many other grave warnings, at this current stage of industrial capitalist development, carbon-enabled growth has become so deeply imbricated in the political, economic, and social operations of everyday life in developed nations that growth is no longer a means to an end, but a necessary end in itself. If capitalism is to

continue in anything like its current form, production and consumption must steadily increase whether or not they fulfill a genuine need. Any slowdown in economic growth (a recession) and the entire system begins to fall apart. Perversely, governments at all levels are tasked first and foremost with ensuring growth—a good quality of life for their citizens is a distant second at best, and the health of the planet that sustains us barely registers (Harvey 2010, 259).

The crisis is here

Whatever one might make of the decision to organize entire societies around the need for ever-increasing profits, the fact of the matter is that such a choice is no longer an option—at least when it comes to profits enabled by carbon-based fuels. For one thing, the earth's supply of carbon-based energy is limited, and we're starting to bump up against that limit. Extracting fossil fuels has become an increasingly costly and energy-intensive enterprise, and while we may be able to prolong the inevitable with new, environmentally destructive technologies like fracking and deep-sea drilling, it won't be long before the costs and energy required to extract carbon from the earth outweigh the benefits.

But more importantly, the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and other destruction of plant life through capitalist activity has lead to a massive buildup of carbon dioxide and other gases in the earth's atmosphere. Before industrialization, carbon absorbed by plants and the oceans more or less balanced emissions from volcanoes and other sources. But over the last two centuries of carbon-fueled capitalist growth, a dramatic rise in greenhouse gases has begun to increase the amount of heat retained on the planet, causing wild fluctuations in global temperatures and destabilizing the balance that made settled human life possible for the past twelve thousand years.

Scientists calculate the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere in measurements of parts per million (PPM). Historically, carbon dioxide was about 275 PPM. NASA scientist James Hansen has calculated that the highest level of carbon dioxide and its equivalents that the atmosphere can safely contain is about 350 PPM. Currently, we're at 394 PPM and rising rapidly. The average global temperature has already increased by one degree Celsius and predictions consistent with current observations suggest that the temperature will rise by six to eight degrees Celsius by 2100 unless dramatic measures are taken soon. All the ruinous impacts we have seen so far are just the beginning. We're quickly approaching a point of no return.

The development-inclined World Bank concludes in a recent report that even if countries adhere to UN-brokered emissions-reduction pledges—and they haven't been thus far—we're likely to see a 3.5 to 4 degree Celsius increase this century. The report warns that such an increase will result in unprecedented heat waves, water scarcity, food shortages, droughts, increasingly powerful hurricanes, inundation of coastal cities, and severe impacts on ecosystems. Ominously, it continues, "a 4°C [warmer] world is so different from the current one that it comes with high uncertainty and new risks that threaten our ability to anticipate and plan for future adaptation needs."

Some see global crisis on an unprecedented scale unfolding in as little as a few years. Guy McPherson, an ecologist who has been studying climate change for twenty-five years, estimates that we'll cross the threshold of 400 PPM in the next couple of years. "At that time," he says, "we'll also see the loss of Arctic ice in the summers." Loss of Arctic ice means solar radiation that would otherwise have been reflected back out of the atmosphere will now be absorbed by the ocean, causing a significant intensification in warming and unleashing a host of unpredictable repercussions for global weather patterns. He warns, "The implications are truly dire and profound for our species and the rest of the living planet."

Calculating the debt

The concept of ecological debt was first introduced by Chile's Instituto de Ecología Política in the lead-up to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro—the first major international climate summit, involving representatives and heads of state from 172 governments. Ecological debt was explicitly presented as a framework for discussing how much of their sovereign debts countries in the South should pay in light of the historical legacy of resource exploitation, loss of biodiversity, pollution, and outright destruction they've suffered at the hands of the North. Many argued that the obligation to repay the more recent high-interest loans had to be balanced against moral and economic liabilities from the more distant past.

But, as with any monetary debt, the full dimensions of ecological debt did not readily lend themselves to quantification. (How do you calculate the dollar value of a traditional way of living that's no longer possible?) Still, carbon emissions can be reliably measured and certainly represent a quantifiable economic benefit to those who emit them, alongside a neatly correlating negative impact on the climate we all share. As the impacts of global

climate change came more clearly into view, this portion of the ecological obligation, appraised on the basis of atmospheric emissions estimates by nation, emerged as the main vehicle for demanding repayment, and subsequently came to be known as climate debt.

A brief look at the breakdown of carbon emissions by nation over time quickly confirms what we already know: the lion's share of the greenhouse gases that are now wreaking ecological havoc were emitted to benefit industrial economies, profit-seeking enterprises, and the attendant consumer culture rooted in countries of the North. To give one quick example of the disparities the data reveals, the average Briton emits about as much carbon dioxide in one day as a Kenyan will in an entire year.

Though the profits of climate destruction tend to accrue to those who've caused it, it so happens that the world's poorest people, largely in nations of the global South, experience the destructive effects in extreme disproportion. One reason for this disparity is geographical: increase in sea levels, desertification, and storms all tend to occur with the most intensity nearer to the equator, around which many of the world's poorest nations are arrayed. Additionally, many inhabitants of the South live and sustain themselves in traditional ways that are often intimately reliant on their specific local environments. When those environments change dramatically, or are no longer inhabitable, the challenge of adapting is far greater than it is for the larger proportion of people in industrialized nations whose climate-change-inducing consumption and production processes are less specifically local.

Poorer nations also simply lack the money needed to mitigate, adapt to, or repair the destruction that's being visited upon them. The impact of recovery and cleanup is eating into a significant percentage of the GDP of nations that are already struggling to maintain a foothold in a global economy stacked against them. In 2012, record-breaking Typhoon Bopha slammed into the Philippines, causing then-unprecedented death and destruction. Describing his country's predicament at the time, a Filipino UN negotiator explained, "We have never had a typhoon like Bopha. . . . Each destructive typhoon season costs us 2% of our GDP, and the reconstruction costs a further 2%, which means we lose nearly 5% of our economy every year to storms. . . . We have not seen any money from the rich countries to help us to adapt. . . . We cannot go on like this."

The following year, the Philippines were hit again. Typhoon Haiyan, the strongest cyclone to make landfall in recorded history, killed over six thousand people, displaced millions more, and caused billions of dollars of damage. Such events will undoubtedly continue with increasing frequency and intensity thanks to the greenhouse-gas-induced warming of the ocean. Why should Filipinos, who on average emit 0.9 metric tons of carbon annually, pay for the destruction wrought by people in nations like the United States, who emit 17.6?

And yet, despite the outsized role the United States plays in perpetuating the climate crisis, it's important not to close our eyes to the deep disparities in experiences of climate change that exist even within the wealthier countries where it's produced. Although U.S. residents are the global leaders in carbon use, members of the wealthiest 1% in the United States use ten thousand times more carbon than the average U.S. resident. And climate-induced disasters on the scale of Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy readily exposed the uneven pattern of impacts within cities, where communities of color and poor populations were often devastated and the wealthy often left relatively unscathed.

Climate debt in default

Though, crucially, the '92 Earth Summit in Rio failed to set clear, enforceable goals for the reduction of carbon emissions, 154 governments did ratify the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which created a formal international process for negotiating coordinated global action in response to the climate crisis. (Forty more countries have since signed on.) Since then, climate justice activists and governments of the world's least developed countries have been elaborating the concept of climate debt and pushing the cause for repayment at major UNFCCC conferences. Results have often been slow in coming. Tellingly, despite the intense ongoing UNFCCC negotiations held since '92, the amount of carbon pumped into the atmosphere annually has nearly doubled.

After 2009's Copenhagen summit once again failed to produce meaningful, legally binding commitments from industrialized nations for compensation and emissions reductions, over thirty thousand grassroots activists from 140 countries came together in Cochabamba, Bolivia to consolidate their demands. Organized around principles of participatory democracy, the 2010 World People's Conference on Climate Change produced a detailed People's Accord, which outlined a legal framework for how the North can be held accountable for their outsized role in the destruction of the climate.

Among other things, the document calls on the North to "decolonize the atmosphere" by reducing and absorbing

their emissions; to guarantee the human rights of the hundreds of millions forced to migrate by eliminating restrictive immigration policies; to monetarily compensate the South for the "loss of development opportunities due to living in a restricted atmospheric space"; to pay the costs of mitigation and adaptation; and to finance and share clean technologies. Bolivia submitted a proposal to the UNFCCC based on the Cochabamba accords shortly thereafter.

But they're up against an array of powerful interests. Governments of wealthy nations—particularly the United States—have obstructed climate justice proposals at virtually every turn. With a little digging, behind these government officials' and diplomats' intransigence, you can usually find the influence of a sophisticated network of ultra-rich individuals who benefit from the climate crisis through crisscrossing networks of trade, finance, and carbon-rich industry. An eye-opening 2011 report from the International Forum on Globalization maps how these "carbon billionaires" use their personal wealth to exert a tremendous amount of influence, playing governments off of each other and holding climate negotiations hostage to ensure they can continue reaping profits without being held accountable for the environmental costs.

Beyond Growth and Debt

Within our current nation-state-based global political framework, calculating climate debts by country may be the most practical way to account for the history of Northern-imposed capitalist industrial development and the disparities in wealth and mass destruction it continues to cause. Those of us who live in wealthy nations, to the extent that we engage with or agitate against the governments that claim to represent us, must demand that reparations are made for the environmental damage caused by over two hundred years of intense exploitation of the earth's natural resources at the expense of the world's poorest.

But in the same way that calculations of monetary loans simplify complicated relationships, calculating climate debt by nation-states' emissions can obscure important exploitative power dynamics that exist at every level in a globalized neoliberal economy. Ultimately, beyond the billionaires and intransigent governments that perpetuate climate change lies the compelling force of the global capitalist economy itself, the very existence of which hinges on the ability to burn and emit carbon without acknowledging the costs. Its logic is integrated into our very way of life. As such, paying back the climate debt owed must be seen as just the first step towards setting aside our collective obsession with growth.

This is the fundamental challenge of climate change. If we're going to avert complete destruction of the environment, what's really needed is a radical shift in the values that guide us, along with a transformation of the way we organize our lives and our communities. A global economic system that relies on never-ending economic growth inevitably means more carbon emissions and greater climate change. To those of us who've lived our entire lives in such a world, it's difficult to know how to begin imagining new ways of living together prosperously, with respect for each other and our shared climate. There are no simple answers.

But traditional cultures that have been resisting the imposition of Western-style economic development for decades may be able to provide some clues in the search for alternatives. In Andean regions of Latin America for example, over decades of common struggle against the destructive effects of development projects, a rich discourse around concepts of *vivir bien* has emerged among diverse communities of indigenous people, peasant groups, and the urban poor. Though a simple translation of the Spanish words "vivir bien" would be something like "to live well," the term refers to a confluence of rich political and philosophical concepts of "harmonious living" emerging from Aymara, Quechua, Kichwa, Guarani, and other regional traditions.

As these traditions largely lack notions of linear progress, their concepts don't lend themselves to simple translation but provide valuable counterpoints to Western worldviews. Though different cultures emphasize different aspects, concepts of *vivir bien* generally address issues Westerners might group under the term "quality of life," but with the understanding that true well-being can only occur in a community. Importantly, nature is considered to be part of the community rather than simply a setting or a resource to be exploited. Though concepts of *vivir bien* have been enshrined in the constitutions of both Bolivia and Ecuador, it doesn't represent a fixed set of principles. It continues to evolve in response to technocratic, commodifying, growth-focused development ideologies, yet draws in other facets of Western thought when useful as well. As Western cultures begin to imagine what life after the past two hundred years of carbon-fueled growth might look like, we might do well to draw in aspects of *vivir bien* in return.

Resources

Articles and Books

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