

Thoughts on the book *Geopolitics of Green Colonialism*

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(Intervention at the launching of the book, *Geopolitics of Green Colonialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2024), Quezon City, July 20, 2024)

First of all, I would like to thank my friend Meanne Manahan and Atty Rachmi Hertani for keeping me up all night reading *The Geopolitics of Green Colonialism*. This is not a criticism but a note of praise, for the book, of which they are co-authors, is very absorbing and stimulating.

The *Geopolitics of Green Colonialism* is an important contribution to understanding climate politics because it brings together in one volume the writings of some of the most articulate critics of the corporate capture of the green agenda from the global South. The contributions are insightful and provocative critiques based on solid familiarity with the facts on the ground. What distinguishes them from other critiques is that their point of view is consistently that of the global South.

The authors of this collection contend that global capital has now come to what they call the “decarbonization consensus,” that is, the capitalist consensus to move out of fossil fuels. The key pillars of this new paradigm are technofixes such as electric vehicles, economic mechanisms such as carbon trading, and social institutions such as multistakeholderism. The avowed aim of the decarbonization consensus is to allow high levels of consumption to continue even as carbon emissions are reduced, make the market instead of government the key mechanism for decarbonizing the economy, and eliminate the need for radical change of social and economic arrangements in the transition to a post-carbon world.

Two things at the outset. First, I fully agree with the authors that the aim of the corporate agenda is to save capitalism for a post-fossil world. Second, the decarbonization consensus won't succeed in allowing both capitalism and the planet to make the transition to a post-fossil-fuel world.

Let me be specific.

Market mechanisms like carbon trading are no substitute for taxes, punitive taxes, when it comes to altering corporate behavior.

Raising consumption or GDP while reducing carbon emissions can't work since, as Tim Jackson and others have shown, reductions in one sector of the economy will simply be wiped out by increased greenhouse gas emissions in other sectors that absorb the emissions savings of that sector.

Technofixes like electric cars will necessitate production and raw material extraction that will be very carbon-intensive. These technofixes will also deepen the North-South divide since it will intensify dispossession of communities and countries that are rich in key raw materials like lithium, nickel, and rare earth. The authors, in fact, speak of key parts of the global South being converted into "sacrificial zones," borrowing a term from the nuclear age that referred to areas designated for nuclear testing.

In other words, it is becoming clear that a transition to a climate-friendly world that does not leave capitalist economic and social arrangements behind won't happen.

I have three comments though that I'd like the authors to address:

One, Maria Campo and Arturo Escobar, two of the authors, assert that we cannot just say the global North must degrow but development remains the agenda for the global South. I agree. But what is the strategy of growth that would supplant developmentalism in the global South? There would need to be some economic growth so that a climate future for the poor countries won't just be redistribution of poverty amidst equality, would there not? Would a climate-sensitive development strategy for the global South be mainly a question of reducing quantitative targets, say from a 6 to 2 per cent GDP growth rate? Or would it be a qualitatively different strategy and one that is not just an adjustment at the margins?

In this regard, I would just like to remind everyone that among the key factors that brought about the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe was the sense among people that socialism had become an inert system that simply redistributed poverty. Also, we must not impose our preferences of what should be desirable consumption on the poor but take them as actually existing historical subjects "infected" by consumerism of capitalist society.

Two, is there in fact now a decarbonizing consensus among the global capitalist elite? Isn't climate denialism and aggressive promotion of oil and other fossil fuels still the posture of significant sectors of the corporate class. In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention two nights ago, Trump said he would fight for the continuing production of fossil-fuel vehicles because he doesn't want the US auto industry to go under. Presumably, he was referring to the fact that the Chinese are so far ahead when it comes to electric car technology and production. He used the word "obliterated" to describe the future of the US auto industry if Detroit is prevented from producing fossil-fueled vehicles.

This is related to my third and final point on the politics of the energy transition. The model of radical green transformation the authors offer us is something that I find hard to disagree

with. The only problem I see is that it is not inserted into the real world political, economic, and social conflicts that would condition the energy transition.

Let me be more concrete. The sectors of the global capitalist elite that would favor the decarbonization consensus are probably the same as those that have benefited from the Cold War liberal world order--one underpinned by US military power, whose political canopy is the Bretton Woods institutions and NATO alliance system, whose economic ideology is neoliberalism, and whose political ideology is liberal democracy. But that order is coming apart, and with Trump becoming president in the US and the far right coming to power in Europe, we will have powerful political forces that, if not flatly denialist, would be promoting an illiberal agenda to address the climate problem, the centerpiece of which would be to crack down hard on migration and be radically protectionist in trade--moves that would be justified as addressing the climate crisis. Building border walls, mass deportation of migrants, and trade sanctions would most likely be the climate agenda of the anti-neoliberal far right, even as they continue to prop up the fossil-fuel related industries.

We should face the fact that the transition would be extremely challenging, and the triumph of the good and the right and the rational is not assured. Strategy-wise, we are in for a rough many-cornered fight between, among others, the decarbonization consensus folks; the fascists, some of who would be denialist and others for radically shifting the burden of climate adjustment to migrants and to the global south; and those of us promoting a democratic, participatory transition. Moreover, we will be up against not only the decarbonization consensus folks and the fascists but also developmentalists who honestly believe that some extractivist activity is the way out of poverty. And, of course, there are our own elites, like the Marcoses and Duterte who don't give a fuck about climate change so long as they personally don't get fucked. And the whole climate struggle will be taking place in the shadow of the intensifying geopolitical and geoeconomic conflict between the US and China.

The great Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci described his era, the 1920's and 1930's, thus: "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters." I think that is also an apt description of our era. Monsters will be encountered during the energy transition, which is, in turn, part of a more comprehensive transition from the Post-World War II liberal internationalist order. We are facing a time of great danger, but also great opportunity. Crisis and opportunity go together, and like Ulysses, we have to pass through the turbulent waters between the two great monsters of Scylla and Charybdis before we can reach the safe harbor of a truly stable and just post-fossil world...if we get there at all.

Thank you again to the authors for this insightful and provocative book.