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Climate Cop-up, Cop-out & Hycoprism

Abstract

The complexities of climate science, of estimates of global greenhouse gas emissions and of their implications for climate change have not prevented widespread acceptance that global warming is a reality and its consequences potentially catastrophic for our planet and its peoples. But the convoluted processes of international negotiations and the political and economic context of their implementation mean that few have any confidence that national undertakings and international targets will be met. COP26 was a watershed, revealing the lack of progress on the most critical challenge of our time, the hypocrisy and double-speak of capitalist states and corporations, and the co-option of some conservation organisations through a deceptively 'green' narrative. A critical, materialist, Marxist approach can break through the greenwash of official discourse, reveal the need for systemic change and potentially serve as a focus for growing public awareness and environmental activism.

Climate Cop-up, Cop-out & Hycoprisy

Where are we now?

The situation today is well understood. Emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) have increased, the most important, carbon dioxide (CO₂), from around 286 parts per million (ppm) in the mid-nineteenth century to 412ppm today – the highest ever since humans appeared on the planet. And despite more efficient use of energy and a switch to renewables, emissions are growing. Consequences include extreme weather events (floods, droughts) which overlie an increase in global temperatures. This in turn threatens a ‘tipping point’ where the buffering adsorption by the sea is reversed and melting ice caps reduce the earth’s albedo so that even more solar energy is adsorbed. Already rising sea levels — around 23 cm since the 1900s with a third of that in the last quarter-century — threaten low-lying areas.^{1,2}

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established in 1988. It followed the 1987 Montreal Protocol (promoted by the US and the first treaty in history to achieve universal ratification) which has successfully reduced the production and consumption of ozone-depleting substances such as chlorofluorocarbons and halons, once common as refrigerants and themselves significant contributors to global warming as well as skin cancers.

The work of the IPCC led to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Alongside two related conventions, on biodiversity and on desertification, UNFCCC was adopted at the 1992 ‘Rio Earth Summit’ and in force from 1994. Since then annual Conferences of the Parties (COP) to the Convention have been held to review progress and secure commitments for the future. One significant early outcome was the Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997 and in force from 2005. This secured an undertaking from the industrialised states to secure an average five per cent reduction in GHG emissions compared to 1990 levels over the five year period 2008–2012. The Kyoto Protocol though signed, was never ratified by the United States (the world’s largest producer of GHG emissions) and Canada withdrew in 2011. Despite Kyoto, global GHG emissions increased by 32% from 1990 to 2010. At COP18 in 2013 the Doha Amendment to the Kyoto Protocol committed a different set of parties (again excluding the US and Canada) to reduce GHG emissions by 18 per cent (below 1990 levels) in the eight years to 2020.

The 2015 COP21 ‘Paris Agreement’ was a separate instrument under the UNFCCC rather than an amendment to Kyoto. It established the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels by reducing GHG emissions to a global peak (and a climate-neutral planet) by mid-century. The 1.5°C threshold is important because breaching it would lead to irreversible change. Even with a 1.5°C increase, sea levels are predicted to rise by some 48cm. The Paris Agreement committed all signatories to submit their own Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to this global target to the UNFCCC by 2020 and to implement measures to achieve these. Initially intended to be binding on the major GHG emitters, the negotiations almost collapsed when the US realised that the word ‘shall’ in the final agreement would have meant that developed countries would be legally required to cut omissions: the French solved the problem by calling it a typographical error’ and changed ‘shall’ to ‘should’.³ The consequence is that NDCs are unenforceable, are anyway mostly couched in woolly language and even if implemented to the full are together predicted to lead to a 2.4°C (rather than 1.5°C) global rise in temperatures. In 2018 the IPCC

declared that, in order to avoid global warming exceeding the target of 1.5°C, greenhouse gas emissions must be cut by 45 per cent by 2030.⁴ All the data however shows that the world is on track for a 16 per cent *increase* in emissions by 2030. The consequences are potentially catastrophic.

Britain

The UK is itself hugely vulnerable to climate change though less so than other places around the world. Impacts include species loss and habitat degradation, disruption of ecological cycles, drought and extreme weather conditions, risks to soil health crops and livestock from increased flooding, damage to the infrastructure and the economy, and major impacts on human wellbeing. All have already occurred: recent energy blackouts in Scotland and major flooding in southern England are examples.

In Britain implementation of its undertakings under UNFCCC has been piecemeal through a host of measures including (since 2013) a Climate Change Levy (CCL, a tax added to non-domestic electricity and fuel bills) with a discount for voluntary climate change agreements (CCA, negotiated with the Environment Agency); the CRC (Carbon Reduction Commitment) Energy Efficiency Scheme (requiring large non energy-intensive firms to monitor and report their CO₂ emissions but now closed by the Tory government) and the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS, allowing energy-intensive sectors buy and sell GHG emission allowances). All have existed alongside a range of incentives and regulations, for example on insulation standards for new buildings. One significant achievement has been the gradual phasing out of reliance on coal for electricity generation. For the domestic sector in addition to tighter building regulations and energy-efficiency kite marking there has been a range of grant schemes, for example to encourage householders to replace ageing gas boilers and install solar panels.

All have major limitations, not least their subordination to commercial interests. In June 2021 the British government's own Climate Change Committee (CCC, a statutory body established under the Climate Change Act 2008) warned that Britain is 'nowhere near' meeting its own climate commitments. In the lead-up to COP it declared that "*the UK has the capacity and the resources to respond effectively to these risks, but it has not yet done so.*"⁵

COP26

COP26 took place against a background of significant change in public and policy discourse with a lexicon and narrative itself constantly changing as a consequence of the insistence of campaigners and activists that this was an emergency — in contrast to the insistence of corporate interests that they had everything in hand. Despite intensive media coverage most members of the public profess ignorance of any specific details of agreements or progress on matters such as fossil fuel consumption and deforestation; probably because even these were largely restricted to vague statements of intent and lacking in detailed or legally binding commitments.⁶ Apart from some inspiring protests — from Greta Thunberg's blistering speech at Fridays for Future's 'Global North Greenwash Festival' occupation of Glasgow's streets during 'Youth Day', to the superb hoax of the 'Yes Men' with 'Glasgow Calls Out Polluters' revealing that Yasava, a Swiss luxury-jet interiors company had been admitted into COP26's flagship 'Race to Zero' programme without any evidence or scrutiny whatsoever⁷ — there was little of substance to remember.

The little that there was - beyond the US President Joe Biden falling asleep during a session - includes Boris Johnson's attempt to situate himself as a Churchillian figure, declaring 'history will judge us' and his opening declaration – as if he cared – that it was 'touch and go' whether progress could be made. His intention was clearly to reduce expectations, shift the blame for failure, and to position himself as the mediating statesperson of the event. The attempt had already been made futile by Chancellor Rishi Sunak's pre-COP budget freeze on fuel duty and reduction in air passenger taxes for domestic flights, and by Johnson flying back to London by private jet immediately after opening the event to have dinner with newly ennobled Baron (Charles) Moore - his former boss at the Telegraph (when Johnson was a £250,000pa columnist) and a noted climate change sceptic.

For Marxists there are only two sources of value – nature and human labour. And labour is the only source of 'new' value. Land for Marx could be source of rent (a form of 'fictitious capital') but was not of itself able to generate new value unless subject to labour, for example by the production of agricultural goods. But under financialised capitalism, nature itself has become a focus of capital accumulation, increasing in exchange value without the need for the investment of labour. Alongside this a new lexicon has developed. The natural world itself is framed as 'natural capital'. Landscapes, habitats and ecosystem processes — including the ability of biogeochemical cycles to adsorb waste and maintain planetary equilibria — are now conceived of as providers of 'ecosystem services'; benefit streams; assets that, once quantified, can be substituted. The loss of one asset – a wood, wetland, or river – can be compensated by the creation or enhancement of another asset that provides the same 'service'. In this way environmentally destructive activities are seen as acceptable provided gains elsewhere lead to 'no net loss' to the 'services' in question.

The orthodox explanation for negative environmental consequences of commercial activities is that the degradation of nature is an 'externality', unpriced in market calculations. The conventional solution has been to value environmental 'goods' by entering shadow prices based either on contingent valuation (asking people how much they would pay to 'keep' something) or by market behaviour (e.g. visitor expenditure) into a cost-benefit analysis. But under financialised capitalism 'real' markets are created through tradeable rights to pollute (emissions trading) and offset markets; the direct commodification of nature.

Emissions trading allows companies to emit CO₂ and other pollutants within a cap. The rights can be bought and sold. This supposedly provides the most effective outcome by ensuring that pollution is cut where it is cheapest to do so. Offset markets allow environmental damage to be compensated through the purchase of credits which pay for purportedly equivalent enhancements elsewhere. Most organisations claiming to be carbon-neutral do so by buying cheap offset credits for as little as £6 per tonne of CO₂ – largely for carbon sequestration schemes (not all of them genuine) in developing countries.

The dangers of the monetisation, commodification, marketisation and financialisation of nature go well beyond what Sian Sullivan has called the "*cultural poverty of constructing nature as service provider.*"⁸ Carbon trading is now one of the world's biggest markets – a profitable asset stream. As O'Neill⁹ and others have pointed out the 'systemic growth imperatives' of capitalist society are hugely exacerbated by financialisation which depends on debt, interest and returns on investment. All are a claim on future growth and appropriation of surplus value. They also create a perverse asset class: their value depends on the continuation of environmentally damaging activity. A river's capacity to adsorb waste is of value only as long as its pollution continues: a forest's worth as a carbon sink exists only as long as excessive CO₂ emissions continue.

One bizarre result is that nature conservation itself is increasingly dependent on contributions from the perpetrators of environmental damage. The discourse of natural capital — ecosystem services, mitigation, offsetting and ‘net zero’ — has become normalised, not least through the participation of environmentalists themselves. In Britain’s National Parks the company Palladium (a commercial ‘global giving platform’) works with Park managers through its ‘Revere’ project. This funnels money into restoration schemes for woods, grassland, wetlands and peatlands, by selling ‘ecosystem services’ to firms wishing to offset their carbon emissions, deliver biodiversity offsets or compensate for other negative environmental impacts.¹⁰ Kent Wildlife Trust through its subsidiary WilderCarbon¹¹ offers UK companies a price of upwards from £45 per tonne of CO₂. It calculates that that ‘rewilding’ seminatural and degraded habitats could lock in sufficient carbon to ‘offset’ 17 years of UK domestic, international and military flights — i.e. business as usual. At least WilderCarbon is focusing on its own primary goals of nature conservation — including arguing for compulsory purchase of nationally critical carbon ‘infrastructure’ sites where the owner has refused to negotiate for habitat restoration and enhancement. Global conservation bodies such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) are increasingly dependent on — and acting as vehicles for — corporate ‘investment’ that allows companies to claim that they are ‘carbon neutral’.¹²

A ‘second contradiction’ of capitalism?

The corporate embrace of ecospeak is not just hypocrisy of course. It’s also, for the companies concerned, a matter of survival- not of themselves individually but of the system within which they operate. As Marx and Engels observed in the Communist Manifesto capitalism is an extraordinarily dynamic system. It is one which continually overrides its own boundary conditions, including those provided by nature. This has proved a major stimulus to technical advance, from the replacement of timber by fossil fuels as a source of power in the early days of Britain’s industrial revolution to today’s gradual switch from fossil fuels to ‘alternative’ sources including renewables. Those environmental constraints have been termed by James O’Connor (founder of the journal Capitalism, Nature, Socialism) a ‘second contradiction’ of capitalism alongside class struggle.¹³

Financialised capital, operating globally, needs the nation state as a guarantor of ‘sound money’ and the means by which the burden of its crises can be transferred to — imposed upon — ‘the many’. As Walter Wriston, head of Citibank declared, ‘*countries can’t disappear —you always know where to find them in the event of difficulties.*’¹⁴ It also needs a degree of international agreement and regulation to provide the ‘level playing field’ on which to operate in a competitive environment. This explains the ambivalence of corporate capital and the lip-service paid by all political parties to international cooperation on climate change.

The term ‘carbon footprint’ was popularised by fossil fuel corporation BP through its 2005 advertising campaign designed to switch attention and the onus of climate action from the fossil fuel industry on to individual consumers. The strategy borrowed heavily from earlier campaigns by the tobacco industry. It is now employed by the industry as a whole, not least in the phoney ‘choice’ of green energy offered to consumers by competing energy companies (many collapsed over the past year). BP made no attempt to reduce its own carbon footprint, instead expanding its extraction of oil and gas — which continues.

Examples could be multiplied *ad nauseam*. One of the companies showcased at COP26 was Drax in north Yorkshire, once Western Europe’s largest coal-fired power station and still the UK’s

single biggest emitter of CO₂, releasing (according to Drax's own estimates) over 13 million tonnes of CO₂ in 2020. Now converted from coal to burning wood pellets, Drax is the largest 'renewable' fired station in the world. It consumes some 7 million tonnes of pellets (equivalent to around 15 million trees) per year, imported from the US and Canada, where conservation groups are campaigning against the logging of 'old growth' forests. In the UK workers have suffered compromised health from exposure to the pellet's dust and a prosecution by the Health and Safety Executive is ongoing. Drax, of course, doesn't include the CO₂ supply chain costs of its pellets in its claims for sustainability and (in line with the 1997 Kyoto Protocol) it erroneously counts energy produced from forest biomass as carbon neutral, ignoring the emissions (which are similar to coal) generated in the producing countries.¹⁵ The result is that the forest biomass industry is spreading rapidly as forests become the 'new coal'.¹⁶

Already subsidised by the UK taxpayer to the tune of £800 million per year, Drax is seeking further subsidies to develop carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology, the latest technical fix. CCS is currently the focus of a major research effort as financial institutions seek to position themselves to take advantage of the potentially highly profitable opportunities for the firms providing it. Most research focuses on sequestration from industrial point sources (such as cement kilns) with permanent storage in underground geological formations or abandoned mines, or mineral storage in combination with metal oxides to produce stable carbonates. In parallel a host of futuristic proposals includes the latest favourite of the oil giants—'mechanical trees' developed at the Center for Negative Carbon Emissions (CNCE) at Arizona State University to suck carbon from the atmosphere.¹⁷

The CCS acronym is now often found in combination with the equally suspect biomass energy ('bioenergy') as BECCS.¹⁸ Produced through the fermentation of starch, ethanol is already added to petrol: E10 is 10% ethanol, 90% gasoline; B20 is 20% bio- and 80% petroleum-diesel. British Sugar's bioethanol factory in Wissington in Norfolk makes biofuel from locally-grown sugar beet. The harvested beet has profitably displaced food production which is compensated by rising imports.

Equally problematic are claims for the potential of a new 'hydrogen economy'. Most current projects involve massive government subsidies to the corporate sector — promoted without a trace of irony as 'unlocking' private investment¹⁹ — to produce 'blue' or 'grey' hydrogen, based on the decomposition of methane (natural gas). The energy content of the hydrogen produced is less than that of the original fuel and CO₂ is emitted as a by-product, itself requiring CCS. Shell's own massive 'green' carbon capture facility in Alberta emits more GHS than it captures — according to a Global Witness report²⁰ a carbon footprint equivalent to that of over a million fuel-powered cars.

Reduce, reuse, recycle

There are of course numerous ways to reduce CO₂ emissions in ways which yield real social as well as environmental benefits. Transport is the UK's largest direct emitter of greenhouse gases. UK Government plans to end sales of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030 have been accompanied by emission regulations and incentives for the purchase of electric vehicles. At the same time EU and UK vehicle emission targets (which link permitted emissions to the weight of cars) are so soft that three companies — Jaguar Land Rover, Daimler, and Volvo — are actually raising their average car emissions through pushing sales of high-emitting SUVs and 'fake electric' plug-in hybrids. This is projected to increase CO₂ emissions between 2022 and 2030 by some 55 million tonnes.²¹

A huge poster greeting travellers at London's Heathrow Airport declares "*Climate Change: We need to talk about the elephant in the airport.*" A grudging "*We acknowledge our carbon footprint is part of the problem*"²² is followed by a self-congratulatory announcement that the airport's lighting is all secured from (unidentified) 'renewable' sources. Passengers are offered the chance to offset 'their' carbon emissions (and presumably salve their consciences) by making a donation to support the addition of 'sustainable' aviation fuel (SAF, with identical tailpipe emissions to conventional aviation kerosene) and certified reforestation projects.²³ The most effective way of reducing vehicle and aircraft emissions would of course be a national transport strategy – something conspicuously lacking in the policies of Labour as well as the Tories. Having already wasted almost £100 billion on the unnecessary HS2 project, which Boris Johnson originally claimed would ensure that "*no town or city is left behind*", his scrapping of its northern extent to Leeds is estimated — despite the much-hyped replacement Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) — to lead to an extra 12,000 car trips per day.²⁴

Alongside transport the most cost-effective measure for reducing GHG emissions would be massive government investment to reduce energy losses in domestic and industrial heating, insulate existing housing stock, and to require better designed new building development formats that allow for district heating and even the use of heat pumps. Some 15% of UK total GHG emissions come from heating homes. Campaign groups like Insulate Britain²⁵ (whose activities have included civil disobedience for which some of its activists have been jailed) have focused on the need for retrofitting the UK's 29 million homes - the oldest and least energy efficient housing stock in Europe. Starting with social housing – a need made more urgent given projected increases in energy prices – the UK needs a nation-wide programme to upgrade almost every house; a task made more difficult by 'right-to-buy' and the sell-off of local authority housing.

According to a recent government-commissioned report on Britain's food, the global food system (agriculture, food production, distribution and retail combined) is responsible for 25–30% of global greenhouse gas emissions – more than any other sector apart from energy. In the UK, the food system accounts for 20% of domestic emissions. This figure rises to around 30% if imported food is included.²⁶ A planned national food strategy which reduces dependency on imports as well as domestic GHG emissions from farm animals and the loss of soil organic matter would be a major contribution. At a local level the 'Preston Model'²⁷ has demonstrated how local authority procurement can show a way forward.

Such a potential is frustrated even in the most progressive local authorities by successive cuts in government core funding – in the case of the London Borough of Islington a reduction of 70% between 2010 and 2021. Nevertheless there have been some significant innovations even in this hostile environment. For example Islington Council's Bunhill Heat and Power Network (BHPN) uses a heat exchanger to take waste heat from London's underground train network to provide lower cost, greener heat to local homes, schools and leisure centres. BHPN has a combined heat and power (CHP) plant that generates both heat and electricity; the heat is put into the network and electricity is sold into the national grid. Launched in 2012, BHPN now supplies heat to over a thousand homes, a school and two leisure centres. Other district heating and CHP schemes exist. However their wider implementation has been frustrated by the lack of coordinated policies for housing and community development and, where suitable estates exist, by multiple ownership due to council house sales. The government's Green Homes Grant and its Domestic RHI (Renewable Heat Incentive) are focused on individual property owners.

At a national level there is an urgent need for an end to fossil fuel extraction and for a clear plan for genuine renewables. These need to go beyond existing proposals for wind and solar power. Geothermal power (for example) has significant untapped potential: most of the major population centres in the UK lie above or adjacent to major geothermal heat sources.²⁸ The UK's only existing geothermal plant at Southampton services a district heating scheme. Other projects such as one at a former cement works to heat the Eastgate Renewable Energy Village near Stanhope in County Durham have been shelved, though plans are ongoing in Cornwall for a plant near Redruth and another at the Eden project to provide electricity sufficient for some 3,500 houses.

Most importantly the development of renewables should not be left to the 'market'. Both wind and solar are now established technologies due to government development grants. They are proving a profits bonanza to supposedly 'green' energy companies (and the financial structures which own them) thanks to generous state subsidies on top of whatever prices they charge in the wholesale market which are now – following the lifting of the cap on energy tariffs – running at several times what they were last year, without any increase in costs. A progressive energy policy supported by detailed industrial plans rather than empty rhetoric could form part of what has been widely promulgated as a Green New Deal²⁹ – a set of policy ideas that require the state to intervene to incentivise a new, 'green' regulated capitalism. The success of all such initiatives needs to involve local communities and the organised labour movement as well as the commercial interests that will deliver them.

Ultimately, however 'green capitalism' is a contradiction in terms, a contradiction recognised by those who argue for something more – a 'green and just transition'.³⁰ The phrase was appropriated at COP26 in a declaration³¹ signed by 17 capitalist states including the governments of Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Sweden and the US as well as the UK and the EU. It claims derivation from the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 2015 'Guidelines for a just transition'.³² But the declaration's non-committal policies are full of 'envisage', 'making efforts', 'empowering', 'dialogue' and 'capacity building' towards '*Green growth, decent work, and economic prosperity in the transition to net zero*' and conspicuously lacking in any concrete undertakings.

Campaigns for immediate policy changes need to go hand in hand with a wider vision for a more sustainable, socialist transformation of society. One very significant initiative is The Greener Jobs Alliance³³ (not to be confused with the Green Alliance³⁴ a think-tank linking corporate interests with NGOs and decision-makers) which seeks to coordinate a coherent trades union approach to climate change. Supported by Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the TUC, Unite and a number of other trades unions, it focuses on the promotion of skills training and job creation to meet the needs of Britain's rapidly growing low carbon sectors and to green the whole economy. It also emphasises the importance of education and promotes a Trade Union Guide to Just Transition and an introductory Climate Change Awareness course for trades unionists.

'The Global South'

Any significant progress has to involve a more equitable relationship between capital's metropolitan heartlands and the so-called 'developing' world from which much of the wealth has been extracted that underlies the capital which has – past and present – produced the current crisis. This is not simply a matter of morality. Some have suggested that 'developed' nations pay restitution to countries from which through slavery and exploitation their wealth was derived. Such gestures –

paid for out of taxation – would be better replaced by a wealth tax or (better) reappropriation of the capital holdings of large landowners whose wealth was based on that very process. But – especially in the case of climate change as in so much else – that exploitation of ‘third world’ peoples is not ‘just history’; it’s happening now. The wealth of ‘rich’ nations is based on annexation of the resources of others. The advanced capitalist nations are responsible for 79% of historical CO2 emissions. It is the height of hypocrisy for multinational corporations and governments in the ‘global north’ to exhort others to desist from fossil fuels when they are still commissioning new extractive endeavours.

More sinisterly, despite the reduction in Britain’s reliance on coal for energy generation, nothing has been done to stop corporate funding of fossil fuels extraction by the UK’s finance industry which continues to accelerate climate change across the globe. HSBC (Europe’s second largest fossil fuel financier) lobbied against the setting of binding targets for GHG reductions while its advertising declares that it is *“unlocking next-generation solutions to accelerate the transition to net zero.”*³⁵ By funding polluting projects all over the world, UK-based finance capital creates almost double the emissions of the whole of the UK. Greenpeace declares that *“regulating the finance sector is probably the biggest single thing the government could do to stop the global climate catastrophe.”*³⁶ It is also the least likely.

Concerted efforts by the media (led by Johnson and Biden) to blame China and Russia for their supposed intransigence is designed to conceal the fact that (for example) China, the world’s biggest total GHG emitter (much of which comes from production of goods which are imported by the West) nevertheless has per capita emissions that are less than half those of the US, Canada, Australia and Britain. China’s emissions have shrunk by almost 20% between 2015 and 2020 and it claims to have delivered on its own Paris COP21 NDC target ahead of schedule.

One of the consequences of climate change – primarily affecting the poor – will be increased internal displacement and international migration, already approaching levels attributable to military intervention.³⁷ Sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia and significant areas of Iraq and Iran are already heavily affected. Seven countries – responsible for 48% of the world’s historic GHG emissions – collectively spent at least twice as much on border and immigration enforcement (more than \$33.1 billion) as on climate finance (\$14.4 billion) between 2013 and 2018. *“These countries have built a ‘Climate Wall’ to keep out the consequences of climate change, in which the bricks come from two distinct but related dynamics: first, a failure to provide the promised climate finance that could help countries mitigate and adapt to climate change; and second, a militarized response to migration that expands border and surveillance infrastructure. This provides booming profits for a border security industry but untold suffering for refugees and migrants who make increasingly dangerous – and frequently deadly – journeys to seek safety in a climate-changed world.”*³⁸

The reality is that climate is a class issue. The world’s richest 1% already account for some 15% of global emissions, a proportion that is rising. Low-income countries are responsible for less than 1% of historic carbon emissions. More: the problem is an issue of capitalism, specifically financialised capitalism. Thirty-four of the planet’s poorest countries are forced to spend over £21bn on debt repayments – more than five times what they spend on measures to tackle the impact and causes of climate change.³⁹

Climate justice and struggle

The climate crisis is, ultimately, an arena of struggle. As the British Communist Party declares *“It is a measure of the pressure on Western governments – not only from their own peoples but from the overwhelming majority of developing countries, and even from certain sectors of finance capital – that the COP26 summit has resulted in some international agreements so far.”*⁴⁰ Possibly the most significant achievement of COP26 was Shell’s withdrawal from Cambo, the UK’s largest undeveloped offshore oilfield, a withdrawal secured not within the conference hall but by campaigners outside it. As the conference entered its second week and following months of pressure from opposition parties and campaigners, Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said the project should not go ahead. Then Shell, which had a 30 per cent stake in the development, declared it had *“concluded the economic case for investment in this project is not strong enough at this time, as well as having the potential for delays.”*⁴¹

More generally, a major achievement of COP26 — or, rather, of the activism of environmental groups around it — has been to draw attention to the issue of consumption (an area traditionally neglected by Marxism) and particularly to the disproportionate consumption and contribution to the climate crisis by corporate capital and the rich. One of the consequences has been that consumption (hitherto identified, if at all, as a matter of individual choice and lifestyle changes — something welcomed by corporate interests as shifting the buck at the same time as offering new opportunities for profit)⁴² has been revealed as deeply political.

Earth’s resources, geological and biological (in particular the equilibrating capacity of biogeochemical cycles) and even physical space are insufficient for everyone to ‘enjoy’ private luxury on the scale of Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, Bill Gates, Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg. The planet will not support everyone living the wasteful luxury lifestyle of the ‘1%’ whose wealth is in any case extracted from the labour of the ‘99%’. But there is ample evidence that within a sane economic system our Earth has plenty of everything to provide everyone with private sufficiency (food, housing, warmth) and for everyone to enjoy public luxury – good education, health and social care; public libraries, museums, art galleries, sports centres, and swimming baths, playgrounds and community centres, a good transport and communications infrastructure, local greenspace and public parks.

Marx’s dictum ‘from each according to their ability to each according to their needs’ is an objective for all socialists. As David McLellan argues: *“clearly a society based on needs is a very different society from one based on wants”* and *“the world’s resources are limited and more likely to be able to sustain a society based on needs rather than wants.”*⁴³ That perception is increasingly one that drives environmental activism today.

Marx and Engels recognised over a century and a half ago with their concept of the ‘metabolic rift’⁴⁴ that environmental crisis is intrinsic to the political economy of capitalism. That crisis is manifest today in resource depletion, biodiversity loss, monopoly control of global food chains and the general degradation of our planet. Climate change is its most prominent and immediate dimension. Neither ‘green capitalism’ nor individual lifestyle choices – both promoted so vigorously by corporate and financial interests – offer any solution to this most pressing problem of our time. As Barry Commoner, a Marxist ecologist and one of the founders of the modern environmental movement put it a half-century ago in his book, The Closing Circle:

“The world is being carried to the brink of ecological disaster, not by a singular fault, which some clever scheme can correct, but by the phalanx of powerful economic, political and social

forces that constitute the march of history. Anyone who proposes to cure the environmental crisis undertakes thereby to change the course of history."⁴⁵

Fifty years later that is also the perception of groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Insulate Britain and of the People's Tribunal during COP itself. Linked to a broader understanding of the political economy of capitalism, to the struggle for genuinely socialist policies and to the potential strength of organised labour, there is at least some hope that change may be possible.

Notes and references

¹ The IPCC's latest scientific assessment was released in mid-2021. IPCC. 2021. *Climate Change 2021. The Physical Science Basis*. Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/. Reports on climate impacts (including implications for agriculture, ecosystems and human well-being) and on mitigation measures are due in February and March 2022.

² Most recent data shows an annual average annual rise from 2.1mm pa from 1993-2000 to 4.4mm pa from 2013 – 2021. World Meteorological Organisation. 2021. *State of the Global Climate 2020*. Geneva: WMO; <https://public.wmo.int/en/our-mandate/climate/wmo-statement-state-of-global-climate>.

³ 'How a 'typo' nearly derailed the Paris climate deal.' *The Guardian* 16 December 2015.

⁴ IPCC. 2018. *Summary for Policymakers. Global Warming of 1.5°C*. www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/

⁵ Climate Change Committee. 2021. *Independent Assessment of UK Climate Risk: Advice to Government*. London: Climate Change Committee, www.theccc.org.uk/publication/independent-assessment-of-uk-climate-risk/

⁶ The Glasgow Climate Pact can be read on <https://unfccc.int/documents/310475>

⁷ *Morning Star* November 20-21 2021.

⁸ Sian Sullivan. 2009. 'Green capitalism, and the cultural poverty of constructing nature as service provider' *Radical Anthropology* 3 18-27. See also 2013. 'Banking Nature? The spectacular financialisation of environmental conservation' *Antipode* 45 (1) 198-217.

⁹ John O'Neill. 2020. From Socialist Calculation to Political Ecology. In *Marx 200. The significance of Marxism in the 21st century.*, ed. Mary Davis:104-118. London: Praxis Press.

¹⁰ See, e.g. <https://revere.eco/> and <http://letsmakeitpossible.com/>

¹¹ www.wildercarbon.com

¹² See, e.g. www.iucn.org/theme/business-and-biodiversity. The IUCN's MoMo project can be found on www.iucn.nl/en/our-work/funding-nature-conservation.

¹³ James O'Connor. 1998. *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism*,. New York: The Guilford Press.

¹⁴ David Harvey. 2011. *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. London: Profile Books; 9.

¹⁵ See e.g. <https://environmentalpaper.org/the-biomass-delusion/>

¹⁶ <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/08/are-forests-the-new-coal-global-alarm-sounds-as-biomass-burning-surges/>

- ¹⁷ <https://mechanicaltrees.com/> See also *The Wall Street Journal* February 12, 2020 www.wsj.com/articles/carbon-capture-is-winning-fans-among-oil-giants-11581516481
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- ¹⁹ www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-launches-plan-for-a-world-leading-hydrogen-economy
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⁴⁴ See, e.g. Richard Clarke. 2020. Climate, capital, class and crisis. *Theory & Struggle* 121: 32-43.

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