

The logo for 'Ebb' magazine, featuring the word 'Ebb' in a bold, sans-serif font inside a white, angular shape.A white rectangular button with the text 'Essays & Interviews' in a light grey font.A white rectangular button with the text 'Reviews Focus' in a light grey font.A white rectangular button with the text 'Patreon' in a light grey font.A white rectangular button with the text 'Issues About' in a light grey font.A photograph of a tree with sparse green leaves and a large piece of orange fabric draped over its branches. The background shows a dark, rocky shoreline and a body of water under a pale sky.

# COP27 and Imperialism: Weaving a Crown of Thorns for the Global South

28-11- Alexia Alkadi-Barbaro  
2022 | and Zeyad el Nabolsy

Compared to the COP26 summit in Glasgow last year, the COP27 summit in Sharm el-Sheikh has been distinguished by greater inclusion of voices from the Global South, as evidenced by the acceptance

of a proposal to create a 'loss and damage' fund for developing countries that are suffering from climate disasters. However, it remains to be seen how the mechanisms for the implementation of this fund will be worked out. Western developed countries were vocal in their opposition to the fund throughout the summit, and it was only due to relentless pressures by developing countries that they eventually relented. If past events are anything to go by, then it is highly unlikely that the most vulnerable countries will get to have a substantial say in how the climate fund is operated. In fact, the Western developed countries are already trying to use this as an opportunity to drive a wedge between developing countries and China, whose lending and investment policy presents a favourable alternative to 'strings-attached' IMF funding. This is precisely one of the hallmarks of 'climate

colonialism': a concept that refers to the deployment of justifications ostensibly related to the need to bring the causes of anthropogenic climate change under control, but which in fact serve to legitimize the domination of weaker, poorer states in the periphery of the world-system by stronger wealthier states in the core. What this means is that those who are most responsible for the impending catastrophe will get to dictate the terms of the response (even if ineffective) in a manner that would ensure they can externalize the costs to those who are least culpable. It is well known that poorer countries in warmer climates will be the most severely affected as the planet continues to warm.

Any socialist response, even at the level of mere rhetoric, which discounts the significance of imperialism to debates about how best to respond to climate change is

functionally equivalent to acquiescence to a world where a starving mass of racialised people in the Global South will be left to suffer while Europe and America are transformed into gated continents; 'fortress Europe' and 'fortress America' respectively. We currently have around 270 million people who are faced with hunger due to political conditions to which climate-shocks have been causally relevant. And by 2050, 143 million people in the Global South will become climate refugees – people who have contributed the least to anthropogenic climate change will be left to suffer and die as the West fortifies its borders against a perceived racial contagion. In the worst-case scenario, such conflicts will take on the form of racially inflected wars. There will not just be 'water wars' for instance, but also 'race wars over water'. This is the future which awaits us if a global

'Green New Deal' which neglects the past and actuality of imperialism is allowed to garner support and to pass for a 'socialist solution' to the climate crisis.

Despite the concessions made by developed countries at the COP27, it is unlikely that they will be followed up with substantial action. The \$100 billion per year which wealthy countries committed to at the COP15 in 2009 in Copenhagen as an 'adaptation fund' to assist countries in the periphery in their transition to 'greener' development paths has not materialized and seems unlikely to ever do so.

Moreover, what has been contributed so far has been mostly in the form of loans (as opposed to grants), with all the perpetuation of ties of dependency and systematic value-drain from the South to the North that this form of 'aid' habitually entails. Note also that this amount is not even close to the 6% of Global North

GNP (\$2.3 trillion per year) which is outlined as necessary for a just transition in the historic Cochabamba People's Agreement.

As things stand now, the agenda seems to be more land grabbing in the Global South in the name of carbon offsets, and the pursuit of 'net-zero' through mono-cultural tree planting on land which has been cleansed of its indigenous people. As Max Ajl notes, Biden's discourse of 'net-zero' is primarily aimed at placating Western oil and gas companies, by making it clear that they will not be required to reduce production and that their assets will not be devalued. What is apparent is that the ruling classes in the Global North seek to confuse their constituents through illegitimate abstractions, 'net-zero' being a prime example of this strategy. These ruses obfuscate the social and political terrain upon which different solutions to the

climate crisis should be contested.

Representatives of the ruling class in the Global North seek to hide the fact that it has been overwhelmingly responsible for anthropogenic climate change, as in Biden's statement last year that 'We can keep the goal of limiting global warming to just 1.5 degrees Celsius within our reach if we come together, if we commit to doing our part of each of our nations (sic) with determination and with ambition. That's what COP26 is all about.' At the COP27, Biden maintained the same stance, emphasizing that the U.S. was working towards its goals. The problem, however, is that the U.S. defines its goals unilaterally and presents an ahistorical framing of the crisis and of who is responsible for it. Between 1850 and 2011, Europe and America were responsible for 52% of global cumulative emissions of greenhouse gases. What this

implies is that an equitable solution would distribute burdens in a manner that would cost the Global North more than it would cost the Global South.

To have a 50% chance of reaching the goal of ensuring that global temperatures do not increase by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial times, the number of gigatons of Carbon emitted after the beginning of 2020 cannot exceed 500. Because the U.S. has the highest per capita rate of emissions among the world's large emitters of carbon (excepting Saudi Arabia and Australia) at 16 tons per person, to stay within the global emissions threshold it is necessary to demand that the U.S. reduce its emissions per capita *at a faster rate* than countries with much lower rates of emissions per capita. The U.S. would require an annual reduction of around 20% in its carbon dioxide



emissions to stay within the global carbon budget (relativised to per capita emissions), whereas, for example, China would only need a 10% annual reduction, and Brazil would require only 3.4%. As John Ross observes, the dominant U.S. discourse calls for a 50% reduction in its emissions by 2030, which would enable the U.S. to remain a privileged state able to have per capita emissions which are 42% higher than China's are today. Moreover, the demand for a uniform percentage reduction without discrimination is likely to hinder the development of countries which have hardly contributed anything to global greenhouse gas emissions, e.g., most African countries. Yet Biden still maintained the 50% reduction in emissions by 2030 line at COP27. The aforementioned points were conveniently ignored.

Another imperialist ruse that the U.S. and its allies have

succeeded in pulling concerns their efforts to render military related emissions invisible on carbon budgets. Despite the fact that the U.S. military has a larger carbon footprint than most countries in the world, military related emissions have been only partially reported. The U.S. military budget, geared towards the development and procurement of weapons which guzzle up oil-derived fuels such as the F-35 fighter jet (which burns 5,600 liters of fuel per hour), constitutes 40% of the world's military spending. Thus, demilitarisation must be at the top of the climate agenda. A topic which representatives of the U.S. ruling class were keen to keep off it entirely.

Another manner in which imperialist relations are left unchallenged by the climate action discourse of the COP27 is that emissions tend to be calculated on a production-basis rather than on a

consumption basis. Emissions which are counted as the product of developing or poorer countries, but which express the systematic drain of value from the South to the North – for example, outsourced manufacturing activities of Western-based multinationals exploiting cheap Southern labour, based on global prices differences (differences which persist even when one adjusts for productivity levels) for products of the same value, i.e., products with value x, measured based on socially necessary labour time, produced in some Global South country may be priced far lower than products with value x produced in some Global North country – should be counted as emissions for which the developed countries with their conspicuous consumption are responsible. Clarifying the two different modes of calculation is important because it also

makes it clear that although a country like China would be seen as the largest polluter in the world on the basis of production-based emission calculations, this would not be the case if we adopt a consumption-based framework.

The climate action plan that is being proposed by the ruling class in the Global North and which externalizes the costs to the Global South is part of a prolonged attack on the gains of anti-colonial movements in the aftermath of the retreat of the Bandung-era project(s) in the 1970s. Anthropogenic climate change threatens to roll back nearly all of the social, health, and economic gains which have been achieved in the aftermath of independence.

The climate action plan presented at COP27 also signals the continuation of a policy of ignorance of and contempt towards popular

anti-imperial movements, and demands made from poor, working class peoples from nations within the Global South, as well environmental movements led by Black and indigenous peoples in the Global North. It is worth illustrating how movements for global consciousness and demands for environmental protection from industries, policies, and economic adjustment programs have long demanded localised environmental practices and knowledge to be central in determining green technologies and economic policies around questions of environmental preservation.

The connection between local environmental movements and anticolonial movements illustrates how people within the Global South have long demanded setting an environmental agenda that is antiracist, anticapitalist, abolishes the afterlives of the colonial international

hierarchical order and is both future oriented while taking into account the environmental harms of the past. While many of the popular led environmental movements that took off in the 1960s and rose to prominence throughout the three decades that followed were localised in form – that is, confined to national contexts and thus dealing with local issues pertaining to immediate ecological surroundings – growing consciousness of the unequally inherited effects of environmental degradation among historically racialised nations within the Global South led to convergences between local and global consciousness.(1)

Popular narratives about the rise of environmental degradation usually find their origin stories in the early 1970s, when the United Nations' Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm resulted in the declaration to

focus on “underdevelopment” and “overpopulation” as factors central to environmental degradation. By 1973, with the reverberations of the first oil-shock felt on a global scale, shifts in the types of energy being used (oil versus nuclear) became a predominant issue especially within the United States and across Western Europe. Spurred by the outbreak of grassroots movement actors in the United States and across the Global North, eco-friendly development initiatives were introduced to transnational corporations headquartered in the U.S. and Europe and operating in resource rich nations within the Global South. However, by the mid-1970s, with economic and political pressures for recently decolonised nations to rapidly industrialise, elites at the state level in the Global North and Global South did not succeed in embracing or requiring environmentally conscious

policies around economic development. Meanwhile, amidst the backdrop of elite-driven political discourse and technocratic planning over what should be, and what could be done while still promoting the common good of the international economy, grassroots movements that resulted in the establishment of transnational NGOs like Greenpeace International or Friends of the Earth provided a platform for progressive environmental agendas premised on taking seriously (at least by their own account) popular environmental movements across the globe. (2) But between each of these major historical moments was the often unacknowledged work on behalf of anticolonial activists within the Global South or their diasporas in the U.S. organising to ensure that the gains made during and after movements for decolonisation would not be



rolled back in the grip of neo-imperial politics.

The intersection between anticolonial movements and environmental consciousness can be traced, in part, to the organising work of a handful of transnational activists influenced by the rise of Pan-Africanism. Figures such as Trinidadian activist and ecological engineer Pauluu Kamarakafego, Australian-Indigenous environmental activist and poet Jack Davis, Black American activist and educator Thais Aubry, for example, all overlapped in their various forms of activism around land rights for African, Black American, Aboriginal and Indigenous people of the Pacific and North America in the mid-20th century. Historian Quito Swan has recently illustrated how Kamarakafego's transnational travels from the 1960s onward helped to forefront Black environmental consciousness within both elite-driven and

grassroots movements  
agendas in the United States,  
Ghana, Trinidad, Bermuda,  
Cuba, Australia, and Fiji. (3)

Kamarakafego's  
environmental agenda  
focused on how movements  
for self-determination could  
center solutions for moving  
beyond ecologically  
extractivist practices. Along  
with contemporaries such as  
Walter Rodney and Kwame  
Nkrumah, Kamarakafego  
rightly predicted that  
ecological extractivism would  
be paramount to the  
continuation of economic  
domination set in place  
through colonisation, and  
solidified during the neoliberal  
counterrevolution on behalf of  
Western Europe and the United  
States. His activism centered  
on fostering and bringing to  
the forefront of international  
policy localised, indigenous  
knowledge of how best to  
care for and produce raw  
materials. In each place that  
Kamarakafego travelled, he

would meet with local activists who were often farmworkers, hear about the issues they faced with massive agricultural farmlands owned and run by European or American private corporations, and help to strategise ways to build a transnational consciousness about these problems. In effect, Kamarakafego, along with other activists of his time, sought to sow consciousness about how localised environmental issues stemmed from the racialised economic policies coming out of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, peddled by elite-actors within the Global North.

Like Kamarakafego, Jack Davis and Thais Aubry spent years organising and helping to raise local and transnational knowledge about the shared environmental struggles that African, Black and Indigenous communities faced, and the need for a collective,

transnational grassroots movement that sought to put Indigenous land knowledge at the forefront of international agendas. Inspired by the Pan-African movement for self-determination, Davis travelled to the United States to work alongside Black organisers such as Queen Mother Moore and to build alliances with Indigenous people around land rights and environmental self-determination. His work was influential in mobilizing Aboriginal self-determination movements in Australia. This Aubry organized around environmental land rights for Pacific Islanders from the 1960s through to the 1970s. Her consistent involvement in the Women Speak Out! A Report of the Pacific Women's Conference helped to build a transnational Black and Aboriginal feminist environmental consciousness about the way in which economic policies and environmental technologies

from the Global North together not only posed a problem for non-Western forms of self-determination, but for Black and Aboriginal women's liberation.

All three of these figures came of age during the rise of mass rural farmworker uprisings across the Black Atlantic in the mid-twentieth century. Chief among these uprisings were those spurred in Ghana between 1945 and 1951. In large part brought on by increasing discontent among Ghanaian farmers with British colonial control over cocoa crops, extractivist policies, and the environmentally degrading effects of mass agricultural farm lots, farmworkers movements quickly spread, colliding with broader movement politics in the Global South to secure land rights among Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples. Farmworker movements that sought to center the environment and the demand

for overcoming economic domination spanned from the Caribbean, West Africa, and the United States. These were, in part, early attempts to make anticolonial environmentalism a part of the international human rights agenda at the United Nations. At the end of his life, Kamarakafego himself worked as a consultant on rural development and renewable energy resources. He helped build the International Network of Small Island Developing States of NGOs and Indigenous People, and served on the executive and steering committees on the UN Commission on Sustainable Development reporting on the demands of farmworkers movements across the Black and Indigenous diaspora.

Kamarakafego, Davis, and Aubry are just a few representative examples of many environmental activists who followed after them and sought to build transnational

agendas for environmental racial justice. In the late 1970s, on the Southside of Chicago, Black environmental justice activists and their white allies came together to form People for Community Recovery (PCR) which, while initially focused on the overdue repair work in Altgeld Gardens, would become best known for its work calling attention to and demonstrating against urban environmental pollution once it became known that the Southside of Chicago had a higher rate of cancer than in any other part of the city. PCR activists argued that, due to the heavy concentration of industrial pollution, residential communities in the area were exposed to exorbitantly higher rates of toxic chemicals compared to other communities across Chicago. By the 1980s, PCR activists were travelling to Brazil, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, South Africa and Indigenous communities within the United

States. They would end up collaborating with Greenpeace to halt the transnational actions of ChemWaste which operated in several nations and in the Southside of Chicago. Hazel Johnson, the founder of PCR, and the activists involved would again highlight that local issues required a transnational response rooted in popular movement demands.<sup>(4)</sup> As of today, race in the United States continues to be the largest contributor to whether one lives next to a toxic waste dump or not.

Aware of the unequally inherited effects of climate change on people within the Global South, especially food security and forced migration, these early activists influenced by the global anticolonial moment foreshadowed a strand of environmental consciousness that is necessary for combating the possibility of neo-imperial climate strategies, strategies that



continue to put unfettered capitalist economic profit over the livelihood of the people. Their activism prefigured the organising necessary to attend to the environmental catastrophes we and they have inherited today. To undo the continuation of neo-imperial 'green technology transfers' and elite-decision making power, a space must be opened up on an international scale that takes seriously the demands of the people in the Global South slated to bear the brunt of climate disaster. Their claims have long been articulated, the question is if we choose to listen, and how we choose to respond.

## References

(1) For more on this, see: David Naguib Pellow. *Resisting global toxics: Transnational movements for environmental justice* (MIT Press, 2007).

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(4) Pellow, *Ibid.*

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