

NLNOLI001

Olivia Nolan

ECO2008S

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## **The Plundered Planet: Why We Must- and How We Can- Manage Nature for Global Prosperity Book Review**

Paul Collier's book *The Plundered Planet* is a cry out to environmentalists and the average global citizen to step outside of any preconceived opinion that they might have regarding global sustainability and the earth's natural resources. Collier urges the reader to instead step into the logic of an economist. While at first glance one might think that this implies endorsing greed with no consideration for any of the planet's precious natural resources, Collier reassures the reader that it is not that. Rather it just means that humanity as a unit must strive to better understand the variables and consequences of plundering in its "crude forms" (Collier, 2010:101).

I was at first apprehensive as to what stance Collier was going to take on the complex matters of maintaining global sustainability and prosperity while at the same time lifting a substantial percentage of the world's population out of poverty and keeping within limits to avoid the catastrophe of global warming. He seems very aware of this reaction from his readers so goes to lengths to explain his stance by speaking in extremities. He classifies people into "ostriches" and "romantics" (but seems to be a

lot more prejudice against the romantics) (Collier, 2010:xi). The romantics are those who “see nature as so special that we are merely its curators” whereas the ostriches represent the most greedy and inconsiderate of people associated with evil economists (Collier, 2010:32-33). I was skeptical about the use of these extremes because it seemed as though Collier was simply generalizing and avoiding the topic at hand. However, by the end of the book he makes good points about the flaws and mental-blocks which romantic environmentalists are guilty of which seem trivial on the surface but when adopted by the majority can be extremely harmful globally (Collier, 2010:212). Notions such as the banning of genetically modified foods and disapproval of commercial farming which romantics can be guilty of are some to mention but these will be discussed in greater detail later on.

On a perhaps not so serious note, a few of Collier’s habits in his writing become apparent and are bothersome. Firstly, I find that he can be rather insensitive or clumsy in the phrases that he uses when trying to make a point. This could just be attributed to the hyper-aware state that social media and society seems to be over recent years but does not discredit this reaction. For example, in comparing two imaginary countries to make a point, Collier gives them the names “the Boring Republic” and “Boringstan.” (Collier, 2010:57) As trivial as this may seem, it was still noticeably unnecessary as the reader could draw false conclusions about Collier’s political beliefs from it. Also, Collier tends to give the reader the impression that he thinks very highly of himself as throughout the book he provides anecdotes in which the reader is made very aware that Collier has powerful friends in high places. True though that may be, this subtle arrogance seems unnecessary.

Moving on from personal peeves to the greater meaning in the text, Collier is constantly questioning whether we should preserve natural resources not in a romantic sense but for the benefit of future generations or whether it matters at all seeing as our “propinquity” (closeness) is far from future citizens (Collier, 2010:26). In this sense he is also posing the question of who does nature belong to. He answers this by stating that it belongs to nobody as humans were not born to be “custodians” of nature but rather to interact with it as we are inherently apart of it (Collier, 2010:33). The question of how to handle natural resources regarding future generations is of great “moral significance” (Thomas, 1983:1). Many are quick to argue that “destruction [of natural resources] is shortsighted” and feel a personal loss when considering that there may no longer be any polar bears in the next ten years due to humanity’s obsession with economic prosperity (Thomas, 1983:3). However, Collier attempts to answer the question economically, by saying that whatever is plundered or nonexistent for future generations, it is our duty to provide something else of equal value, mainly savings or investments in infrastructure or technology (Collier, 2010:155). I agree with this because the loss of a mineral asset or animal species may mean guilt and even the downfall of mankind, but it has no impact in the greater scheme of the planet which will be evolving and continuing long after humanity destroys itself by applying the specific economic theory of capitalism.

Regardless of how ‘cold’ economic theory may appear to a reader not invested in its study, ethics and general concern for humanity are evident in Collier’s economic reasonings. He focuses on poverty and hunger in “low-income rich-resource”

countries (Collier, 2010:109). Furthermore he proves that “nature is the lifeline for countries of the bottom billion [the poorest countries]- and thus cannot remain untouched” (Canuto, 2010). It is quite commonsensical that countries within Africa, for example, rely heavily on agriculture (therefore the effects of global warming will be even more dire for countries like these) and that “African countries remain heavily dependent on natural resources- both renewable and non-renewable- for economic growth” (Harvey, 2014:1). Therefore, when “high-income poor-resource” countries plunder poorer African countries, not only are natural assets being depleted which do not ‘belong’ to these ‘high-income’ countries, these countries are taking advantage of the impoverished people of ‘low-income’ countries by removing the opportunity for themselves to benefit from the resource as an asset to be invested in or exported (Collier, 2010:65). This logic is sound and Collier explains how low-income rich-resource countries should go about utilizing their natural assets (Collier, 2010:62). The first step is for “a society... to turn nature into assets through a discovery process” (Canuto, 2010). This discovery process, I find, is incredibly important for two reasons. Firstly, it will make ‘low-income’ countries themselves more aware of the assets (resources) available to them and secondly through discovering more about assets and resources, we can achieve a better understanding of the planet and how we can plan and budget in terms of consumption and utilization of these assets (Collier, 2010:67). Collier also raises an interesting view on aid to ‘low-income’ worse-off countries. This being that though it would be much more helpful for donors to donate to discovering resources in these countries, often they are afraid they will be “criticized by... the compassion NGOs and the environmental NGOs” (Collier, 2010:76). This is

another example of romantic environmentalist reasoning becoming an obstacle for progress which Collier wants his readers to consider.

The second step which countries should take in order to maximize the use of their natural resources is to “capture’ them through a taxation process” (Canuto, 2010). One theme which occurs over and over again throughout the book is the role which Collier feels governments ought to play in capturing “the value of depleting natural assets” on behalf of its citizens (Collier, 2010:46). A central message in *The Plundered Planet* is how it is imperative that all governments and citizens work towards the same goal with the same understanding and this comes through in this explanation of the second step. Collier has “a strong faith in the power of well-informed ordinary citizens” (Canuto, 2010). He speaks a lot about corruption and how, a lot of the time, plundering occurs because some “corrupt bureaucrat” or politician believe that they can “use their revenue for personal gain” (Collier, 2010:101). At first it felt presumptuous for the sheer amount of times he refers to corruption as a main factor in plunder. But upon consideration, it does make sense. It makes sense especially when one considers that many “accounts” of country spending are not entirely open to the public and therefore, it becomes very easy for a corrupt official to sneakily invest some of the country’s revenue in a foreign account never to be heard of again (Collier, 2010:101). This lack of “transparency” between government and citizen is thus problematic because the public will go on consuming and demanding at the same rate for resources ignorant of their own individual responsibility of the plunder (Collier, 2010:87). This is significant and why Collier

places emphasis on the need for “honest leaders with a sense of national purpose” in order for this “crude form” of plunder to be dealt with (Collier, 2010:101).

These comments thus made have been to do with the “chain of decisions” Collier suggests for countries to follow in order to truly harness their natural resources to their advantage without plundering them (Canuto, 2010). However, Collier also focuses on issues such as global warming and carbon dioxide emissions, the benefits of nuclear power, as well as the need to understand that commercial farming, while it produces rather large emissions of carbon dioxide, and the advancement of technology through GMOs are crucial to being able to solve the problem of how we can aid the hungry and unlucky while being prosperous and healthy to the environment (Collier, 2010: 181). The way in which Colier dealt with the issue of carbon dioxide emissions inspired me. Firstly, his describing it as a debt to society places the reader with the correct idea (Collier, 2010: 174). This idea is that it is society’s debt as a whole and trying to blame one economy for the effects of global warming is a waste of time (Collier, 2010:178). It is not a secret that “as the economy grows so does the rate at which the carbon dioxide resulting from the burning of coal, oil and gas accumulates in the air” (Lynas, 2011:52). However, instead of approaching the issue as an “ideological” one, Collier places emphasis that global warming is very much “a technical problem and... is therefore amenable to a large technical solution” (Lynas, 2011:66).

Collier, from here, promotes the use of nuclear technology. I agree with this reasoning because while the initial costs of building a nuclear plant are larger than other forms

of energy production, it's "external costs to society" are virtually zero by comparison (World Nuclear Association, 2016). This is because no green house gases are emitted, the only real problem is the skepticism and lack of support people give it after incidences like Chernobyl and issues of nuclear waste management (World Nuclear Association, 2016). Nuclear power and other innovative powers like it are "essential part[s] of the battle to contain global warming" (Collier, 2010:182). In reality "to cut global emissions in half by 2050... would require the construction of 12,000 nuclear power stations" because energy consumption will in no way start to decline (Lynas, 2011:71). While this is still not exactly hopeful, it is the best alternative for the time being and therefore I agree with Collier on this point.

In continuing speaking about technology, Collier, in the last pages of his book, condemns any romantic environmentalists who may still have a "love affair with peasant agriculture" (Collier, 2010:212). By this he means that people who are opposed to the advancement of technology in agriculture, farm size and genetically modified crops which, though have the stigma of being unnatural are the closest thing we have to a solution to world hunger, are only harming the bigger picture (Collier, 2010:226). This reasoning that Collier presents is completely justified because if the majority of people maintain this romantic mindset then there will be "no market for discoveries pertinent to... crops... and therefore no research" and global issues of poverty will continue to persist or get worse (Collier, 2010:222). Collier, therefore, at his core wants to aid humanity in the most logical and effective method. This is noble and the final sentiment he leaves is rather simple, that of in order to survive and

survive prosperously, we must utilize nature but at a level of “international coordination.” (Collier, 2010:237)

*The Plundered Planet* is enjoyable for anyone concerned with both the well-being of the planet but are informed enough to understand that we cannot simply leave nature alone for its own sake at mankind’s expense.

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