

2021 Is The Year Of Catastrophic Climate Change, But Capitalism Doesn't Care – OpEd

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Body

Since I first saw it on Twitter last week, I've been haunted by the photo above, showing holidaying diners by the sea, or by a lake, seemingly oblivious to the wildfires engulfing a forest on the hills behind. It may or may not be from Turkey, recently ravaged by uncontrollable wildfires. Or it may be, as one commentator suggested, from similar wildfires in Oregon four years ago. It may even be photoshopped, but in the year that wildfires have engulfed forests in country after country across the globe to an unprecedented degree, in yet another year of record-breaking heat in numerous locations, and in its juxtaposition of this disaster with the people blithely, self-obsessedly asserting their right to enjoy themselves, it vividly captures an uncomfortable truth about our collective inability, as human beings, to put aside the allure of self-gratification that is so engrained in so much of our culture, when faced with an existential threat that is largely of our own making.

In that sense, it is as profound as the photo, from 2017, of US golfers continuing their pointless game, in Washington State, while the world around them was consumed by flames, which prompted me to use the photo to accompany an article I wrote in May 2019, entitled, I Pledge My Allegiance to the Struggle for Survival Against Catastrophic **Climate Change**, inspired by the campaigning of Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion, and by the publication in 2018, by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on **Climate Change**, of a landmark report in which, as the Guardian described it, the world's leading **climate** scientists warned there was "only a dozen years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5C, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people."

Unfortunately, while not being oblivious, or in denial, or still enslaved, like so many of my fellow human beings, by simply trying to survive in a harsh capitalist system that exploits so many for the benefit of the comparatively few, my fine words in 2019 haven't translated into reality. I have continued to work towards the closure of the prison at Guantánamo Bay, to raise money to live on, to play music and to chronicle London in photographs on daily bike rides.

Nevertheless, it would be fair to say that environmental concerns have continued to nag at me over the last two years. Last year, when Covid first emerged, and most of the business of gratification — involving international

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tourism and the hospitality business — ground to a halt, revealing how much it has taken us over as a species, I saw environmental hope in its collapse.

As the giddy, hectic, merry-go-round of escapism fell, as insanely crowded commuter journeys to largely pointless jobs were paused, and as building sites, with all their attendant pollution, also ground to a halt, it seemed that we might have an opportunity to recalibrate our notions of what existence means, and, crucially, to recognise our impact on this planet, our only home, and to take significant steps to mitigate the worst effects of the already unfolding patterns of cataclysmic climate change that our existence — and our dependance on burning fossil fuels — have done so much to unleash.

We "cannot bear very much reality"

But it was not to be. "Humankind", as T. S. Eliot wrote, "cannot bear very much reality." The notion of the supremacy of self-gratification has been so powerfully engrained in us, the economically fortunate ones — particularly over the last 40 years or so — that our fellow citizens, in significant numbers, soon forgot the beauty of the clean air, the silence and the return of birdsong to our city centres in the first Covid lockdown, and felt stifled, longing to return to whatever their previous obsessions had been — tourism, spectacle, over-consumption.

As cars returned to London's streets in significant numbers, and construction lorries once more began transporting their deadly cargoes, and as the air once more began to taste of petrol, I found myself reflecting on how, despite our supposed intelligence, human beings cannot, in general, cope with its potential. People live their lives shuffling from one act of self-gratification to another — eating, drinking, obsessing about their looks, being relentlessly competitive, craving novelty, buying corporate goods marketed as the triumph of individual expression and self-entitlement.

Around the world, more people are more spoiled than ever before, even though most of the world's population still lives in drudgery. But think back throughout human history to how harsh life was before the all-encompassing comforts that so many of us take for granted: a home of our own, a car (or two), permanent electricity, heating and air-conditioning, fridges and cookers and washing machines, healthcare, an endless supply of whatever we want, whenever we want it, from supermarkets that offer a cornucopia of choice that, in the UK at least, simply didn't exist until the late 1980s.

We, the enormously fortunate, have been led to believe that we can have, and are entitled to have, whatever we want, whenever we want, and we are so detached from the realities of production that we either don't know, or don't care, how and where our food is produced, our clothes are made, or our gadgets manufactured.

In contrast, those exploited to enable so many of us to live like kings and queens, and princes and princesses, continue to live lives that more closely resemble the "nasty, brutish and short" lives that Thomas Hobbes described in the 17th century, experienced by the majority of our ancestors throughout human history. And yet our comfort, ironically, has led to us being more detached than ever from the reality of what a sustainable existence actually involves. The more we get, the less we know — or the more we forget.

In other ways, we still live with the legacy of those centuries, those millennia — via religions, for example, which promised a heavenly afterlife in exchange for good behaviour on earth, as an antidote to the harshness of life, and that also posited universal father figures as an explanation for the otherwise inexplicable consciousness that, when we are not simply following our urges, endows us — perhaps even curses us — with the ability to wonder who we are, and what it all means, and, unbidden, to reflect on and perhaps even be traumatised by the knowledge of our certain death.

That ability ought to mean that we recognise that we live on a truly miraculous planet that sustains a bewildering array of life, but that could become uninhabitable — for us at least — if we don't treat it with respect. I've recently been watching 'The Planets', Professor Brian Cox's extraordinary series that powerfully frames the miracle of life on earth in terms of chemistry and physics, surveying five billion years of the history of our solar system, and establishing, repeatedly, how fortunate we are to exist at all, when other worlds that might perhaps have sustained

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life — our nearest neighbours Venus and Mars, for example — suffered such drastic chemical changes that all hope of biological life establishing itself was extinguished.

Our life here on earth is precious — miraculous, even — and yet, when confronted with incontrovertible evidence that our collective actions are increasingly suicidal, we find ourselves paralysed.

On one level, of course, I understand that paralysis. To return to Eliot, we simply cannot bear very much reality. Those who grasp the enormity of the environmental crisis risk losing friends by insisting that we stop thinking of ourselves, and commit to drastic collective environmental action instead. But in another way, we are being comprehensively failed by our leaders, and by the capitalist system that they — with our complicity — so slavishly defend.

The role of capitalism

As the New York-based author Hamilton Nolan explained in an article for the Guardian two days ago, the G20, "that coalition that is as good a proxy as any for the combined will of the world's richest countries", wrapped up its latest meeting last week "without firm commitments on phasing out coal power, or on what steps nations will promise to take to try to hold global warming to 1.5C." As he added, "This goal is both necessary and, perhaps, unlikely — a report by scientists found that China, Russia, Brazil and Australia are all pursuing policies that could lead to a cataclysmic five degrees of warming."

Nolan proceeded to describe the G20 as "a perfect model of our collective failure to build institutions capable of coping with deep, long-term, existential problems" that cannot be solved by war, with which our leaders find it uncommonly easy to engage. As he explained, "On the one hand, the head of the United Nations says that there is no way for the world to meet its 1.5C warming goal without the leadership of the G20; on the other hand, a recent analysis found that G20 members have, in the past five years, paid \$3.3tn in subsidies for fossil fuel production and consumption. The same group that claims to be bailing out humanity's sinking ship with one hand is busily setting it aflame with the other hand."

As he also explained, "As overwhelming and omnipresent as the climate crisis is, it is not the core issue. The core issue is capitalism. Capitalism's unfettered pursuit of economic growth is what caused climate change, and capitalism's inability to reckon with externalities — the economic term for a cost that falls onto third parties — is what is preventing us from solving climate change. Indeed, climate change itself is the ultimate negative externality: fossil-fuel companies and assorted polluting corporations and their investors get all the benefits, and the rest of the world pays the price. Now the entire globe finds itself trapped in the gruesome logic of capitalism, where it is perfectly rational for the rich to continue doing something that is destroying the earth, as long as the profits they reap will allow them to insulate themselves from the consequences" — or, to be more accurate, to delude themselves into thinking that they can insulate themselves from the consequences. Money, as Extinction Rebellion have been pointing out, is of no use on a dead planet, or one in which wildfires devour your home, or flash floods make it uninhabitable.

In conclusion, Nolan stated, "Capitalism is a machine made to squeeze every last cent out of this planet until there is nothing left. We can either fool ourselves about that until it kills us, or we can change it."

Impending collapse

The need to act — and to act immediately — was made even clearer in a truly alarming Guardian article yesterday, revealing that the Gulf Stream — the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) — may collapse if we don't change our way of living immediately. As the Guardian explained, the collapse of the Gulf Stream "would have catastrophic consequences around the world, severely disrupting the rains that billions of people depend on for food in India, South America and West Africa; increasing storms and lowering temperatures in Europe; and pushing up the sea level in the eastern North America. It would also further endanger the Amazon rainforest and Antarctic ice sheets."

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Niklas Boers, from the Potsdam Institute for **Climate** Impact Research in Germany, who conducted the AMOC research, said, "The signs of destabilisation being visible already is something that I wouldn't have expected and that I find scary." He added, "It's something you just can't [allow to] happen."

Boers further explained that it is "not known what level of CO2 would trigger an AMOC collapse", but that it was certain that "the only thing to do is keep emissions as low as possible. The likelihood of this extremely high-impact event happening increases with every gram of CO2 that we put into the atmosphere."

As the Guardian also explained, "Scientists are increasingly concerned about tipping points — large, fast and irreversible **changes** to the **climate**. Boers and his colleagues reported in May that a significant part of the Greenland ice sheet is on the brink, threatening a big rise in global sea level. Others have shown recently that the Amazon rainforest is now emitting more CO2 than it absorbs, and that the 2020 Siberian heatwave led to worrying releases of methane."

The Guardian added, "The world may already have crossed a series of tipping points, according to a 2019 analysis, resulting in 'an existential threat to civilisation.'" The newspaper also noted that a major new report from the Intergovernmental Panel on **Climate Change**, which gave us 12 years to avoid irreversible disaster back in 2018, is due to be published on Monday, and is "expected to set out the worsening state of the **climate** crisis."

For those living close to wildfires, or to those who have suffered through the various incidents of flooding that have also been widespread this year, the realities of cataclysmic **climate change** can no longer be ignored, and it just may be that, as the earth reaches a tipping point, so too may politicians' ability to placate their populations with what Greta Thunberg has so witheringly described as their "fine words" that are followed by no action.

I hope so, because the most compelling truth about **climate change** is that there is no way to avoid it, or to wish it away, and if we don't deal with it now, we will find ourselves dealing with its effects — many of them unspeakably horrendous in their impact on our lives — in the very near future.

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