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Climate crisis: anthropocene or corporatocene?

By Dr S Faizi

The author argues that the term 'anthropocene' to denote the period of the modern environmental crisis is hollow and a political digression from the reality, and that the crisis is a product of corporate exploitation of the earth's system. Putting the blame on the entire human society for the environmental crisis is a Western ideological ploy to shield the corporate culprits who have caused the destruction on the strength of their capital and technology. He therefore proposes the term 'corporatocene' to mark the epoch of environmental crisis. If anything it is the Western colonization and the invention of the steam engine that are the markers of the start of the pandemic assault on the earth's natural systems. Obfuscating the debate on this by introducing politically motivated substitutes will only frustrate the efforts to forge meaningful solutions to the climate crisis.

L'auteur affirme que le terme « anthropocène », qui est utilisé pour désigner la crise environnementale contemporaine, est un terme creux qui ne fait que travestir la réalité, la crise actuelle étant le produit de l'exploitation du système terrestre par les entreprises. Faire porter le chapeau du dérèglement climatique à l'ensemble de la société humaine relève, selon lui, d'un stratagème idéologique qui vise à protéger les entreprises occidentales coupables d'avoir causé la destruction de l'environnement grâce à leur capital et à leur technologie. Il propose de recourir en lieu et place au terme « corporatocène » pour souligner que ce sont en réalité la colonisation et l'invention de la machine à vapeur qui sont à l'origine des premiers assauts contre les systèmes naturels de la planète. Obscurcir le débat en usant d'expédients motivés par des raisons politiques ne fera qu'entraver les efforts visant à trouver des solutions efficaces au dérèglement climatique.

El autor sostiene que el término "antropoceno" empleado para denotar el período de la crisis medioambiental moderna es vacío y una digresión política de la realidad, y que la crisis es fruto de la explotación a la que las corporaciones someten al sistema Tierra. El hecho de culpar al conjunto de la sociedad humana de la crisis medioambiental es una estrategia ideológica occidental para proteger a los culpables corporativos que han provocado la destrucción sobre la base de su capital y tecnología. Por lo tanto, propone el término "corporatoceno" para señalar la época de la crisis medioambiental. En todo caso, son la colonización occidental y la invención de la máquina de vapor las que marcan el comienzo de la agresión pandémica a los sistemas naturales de la tierra. Ofuscar el debate al respecto mediante la introducción de alternativas con motivación política lo único que va a conseguir es frustrar las iniciativas para dar con soluciones significativas a la crisis climática.

The term anthropocene was first proposed by Nobel laureate chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stormer at a meeting of the little known International Biosphere-Geosphere Program in 2000 in Mexico. Anthropocene was meant to be a new geological epoch following the 11700 plus year old post-glaciation period, to capture the impact humans have caused on the earth's biosphere and the climate system. The term persists though it hardly had any takers among the environmental community that is most engaged with the environmental change nor among geologists. Nonetheless, there was a recent proposal, further on the anthropocene semantics, to set the starting year of the epoch at 1950, following the finding of an annual layer of sediment deposition with traces of plutonium in the small Crawford lake of Canada by a team led by Francine McCarthy of Canada's Brock University.

Developed during the West's colonial ride, Western science has been racist and Eurocentric from the start. Especially so are biology and anthropology, from the Swede Carl Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy, who was a hard core racist, to Thomas Jefferson, the politician scientist of US Independence fame. As a masters student I was shocked to find Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* repeatedly referring to countries outside Europe as savage countries. The West has not yet been liberated from that immutable tradition. This new naming is also in line with its racial politics. Let us examine why is it so.

The 2000 proposal mentioned above repeatedly refers to the culprits of the ecosystem damage and climate change as humans (and mankind), thereby shielding the real culprits - that are even recognisable by names - by using humans. The overwhelming responsibility for impairing the earth's ecosystems and for causing the climate change rests with the corporate forces in the West with capital and technology to do so, and not with the huge majority of humanity living in the Global South. They were/are the victims of the depredations of western capital and technology and its impacts on the earth system as well. The anthropocene proponents make the

perpetrators of the planetary atrocities and their victims inseparable, and obfuscate an informed debate on the actual culprits. False prognosis of the environmental crisis will only make the debate on its solution a futile exercise. If this is not a conscious effort it is an inadvertence within the legacy of colonial worldview.

Humans have been modifying the environment with the start of agriculture some ten thousand years ago, following the end of the last glaciation period. Those modifications have been within the resilience and regeneration capacity of the earth system. What has changed the fate of the earth is the imperial onslaught and the politics of violence and mindless exploitation it has engendered. It is not the use of nuclear material that marks the shift in the biospheric trajectory but the acquisition of gun making technology in the West. That was in the late 15th century - both Christopher Columbus who went to the land that was later called America and Vasco da Gama who came to India had it. Guns enabled the West to play havoc in the world, by subjugating peoples who didn't have it. And with the invention of steam engine three centuries later the West devastated the ecosystems and biodiversity of the continent of North America and its human populations annihilated, and to a lesser degree South America too. Australia and New Zealand, no different.

Africa, the home of *Homo sapiens* where we have attained the greatest genetic diversity, was reduced to its current vulnerability - ecological, social and political. Belgians massacred in Congo three times the number of people massacred by Hitler. And a significant part of the human population of Africa was enslaved and transported across the Atlantic. Brutality towards humans, ecosystems and biodiversity, in unprecedented scale. India endured a savage assault on its forests by the British, as historian Ramachandra Guha says.

The colonialism imposed on a larger part of the earth and its people by the West continues in the

economic relations, with periodic resort to violence. Eleven trillion dollars debt of the Global South to the developed countries cripples the ecosystems, biodiversity and peoples of a great part of the world. The West amasses living and mineral resources and uses these twenty times more per capita than those in the South. And in that process they precipitated the climate crisis too.

Imperialism and its industrial revolution are the greatest threat the earth system and humankind have faced. Its impact will stay on for another two centuries, if the pervasive industrial civilisation would last that long. However, it is very unlikely to last that long. Petroleum, which is the fuel of modernity will be exhausted in another 60 years. The earth's fresh water sources have already been reduced to half. With the West's reluctance to significantly reduce carbon dioxide emissions and promoting false solutions instead, the climate crisis will sharpen and a good part of the earth would become uninhabitable in the near future. Meanwhile the Homo sapiens has ceased to be an autonomous species, dependent on technology and medicine right from birth. While the species has doubled its lifespan it also suffered a marked loss in the inclusive physiological fitness. Formation and destruction are an eternal duality of the universe. The industrial civilisation will end its greedy assault on nature in less than a century and humans will then be limited to areas outside the reach of technology.

While the solutions to the climate crisis that the West promotes are largely false solutions to circumvent the imperative of reducing/eliminating the use of fossil fuels, their approach to biodiversity conservation in the Global South is impregnated with violence. The indigenous peoples who have been the historical caretakers of biodiversity have been disenfranchised and alienated in the name of conservation which led to the failure of the conservation project as shown by the estimate of one million species facing the threat of extinction as provided in the 2022 biodiversity assessment by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

Paul Curtzen won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the ozone hole in the Antarctic stratosphere and was closely involved in promoting its global solution and therefore he should know why this particular crisis was resolved while others are not. That the ozone layer was restored by phasing out the human-induced discharge of ozone depleting substances in a relatively short period owes to the fact that the excess of ultraviolet rays that enter the earth due to the hole in the ozone layer was largely to affect the human populations deficient in melanin pigment, that is white- rather pink-skinned people. While the United States President said, "our lifestyle is not up for negotiation" in relation to climate change on the occasion of the Earth Summit in 1992, their position on ozone depletion was starkly different.

Imperialism and its violence, corporate greed and violence are at the root of the ongoing planetary crisis, which will only deepen until it extinguishes the industrial civilisation itself. Attributing the corporate violence, predominantly Western, to the entire humanity, is imaginary and a desperate attempt to enable the culprits to hide behind humanity. Anthropocene therefore is an invalid proposal. Francine McCarthy's work was part of the International Commission on Stratigraphy's working group on anthropocene, assuming that everyone accepts this invalid term and further assuming that a bunch of predominantly Western geologists could name earth events and affairs that matter to the whole humanity as they used to in the colonial period. It is amusing to see someone looking for traces of plutonium in the deep layer of a lake bed and based on that proposing 1950 as the starting year of anthropocene, ignoring the uranium bomb of a good 4.4 tonne weight dropped on Hiroshima five years earlier and the timing known up to the minute. That is, if the presence of radioactive substance has to be taken as a marker.

Any naming of the violence against the earth system caused by imperialism and the corporate forces should naturally reflect the objective reality that the culprits are the corporates and not the people. Corporatocene

is the epoch that we are in, whether the West would like to call it so or not. The illogical 'anthropocene' is a social and political construct, so is 'corporatocene' or its possible synonyms.

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