

## CONFRONTING THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY: A CALL FOR CRITICAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*Increasingly there is a shift away from the Anthropocene (Age of Human) to the Capitalocene (Age of Capital) in the explanation of the climate crisis that the world currently grapples with. For too long, there has been an argument that inaccurately places man at the centre of the climate events that have devastated the ecosystems and posed untold hardships to lives and livelihoods. The shift foregrounds the culpability of economic interests and capital in the climate crisis fuelled by expansive extractions and emissions of harmful gases. The mainstream radical responses from social science scholars have focused on the exigency of the overthrow of capitalism, which thrives on the exploitation of labour and nature. It will however be more practical to seek solutions in reforms because of how entrenched capitalism has become and how it is being steadily reinforced by the institutions of the society. The paper posits three key reforms that social scientists may pursue to lessen the impacts of capital on the climate: conforming democracy, consensus building, and formation of lobby front.*

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Climate Activism, Democracy, Capitalocene, Social Science.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change is arguably one of the critical crises for the world in the 21st century, interlacing with other issues, including social, economic, political, and other structural challenges. There is mounting empirical proof that climate change is distending both the regularity and intensity of global warming, and manifests in extreme climate events (IPCC, 2021; Solaun, K., & Cerdá, 2019; Sperber, 2013). Earth observations reveal that the planet's climate is changing significantly (IPCC, 2021; Santos et al, 2020). Even though Earth's climate has been changing throughout history (Hornsey & Fielding, 2020; Hausfather, Drake, Abbott & Schmidt, 2020), the changes witnessed in the last few decades have been acute. From the 1950s to date, carbon emissions have sharply increased from the highest historical CO<sub>2</sub> level of 300 parts per million (PPM) to close to 420 parts per million (PPM) (NOAA, 2022). The effects of climate change such as heatwaves, harvest disruptions, forest fires, floods, among others, are a common experience across the world (Krishnan et al., 2020; Michetti & Pinar, 2019). The magnitude of the emissions of harmful gases at the turn of the modern era till date has been at an intolerable level, thus creating human security challenges while also posing existential challenges to biodiversity (Betts, 2021; de Boer & Aiking; Williams & Newbold, 2020). This situation is patently precarious, and it holds sparse hope for the future of the humankind.

There have been Anthropocene arguments on the global climate crisis that situate the conundrum in human activities that strain and destabilise Earth's finite resources (see Williams, Abatzoglou, Gershunov, Guzman-Morales, Bishop, Balch & Lettenmaier, 2019). However, other scholars such as Griffin (2017), Moore (2017), Wark (2015), and Huber (2022) have delineated the impacts of human activities and the Age of Capital – Capitalocene - in the historicisation of planetary crisis. They foreground capitalism's environment-making revolution and the necessity of identifying how planetary crises fit into patterns of power, capital and nature established centuries earlier. It is important to understand climate change in terms of the Capitalocene, instead of the Anthropocene, because it makes clear that while climate change is a problem that faces all of humanity, it is not one for which all of humanity is equally responsible, or indeed, that is experienced in the same way by all human beings (Omotayo, Malherbe & van Niekerk, 2022). Thomas et al. (2018) have contended that there is differential human vulnerability to environmental hazards and this, according to them, results from a range of social, economic, historical, and political factors, all of which operate at multiple scales. While adaptation to

climate change has been the dominant focus of policy and research agendas, it is essential to ask as well why some communities and peoples are disproportionately exposed to and affected by climate threats. The stanch drive by the owners of capital to cheapen labour and the environment for purposes of profit-making is most responsible for climate change (Selwyn, 2021; Marques, 2020; Amin, 2014; Moore, 2015). It is noteworthy that capitalism is not only the base of most of the global economy, but also entangled with nature that provides the objects of production. Capitalism is arguably deep-rooted across most of the countries of the world where it is the substructure upon which critical social institutions have been built, thus reinforcing capitalist ethos and in turn being reinforced by it. There appears to be no empirical pathway to controlling the Capitalocene except through reforms. This is the more so since the bipolarity that once characterised the global economy seems to have jaded. It is the argument of this paper that social scientists have critical roles to play in addressing the inherent issues in the capitalist system, especially as they concern climate emergency that the world is embroiled in.

What then are the climate justice roles for social scientists and how are they able to control the effects of capital on the climate? As this paper will show, social scientists working in climate-related fields have written extensively on the climate. The climate discourses in social science have however produced, in the main, two diametrically contrasting perspectives on the effects of capitalism on the environment. While some scholars have argued about the negative effects of capitalist extractions on the environment, some others believe in the benefits that capitalism portends and how its effects on nature are unavoidable hazards. However, because all struggles always entail oppositional politics (Malherbe, 2022), it is believed that, even though there is no consensus among scholars about the Capitalocene, it will be disingenuous to discount the impacts of extractive productions and fossil capitalism on the climate. Hence, social scientists' contributions in relation to the exigent climate crisis is important and central to the climate justice movements. It is the argument of this paper that social scientists need to rethink their interventions in the climate discourses by seeking to reform the social institutions that have aided capitalogenic climate disasters. A proposal of three key reforms that social scientists may pursue is made which may contribute significantly to the climate justice organisation, namely: conforming democracy, consensus building, and formation of lobby front.

In the subsequent sections, a more detailed description of the effects of capitalism on climate change is given, after which the nexus between capitalism, environment, and social science will be examined; then the socio-political reforms that need to happen to rein in the capitalist effects on the climate and some of the areas in which social scientists can work with climate activists to further climate justice will be elucidated. Lastly, the paper will be concluded by reflecting on the possible areas that future social science work on climate justice may follow.

## **2. CAPITALISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Capitalism implies the organisation of economic production and distribution based on private ownership of the means of production (Giddens, 1990). As a universally widespread economic system relying only on its own resources, capitalism develops the process of reproduction indefinitely and on a continually expanding basis (Grossmann & Kennedy, 1992). It relies heavily on the exploitation of the forces of production (labour and the environment), has remained the dominant economic system globally.

The outset of marked climate change coincided with the transition from the traditional society to the modern era which was characterised by fossil capitalism (IPCC, 2021; NASA, 2021; Holt-Giménez, 2019). This presupposes that there is a direct correlation between capitalism and the degradation of the ecosystems. The highest historical CO<sub>2</sub> level before early 1950s was 300 parts per million (PPM) but it has since increased to over 420 PPM (NOAA, 2022). It is noteworthy that the earlier economic modes, before capitalism, had a negligible impact on the ecosystem because they were built mainly around organic agriculture and pastoralism.

According to research evidence, carbon dioxide is now more than 50 percent higher than preindustrial levels, thus showing that there exists a positive long-term relationship between carbon emission and the heightened economic production catalysed by the Industrial Revolution (NOAA, 2022; Yao, Zhang & Zhang, 2019; Bastola & Sapkota, 2015). Capitalism incentivises capital owners to exploit the environment in an unsustainable manner in their search for record profit (Mann, 2022). Capitalists are always seeking new markets and trying to develop new products in the pursuit of profit with little or no concern for the health of the environment (Charitsis et al., 2018; Itçaina, et al., 2016; Giddens, 1990). A leading climate scientist, Michael Mann's words remain fitting.

“The great tragedy of the climate crisis is that seven and a half billion people must pay the price – in the form of a degraded planet – so that a couple of dozen polluting interests can continue to make record profits. It is a great moral failing of our political system that we have allowed this to happen.” (Mann, 2022:2)

The profit drive of capitalism makes it intrinsically restless and (capital) a self-expanding value (Magdoff & Foster, 2011; Giddens, 1990). Capitalists are always seeking new markets, cheap raw materials, overhead reduction; and are virulent against obstacles to super profits. Capitalism accordingly recognises no limits to its own self-expansion, meaning that no amount of profit, wealth, consumption is either enough or too much (Magdoff & Foster, 2011). There is no taming capitalism.

Central to capitalist ethos is competition and based on the inner logic of capital, a business must do everything it takes to survive, or it will die. This means that the environment exists, not as the external surroundings of humankind, which support their lives, and a place for the interaction all of Earth's species of biodiversity, but as a realm to be exploited in a process of growing economic expansion (Magdoff & Foster, 2011).

The antagonism against capitalism remains deep-rooted from 18th century Europe till date. Capitalism is seen as a system fraught with large-scale exploitation - including of nature - and inequality. The socio-historical evidence of social disorganisation that marked the emergence of capitalism in Europe and later the colonisation in the Global South, driven by the capital, laid the foundation for the criticisms and cynicisms against capitalism. In the emerging economic system in the post-traditional society, a few, powerful rich profited greatly while the vast majority worked long hours for low wages (Ekpenyong, 2008). This epoch was also characterised with mass exodus of manpower from countryside to the cities in search for paid employment. The aftermath of the movement of rural dwellers to emerging cities in search for wage labour was the beginning of urban decay occasioned by such problems as overcrowding, pollution, noise, and traffic congestion (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017). This situation caused rapid social change and threatened the fabric of the new industrial society. The nascent economic system also forced women and children into industrial workforce – who lived in utter squalor compared to flourishing capital owners (Ong, 2010; Dalla Costa, 1995).

In response to the social upheaval that the burgeoning economic order had heralded, social thinkers began to theorise about the dynamics of the new industrial society. One of such thinkers was Karl Marx who remains the most prescient opponent of capitalism till date. Combining history, philosophical view of man (sic), economy and politics, he situated the mass suffering in capitalist primitive accumulation (Giddens, 1990). This led to intense dialectical contentions among classical philosophers.

The emerging realities that trailed the introduction of capital to social production led labour leaders, informed by Marxian ideology, to form a reactionary and radical movement to overthrow the capitalist system (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017). They became conscious of their conditions and metamorphosed from a class in itself to a class for itself. The expanded profit-making of the bourgeois class and the concomitant impoverishment of the working class underlay the consciousness and amplification of Marx's socialist ideology. Socialism is a socio-economic ideology that contains values and policy prescriptions that pose a

threat to the continuous existence of capitalism (Oladejo & Agwanwo, 2015). The recession of socialism has diminished the bipolarity that once characterised the global economic order, and this manifestly shows the resilience of capitalism. Upon the demise of socialism, capitalism became the undisputed inheritor of the patrimony – the whole world – which communism was contesting with it (Ekekwe, 2008).

While Marx favoured the complete overthrow of capitalism, other social thinkers including Max Weber and Emile Durkheim were opposed to socialism (at least as it was envisioned by Marx). Although Weber and Durkheim recognised the inherent problems within capitalist society, they sought for social reforms within capitalism rather than the social and political revolution argued for by Marx. Essentially, the ideological opposition to capitalism has been unable to displace it because pro-capital scholars and world leaders have remained committed to defending capitalism despite its glaring weaknesses. In defence of capitalism, there is little or no effort by governments to hold polluting interests to account because of the panoply of socio-economic networks that bind the political leadership and owners of capital. Hence, the capital's degradation of the environment continues unabated because it fits into the patterns of power relations that favour businesses that pollute the environment.

### **3. CAPITALISM, ENVIRONMENT, AND SOCIAL SCIENCE**

The emergence of social science disciplines can be traced to certain socio-historical contexts, including but not limited to the advent of the industrial society and the twin Revolutions (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017). These phenomena resulted in acute social disorganisation that crystallised into social theorising and the eventual birth of social science. Essentially, social science systematically studies issues that affect society - economy, politics, and public health to mention a few.

With many scholarly responses to climate change indubitably stating that the world faces an existential crisis that requires urgent corrective actions, the social science disciplines, including but not limited to sociology, economics and political science, have advanced knowledge about climate change. The social science literature on climate change and its impacts on socio-economic wellbeing is vast and expansive and cannot be exhaustively recounted here (see e.g., Dietz, Shwom & Whitley, 2020; Jewell & Cherp, 2020; Koubi, 2019; Watts et al., 2015). Notably, there is a vast body of critical work that takes seriously the capitalistic origins of climate change (see e.g., Huber 2022; Thomas et al., 2018; Moore, 2017). Their argument centres around capitalistic overconsumption, which results in the unsustainable use of limited resources, pollution, and the destruction of natural habitats with attendant declining biodiversity.

Conversely, there is growing pro-capital scholarship within social sciences, which emerged, in the main, as a response to anti-capitalist scholarship. One of the leading figures of this tradition is Thomas DiLorenzo, an American economist, who was influenced by the writings of Adam Smith, John Locke, and Joseph Schumpeter. In his book, *How capitalism saved America: The Untold History of our Country, from the Pilgrims to the Present*, published in 2005, DiLorenzo says

“The word capitalism was coined by none other than Karl Marx, who hoped that it would use it in his crusade to denigrate the system of private property and free enterprise and promote socialism.” (DiLorenzo, 2005).

He condemns Marxist ideology that sees capitalism as a zero-sum game in which somebody gains, and somebody loses. He, on the contrary, believes that capitalism succeeds because the free market is mutually beneficial, and it is a guaranteed “source of civilizations and human progress” (DiLorenzo, 2005). For pro-capital social science intellectuals, countries have a lot to benefit from the innovative activity of original thinkers, visionary entrepreneurs, canny investors, and pioneering managers (Phelps, 2009).

Aside the divergences in the views of scholars for and against capitalism, there is no dissension about how capitalism is impacting climate change (DiLorenzo, 2005; Johnson, 2010; Moore, 2017). What however is

the issue is the response. While scholars against capitalism are averse to the capitalists' view of environmental degradation as cost of doing business and would see the scaling down of economic and consumption activities that endanger the environment, the scholars for capitalism have stated that capitalism has inherent mechanisms for addressing climate change. For them, capitalism is a problem-solving mechanism and could solve the problems of pollution not only technically but commercially, too, by writing environmental protection into its costs (Johnson, 2010). The responses still present a disagreement because capitalists will not slow down their unsustainable consumption of Earth's finite resources despite the existential climate crisis that results therefrom. In *The End of Growth*, published in 2011, Richard Heinberg posits that the current global economic order is approaching its growth limits since the environment is being damaged and depleted. He further argues that there is life after economic growth and foregrounds the need for the world to operate within Earth's budget of energy and resources, promote human and environmental wellbeing, rather than continuing to pursue shareholders' content and the now-unattainable prize of ever-expanding GDP.

The capitalistic pursuit of economic growth cannot continue at this rate because, as King Charles remarked while speaking with the leaders of the G20 ahead of the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) in 2021, humankind has the "last chance saloon" to save the world from runaway climate change (Walter, 2021). The saving of the world is a task that the academia needs to participate in. Social science, based on its origin, is particularly critical to the climate justice movement and because the focus of its subject matter is society. Hence, it is expected to generate scholarly contentions that may help ensure climate adaptation, reduce vulnerabilities, increase resilience, and reverse the trajectories of climate change.

#### **4. A CALL FOR ACTION**

In speaking to climate recovery for the benefits of humankind, Stern (2009) and Speth (2008) have called for a sustainable, reinvented, and regulated version of a market system, that is, the economic system that is made amenable to social good and environmental sustainability. The task of making the capital accountable to society and nature will not be easy. For many scholars, this work will face significant opposition from the political and ideological foundations backing capitalism. It is this challenge of confronting capitalism with its support base that social scientists involved in climate advocacy can respond to.

There is a justifiable disinclination from radical social scientists about reforming and regulating capitalism and this relates to the history and currency of capitalism, which is about how difficult it is for capitalism to be tamed (Ronzoni, 2018; Yakamoto, 2018). Therefore, social scientists in climate justice activism must take cognisance of the resistance, be it from the political establishment, academia, mass media, that such vocation will face. According to Storm (2009), most climate observers would agree that capitalism as we know it is thoroughly inept when it comes to tackling climate change and that redemption can only be found, if at all, in its capacity for transformative change towards sustainability. Despite the realities of global climate change and how it changes everything, capitalism is not going to go away (Turner, 2021).

While there may be different ways social scientists may engage with the climate justice movement, this paper focuses on three: (1) conforming democracy; (2) consensus building; and (3) formation of a lobby front. In what follows, there is expansion upon the conceptual nature of these roles, reflecting on how each of these can contribute to the advancement of anti-capitalist climate justice struggle.

##### ***Conforming Democracy***

In most parts of the world, democracy - be it liberal or communist - holds sway. The underlying belief is that democracy is the system of government that derives from the consent of the people and such that represents the will and interest of the people. However, in reality, democracy has continued to be an appendage of capital. As rightly noted by Miliband (1983), the state elite and the capitalists are not distinguishable because of the panoply of social and economic connections between them. Consequently, the state exists only to further the

interests of the owner of the capital (Busemeyer, Carstensen & Emmenegger, 2022; Wolff, 2020). It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, for the state to hold capitalists accountable for the environmental costs of their consumption and production activities. It is thus true that democracies are oligarchy, serving the interest of the few rather than representing the interest of the people (Fajobi, 2021).

To pursue the vocation of reversing the current climate course, social scientists will have a herculean task of upscaling the advancement of knowledge and ideologies, capable of fostering - in the public sphere - radical disposition to making democracy to be truly representative of the people's interests, considering that environmental protection and climate recovery are in the interest of the people. To conform democracy is to provide a counter ideological framework to the current elite-focused, oligarchic political system. It is to spearhead the discourses that place collective interests above private, economic interest. Social scientists will need to engage in surveillant scholarship that will monitor how governments are prioritising the interests of their peoples vis-à-vis the environment where their lives subsist. They will however need to purge themselves of preconceived biases and personal interests that may mar their efforts at making democracy a truly people-focused system.

### ***Consensus Building***

Consensus building is a process involving a good-faith effort to meet the interests of all stakeholders and seek a unanimous agreement (Harvard Business School, 2023). This is important for climate activism among social scientists. Social science is inherently contentious and to navigate the science's contradictions to arrive at a consensus is hard. This contradiction is rooted in the complexities involved in social studies and, partly, because it recognises different perspectives and paradigms about any phenomenon. Social science does not lay the sort of claim natural science makes about precision and objective truth. This is because the objects of study differ. While social science focuses on human behaviour and social institutions, natural science studies matter, which responds to stimuli in a fixed manner. Humans and social institutions are not so; they are dynamic.

The scholarly contentions among social scientists working in climate-related fields present a peculiar challenge to climate justice activism. While most social scientists are committed to the struggle against environmental degradation – and most opposed to the effects of unsustainable capitalist extraction and use of nature's resources, there are other social scientists who are for the capital. This is where deploying the mechanisms for consensus building in the interest of the climate becomes important. While it must be underscored that the support of pro-capital social scientists is not a necessary precondition for environmental activism, it could enhance the struggle for environmental protection.

### ***Formation of Lobby Front***

Lobbying is when individuals or groups try to influence or get a government to change its policies (BBC, 2021). Social scientists need to transcend the usual narratives about climate change and actively engage with the political system. Much of the scholarly debates on the environment does not reach policymakers. Curtailing the runaway climate requires significant policy reframing and overhaul of climate legislation, hence the importance of lobbying. Lobbying is believed to be an important factor in the success or failure of climate change legislation (Brulle, 2018). Needless to say, social scientists understand that climate change is a political issue, hence, they need to play in that sphere in the interest of the climate and society. It has been argued that a primary mechanism by which to modify capitalism is policy changes at the level of the nation-state (Turner, 2021).

It must be stressed however that lobbying is an arduous task because changing politicians' minds can take a long time. Working with experienced politicians who know the game could prove helpful because of how difficult it is to change a politician's mind (BBC, 2021).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The frequency of unfavourable climatic events is still a current concern. People all over the world are becoming more conscious of the risks associated with the current course of the climate and the requirement to develop the required adaption methods. However, there is not much that is being done to reverse the trends and put the climate on the path of recovery. The current increasing frequency and intensity of global warming, extreme and extended drought, tropical storms, rising seas levels and the alarming future predictions are deeply concerning.

While some researchers have discounted the capitalist origin of these climate events, overwhelming evidence suggests otherwise. Climate change is largely as a result of the capitalist unsustainable consumption of Earth's resources and lack of concern for society and environment. For social scientists whose object of study is primarily society, climate change thus becomes an existential crisis which not only requires intense scholarship but also activism - with a view to controlling it.

In this article, an attempt has been made to bring to fore considerations of climate activism into the social science scholarship, foregrounding the necessity and urgency of climate action by social scientists. Thus, the paper argues for the reformatory role that social scientists can play in the anti-capitalist climate justice struggle. Such struggle could follow many paths. In addition, it is debatable to what extent the work of social scientists is relevant to the advocacy for climate justice on a social level. Future research that engages critically with the arguments presented in this article, will hopefully build upon, refute, and ultimately help to create sustainable possibilities for a critical social science that views climate change as a phenomenon fuelled by capitalist extractive and consumption activities that affect society and toward which reform efforts should be directed. These reforms will undoubtedly prove helpful in ensuring a reduction of the climate events that exacerbate the negative existential realities faced by humanity in current times and beyond now.

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