



Environmental catastrophe **is not only** the problem of nature

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After 2-day coursework with Mr. Christian Schmidt, our Marx Autumn School class joined with hundreds of audiences around the world in the conference on Mine, Forest, Dam – Liberation of a Nature that became Prey: Activists in Exchange about their Struggles and Practices, held by the [Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung](#). The conference was a very meaningful conclusion for the course. And it was, to me, an invitation to confront the difficulty of making judgments in both thinking and practice. Negativeness that happened to both nature and humans globally is more far-reaching than what a system of theories from the nineteenth century could ever describe.

From the points of view and practices of environmental activists such as Mikuláš Černík (Czech Republic), Jakeline Romero Epiayú (Colombia), Catalina Caro Galvis (Colombia), John Malamatinas (Greece), Florian Özcan & Robin Rosswog (Germany), and a group of activists from France, we realized that issues that happened everywhere were not only environmental exploitation-related. Furthermore, there were inequalities and conflicts among countries, races, ethnicities, genders, etc. In the field of social sciences and humanities, scholars urge us to see world issues as “intersectionality”.

Most simply, when we discuss natural resources, we often think about the replacement of renewable energy over fossil fuel to reduce the amount of CO₂ in our atmosphere. The media draws us a dream of an illusional future of electric cars, solar batteries, and wind electricity. They say that a “progressive”, “developed” future to think of is a future, in which we colonize the solar system by “clean” energy-driven technology. In fact, when all centers of development which have already reacted to “the end of history” (in the words of G. W. F. Hegel and Francis Fukuyama) try to restrict domestic mining and nuclear waste disposition, their capitalist corporations will instead do the same things in countries that are facing public debt and post-socialist crisis in the East and the South of Europe. And where will they mine cobalt and lithium for “clean” energy exploitation? It is understandable that some billionaires in third world countries who both shake hands

with the local governments and overseas corporations dare to carve from the face of the earth to hell if Satan owns raw materials. They dare to destroy every ancient town of local communities and indigenous people if their towns are randomly located on the surface of some cobalt mines. The precarious economic-political-social context of poor indigenous communities leads to domestic violence and other drawbacks on a micro-scale.

When environmental catastrophe occurs, nature is not the only victim. Humans, with their greed and unradical patches for disasters they have created, systematically oppress each other. Puzzling from the narratives of five activist groups from five countries, I saw forms of neocolonialism that disguise values of benevolence and humanism, and progressivism. The disastrous thing is, this neocolonialism has no specific face and shape. In general, capital has no face and identity.

The West as an ideology

“The West” is often used as a scapegoat which implies the root of colonialism. Based on what is the case, “the West” does not fit any real geographical entity such as Europe. Greece is a European country, but it is seen as subordinated to richer countries due to its public debt crisis. Post-socialist Eastern Europe is also seen as a backyard of the economic giants in Western Europe. Therefore, there is no concreated, ontologically-viable, and geographical West that fits the image of Europe. For Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), Europe must be “provincialized”. There has been no geographical Europe with disenchanting space, secular time, and sovereignty. Europe exists with fragmentation and invisible hierarchies.

The West must be understood as an ideology. For Gamble (2009), the Western ideology is an assemblage of market democracy, liberalism, and universalized capitalism, in which, freedom of choice is seen as human nature. This ideology is what Francis Fukuyama praised as “the end of history” after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The footnote to Fukuyama’s flying colors adoration of the Western ideology is the logic of linear

evolutionism which declares that human civilization has only one way to progress from a lower to a higher stage of development - from tribal societies to monotheistic societies, from cults of personalities to market democracies. It seems to me that it is indistinguishable between the cult of Stalin and the cult of capitalism. It is just that capitalism has been rebranded as a buffet party in which all choices of dishes are predetermined by the elites.

With the claptrap promises of the Western ideology, we dream of an eternal democracy in which the hardest considerations humans must make are binary choices between Coca and Pepsi, KFC and McDonald, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, and so on. In the same way, we think about saving the environment as a choice between buying an electric car or a gasoline-powered car. If more people choose renewable energy, the invisible hand of the market will eliminate fossil fuels. Let us think further: Who will be the first to drive electric cars fueled by wind electricity and solar batteries? Which country will be the first to abandon domestic mining and to reduce the amount of CO₂ to the lowest? And to pay for these futuristic plans, forests, oil, coal, and cobalt from which places on the earth will be exploited without any regulation? It is no need to think twice that people from the poorest, most corrupt countries will pay the price for the dreams of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg.

Green capitalism - a logic implies that we can take advantage of the free market to save the environment without considering structural inequalities - is the reason why we keep following a superficial "westernization" (Chichilnisky, 2019).

Dream of a possible future

Along with the narrative of how to fight climate change is the projection of a better future to live. In the imagination of the Western ideology, this projection is quite clear and determined with the vibe of a conqueror. They presume that human development is like a bullet being shot into the future. This is a kind of radical accelerationism being made up of the desire to maintain human consciousness forever.

What if there is no resource left on the earth to maintain life? All right, let us use clean energy-powered spacecraft to mine every meteorite flying across our head! What if the ecosystem collapses? All right, the richest people on the earth will have their slots to live on Mars. For the international elite class, saving the environment is easy. Because in case they fail to do that, God will save them first. Or to be exact, they will pray God to save themselves.

For the rest of the world, the future is nothing like fairytales and sci-fi movies. The future is even unthinkable.

For countries being entombed in public debt, people dream of a future as a point in which they are out of debt, the economy is being restored, and overseas mining capitalists leave the people's sovereignty. For people in places that used to be under Soviet colonialism, the future is more pessimistic. With continuous disasters such as the state's corruption or the lack of democratic institutions from the day the Eastern bloc collapsed, it seems like those who cried watching the movie "Goodbye, Lenin" will have to put their faith in the hands of the few in more "developed" countries in Western Europe. Life has not changed that much from the days of Soviet colonialism to the days of West colonialism. There is one positive thing to be certain - the media draws a more benevolent face to neocolonialism. Many people assume that, for the future to be thinkable, mining areas must be declared as public properties. Nonetheless, in the context of post-socialism, a variety of the public will see this as a red flag of the return of Soviet-style communism 30 years ago.

Even though being stuck in the conversation of the rights of land ownership and so on, it seems like to people of developed countries, no imagination of the future will surpass the Overton window of wind electricity, solar panel farms, electric cars, and the colonization of all solar systems.

After the Colombian activists raised their voices, I realized that the narrative of "saving the world" must be more complicated. It was ironic to place the dream of the West and the reality of the indigenous people in Colombia

together. It was funny to see the Western projection of a renewable energy-powered future when the fact was, all resources, such as lithium and cobalt, to make that future possible, were looted from South America. Mines were under the private ownership of the top 1% of the top 1% of billionaires who work with both Western corporations and the local military. Local people's lands were robbed in broad daylight, by neither Western capitalists nor local billionaire class, but directly by the local military. In the last two decades, the status quo of radical social inequality in non-West countries has become a reality, along with the rise of Western "futurists". When people got poorer and poorer, they did not care about the environment as much as they care about land ownership and domestic violence.

I cried after hearing one Colombian activist share about how her community dreamt of the future - it was a privilege to project what the future could be in someplace on the earth. The future was undreamable.

The biggest deficiency of the conference was that the problem of gender inequality was not mentioned in a proper amount of time. The feminist take towards environmental exploitation was ambiguous, even though when we tried to connect all the dots in the map, we could see that women of the "third world" countries were most affected by structural oppression. And when all puzzles were put into a complete picture, I soon realized that the traditional Marxist frame we used in the last two days was not to see the whole oppressive world with its completed intersectionality.

"Global North", "Global South" and binary oppositions

There was one thing that made me confused about the conference, as well as many academic forums in the world, was the over-usage of the "Global North" - "Global South" dichotomy. Similar to the case of "The West", this dichotomy must be understood not as two split geographical entities, but as opposition in ideologies caused by postcoloniality. In mainstream discourses, this dichotomy can be falsely understood as if "the West" is "bad",

then its oppositional types of governmentality, such as the authoritarianism regimes in China, Russia, and Iran are "good".

In thinking about the relations of power, we often hear the two terms "center" and "periphery". The powerful often position themselves in the center of common sense, while the powerless are marginalized to the periphery of discourses. It will be a reductionist notion to say that anyone who relates to "the West" is in the center, while everyone who opposes "the West" is marginalized. If we say so, then poor people would not have existed in Western Europe and North America, and capitalism would not have existed outside Europe.

Joey Ayoub (2021) opposes the idea of the binary opposition between the "Global North" and the "Global South". To Ayoub, the elite class exists internationally, regardless of whether they belong to "the West" or "the Rest". Similarly, the marginalized class is everywhere. Special interest groups which pursue the strategy of Occidentalism to confront Orientalism, or in short, to antagonize the West just for gaining power, do not necessarily portray the protagonists to the powerless. It is most likely that these Occidentalists only expropriate the people's hatred towards capitalism to rise to power, to become a new West.

Marx said: "Workers of the world, unite!" More than ever, this manifesto is relevant to our contemporary world. Especially when the term "workers" can be expanded to "the marginalized", "the not-haves", "the weak", etc. My most significant reflection after hearing the narratives as well as the stuckness of the environmental activists was that, could we reduce the complexity of this world to fairytales, showbiz culture, the good, the bad, fans, and anti-fans? Class struggle is an important field of struggle, but it is not the only struggle that deserves to be fought for. Other identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, etc. are equally important because the weak do not only wear one single chain.

Until this point, I agree with Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2006) - author of "the

communist manifesto of the 21st century”, Empire - when they say that when capitalism becomes a global phenomenon, all identities, including “bourgeois” and “proletariat” are stolen from people. There are only “the rich” and “the poor” are left in this world. What a reductionist dichotomy! “Rich” and “poor” here must be understood based on all frames of politics, culture, society. Their meanings should not be reduced to the realm of economics. We cannot reduce our struggle to a binary fight in activism and other kinds of “changing the world”, but should see the struggle through the lens of intersectionality and rhizome: An Asian-American CEO can be a potential oppressor who exploits thousands of (male, female, other) workers in Africa and South Asia, and she can be oppressed by her white husband. This dilemmatic situation of power relations in the globalization era would confuse any great minds in Western philosophy in the 19th century if they could predict the future. Green capitalism will improve nothing except strengthen this status quo, especially when the CEO I have mentioned earlier works in the field of the renewable energy industry.

If pure class struggle can alone save the earth, then our 3-day course should not have existed because we would have surpassed capitalism some decades ago. But still, we sat down, talked about the issues, and thought about the issues, because there was a significant question we had to solve: “Whom are we fighting for?“. /.

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