

# Envisioning a Just Safe World

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## The Strange New world of Anthropocene

The planet's environment had been unusually stable for the thousand years during the period geologically known as the Holocene. But since the Industrial Revolution, a new era, the Anthropocene has emerged, in which human activities push the Earth system beyond the stable environmental state which are potentially catastrophic for the planet. With everincreasing reliance on fossil fuels and industrialized agriculture, human activities have reached its zenith that could plunder the systems that kept Earth in the desirable Holocene state. The irreversible impacts bring about abrupt environmental changes, leading to a state detrimental to human and its nurturing mother earth. Reflexing Anthropocene global changes in a globalising world must take into account the transboundary flows of people, materials, fuel and pollution. The crisis of anthropogenic climate change demands thinking simultaneously on the "immiscible chronologies of capital and species history" and thus to review the process of studying history. (Chakrabarty 2009).

## Carbon Capitalism and Zero-Sum World System

Conservative wisdom on sustainability and development is miserably uncritical about the distributive, political, and cultural dimensions of global environmental challenges. The sustainable development is a mere fantasy and a denial of the entropic realities engendered by planetary dynamics. Reflexing environmental load displacement and ecologically unequal exchange- the forces behind global environmental 'zero-sum game' is essential to be acquainted with the extent to which 'cornucopian' kind of 'development' represent an illusion (Hornborg 2009). The origin of 'ecological debt' and 'ecologically unequal exchange' literature by the turn of the century can be traced back to world systems theory that explains why the peripheral and semi-peripheral nations are locked into ecologically unsustainable patterns. The debt encompasses the historical and modern exploitation of third world natural resources and the excessive use of 'environmental space' for dumping waste (e.g. expropriating global atmospheric resources). A grand coalition of environmental, human rights, and development advocacy groups have been urging the ecological debt to either be paid or used as balance in calculating national economic debts (Roberts and Parks 2007). In his classic paper 'Development of Underdevelopment' (Frank 1966), Andre Gunder Frank observes that that economic development and underdevelopment are the opposite sides of the same coin and the product of the same historical process. In a subsequent complementary work, Frank (Frank 2001) elaborates on how the structure, process and transformation of the "single world-wide system," generate the new wealth and poverty of nations, based on and developed along two main conceptual red threads, entropy and multilateralism, that run almost parallel and intimately related as to intersect at important junctures. Entropy is dispersed from the more 'ordered' regions and sectors of the global world economy to other less 'ordered' regions that are obliged to absorb the entropy dissipated in their direction by the more 'ordered' ones. Thus the climate change caused by

global warming and depletion of the ozone layer generated by industrialised nations' burning of coal and oil, mostly imported from less developed countries are ultimately (re)exported to second group, where they sink low level areas into the rising sea, and massive destruction of virgin rain forests to maintain industries and consumption in developed world. The industrialised countries have polluted the environment to a catastrophic extent with increasing energy- and chemical-intensive production since the days of industrial revolution. Apart from historic entropy transfer, the globalization has facilitated the developed countries to off-shore hazardous manufacturing in the underdeveloped South.

### **Development of Necrodevelopment**

The negative consequences of swelling civilian consumption and escalating military-industrial complexes by deploying ruthlessly limited resources stored in a finite and fragile planet. The resultant multiple social inequalities along with irreversible ecological consequences, threaten the sustainability of life-world as well as the planet itself (Jorgenson, Clark and Kentor 2010). The sociometabolic transition from an agrarian to an industrial regime is an ongoing process with important consequences for future global material and energy demand.

Classical economists had their vision of a 'stationary state'-the ontological destination of economic growth and development constrained by population explosion, finiteness of arable land and the exhaustibility of non-renewable resources. Classical economics treated land, labour and capital as the three factors of production. Neoclassical Economics has taken the necessary process of abstraction and thus excludes leaving essential aspects of the world out of the analysis. Vested interests from nineteenth century American railroad oligarchy to vanguards of Washington consensus have constructed and promoted a pseudo-knowledge quixotically empowered to reign over academics and policy to perform its historic comprador role (Mukhopadhyay 2011). Technical progress seemed to offset any tendency towards diminishing returns. Land, like capital, could be effectively expanded, without limit, via land-augmenting technical progress, seemed to be the right thing to do. The economy subsystem expands relative to the fixed dimensions of the containing and sustaining ecosystem and becomes disembedded from the planetary socio-ecological threshold.

The neoliberal insights to overcome the burst phase of exploitation cycle looks towards hitherto unexplored, fragile and sensitive regions around the world like Polar Regions and sea-bed. Global biophysical transformation engenders localized stresses in the forms of coastal erosion, ice melt, and infertile land and deteriorating water sources. These stresses threaten critical minimum basic needs of vulnerable societies without the capabilities of adaptation and resilience. Thus global warming is enhancing the fast liquefying of Arctic cryosphere, causes matching rise in sea-beds that will result in submerging of several small-island states in Pacific and Indian Ocean by the end of twenty-first century. Confronted with ecological crises, no attempt is made by the system to go to the root of the problem in the social relations."... the technocrats promise to solve all problems while keeping the social relations intact" (York, Clark and Foster 2009). The zero-sum game has its obvious tolls on wretched teeming millions mostly of 'other' world. The retarded societies become retarded ecologies too and the 'development of underdevelopment' diversifies with deadlier dimensions (Mukhopadhyay 2009). Because of these changes in global climate, areas like Arctic, Oceania, low coastal areas, and snowier regions are already undergoing significant climatic changes. These changes in climate not only create physical changes in specific locales, but also threaten critical minimum human security in specific environments. The

Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change (2007), sponsored by the Government of United Kingdom, estimates that the scale of migration will reach 200 million by 2050.

The genesis of the climate crisis is embedded in a much catastrophic ecological crisis—the ecological limits to economic growth. The eternal law of capitalist circulation - supply creates its own demand drives the expansion of production and consumption synergistically. This enterprise has all along reinforced the plunder of the planetary ecosystem that “is largely irreversible for 1,000 years after emission stops” (Solomons et.al. 2009).

### **Visualising a just safe world**

Reflecting contemporary global geopolitics in light of the changed perspectives in earth system requires recognition of embeddedness of both market and control and command economies and societies in the natural ecology, as visualised by Karl Polanyi by the historic turn of post-war world history. In his magnum opus *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944), Polanyi emphasized that a total self-regulating market, disembedded from the society was nothing but a ‘stark utopia’. Such an institution could not sustain ‘without annihilating the human and natural substance of society...’ Polanyi’s relevance in contemporary geopolitics lies in his navigating the ontological shift towards examining the highly unequal world system vis-à-vis the pre-emptive belief in market and, inter alia, in technology as panacea. The neo-liberal project of globalisation, with its liberalisation of markets, privatisation, de-regulation and challenges to collective social agents, has increased the power of transnationally active capital enormously. The prevailing socio-ecological regime and its interconnected world-vision, institutions, and modus operandi all support the goal of unlimited growth of material production and consumption as the best possible quality of life. Transgressing one or more planetary boundaries may be deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of crossing thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental- to planetary-scale systems. It has been estimated that humanity has already transgressed three planetary boundaries: for climate change, rate of biodiversity loss, and changes to the global nitrogen cycle (Rockstrom et.al. 2009). Overcoming these roadblocks and creating a sustainable and desirable future will require a comprehensive and robust redesign of our socio-ecological regime supposed to pursue explicitly the goal of sustainable quality of life rather than the proxy of unlimited material growth.

Visionary appreciation of the enduring political-economic forces shaping uneven cross-national ecological transformation may pave more feasible policies for pursuing genuinely comprehensive and sustainable development (Rice 2009). Foucauldian wisdom reminds us if the values and political implications underlying the ‘growth business as usual’ do not ensure how to protect the society, we can refuse to accept their imperatives and develop alternative epistemology. It is a matter of de-colonizing the imagination and demystification of conceptions such as economic growth, progress, efficiency and GNP (Passadakis and Schmelzer 2010). A research-report “Limits to Growth”, by an international team of experts assembled at the MIT Sloan School of Management on a project supported by the Club of Rome was published as book in 1972 (Meadows et.al. 1972). The main contribution of the ‘Limits to Growth’ was in attracting people’s attention on the fact that the finite earth cannot sustain unlimited economic growth by continuous depletion of resources and the irreversible destruction of ecosystems. Since the mid 1980s, however, this ‘limits to growth’ position became largely marginalized, replaced by the currently dominant

view that a 'de-coupling' of economic growth from negative environmental impacts can and will take place. Such a 'de-coupling' was emphasized by the World Commission on Environment and Development as a key strategy of sustainable development in their report 'Our Common Future (1987) pointed at eco-efficiency and dematerialization as the ways to make economic growth compatible with environmental sustainability.

In view of the barriers to capitalist sustainability, an alternative social narrative is needed- one that embraces values, understandings, and relationships that promote ecological stability and justice (Singer 2010). The goal in criticising growth is to establish social rights globally, such that a good life is possible for all human beings and their future generations, as the vision of 'a just safe world' reflects. Margaret Thatcher's famous assertion that 'there is no alternative' (TINA) and Francis Fukuyama's equally famous 'verdict' of 'End of History...', though apparently seem to be quixotic utopias, are hegemonic/totalitarian utopias in reality. To secure and sustain neoliberal capitalist globalization, the speech act of a distinguished political personality and the 'amazing' narrative of a 'best-seller' trumpet the advent of a particular political and economic system as the final destination of humanity's sociocultural evolution. Political scientist-activist Susan George has countered TINA with the critical utopia of TATA-'there are thousands of alternatives'

In the early twentieth century, Indian poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore had preached for "lights emerging in the horizon of darkness" (*andbokarer utso bote utsarita aalo*) that would pave the desirable social transformation. The same message was echoed in the western world. Sociologist Karl Mannheim in his path-breaking treatise "Ideology and Utopia"(1929) had realized that utopia not only shares with ideology a non congruence with reality, but that utopia offers a perspective critical of the given reality, thus exposing the gap between 'what is' and an ideal of 'what should be'. The critical utopianism does not inevitably comply with a perfection-seeking totalitarianism. Rather it breaks with the prevailing social system and imagines the possibility of other ways of living in the world. The novelty of critical utopian expression lies in the very act of portraying a utopian vision itself, radically different from propagating a particular social system. The utopian imagination represents a liberated zone from which anti-hegemonic forces can challenge the status-quo and move openly towards a radically open future (Moylan 1986, cited in Brincat 2009). The critical utopianism can not only critically undermine current ways of materialistic existence by revealing them as attack on mother earth and sustainability of human civilisation but also justifies the imagination of something better like a just safe world, by envisioning what is in a nascent stage of creation.

### **The creative Utopia**

The topology painted by Mannheim facilitates the humanity's creative journey from purely imaginary utopias towards a concrete utopia-ecosocialism, rooted on the conviction that "another world is possible". The International Ecosocialist Network's manifesto on climatic change, released during in the World Social Forum, Belem do Para, Brazil (January 2009) declared:

"A global warming left without control will have devastating effects on humanity, the fauna and the flora. The yields of the harvest will fall drastically, bringing about famine on a large scale. Hundreds of millions of people will be de-placed by drought in some regions and by the rise of ocean level in others. A chaotic and unpredictable temperature will become the norm."

The western discourses on climate change degrowth, ecosocialism, etc., based on an analysis of energy, entropy and economics, and their social and cultural dimensions can learn from down-to-earth indigenous movements. The journey towards the 'just safe world'-the 'creative utopia' has taken off in a humble but steady way in 'other' America. The historic Latin American indigenous movements for 'Mother Earth's rights could ably convince their progressive polity to implement what is critical for the contemporary warming world. It became possible to insert ecosocialist and degrowth like concepts into the formal constitutions of the Bolivian and Ecuadorian states. This climax of world history has initiated the transcendence from critical utopianism to creative utopianism of the imaginary: 'a just safe world'. The new statist left of South America convened The "Peoples World Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth's Rights" held in Cochabamba, Bolivia from April 19-22, 2010 and the Fourth Americas Social Forum in Asuncion, Paraguay from August 11-15, 2010 have to envisage path towards 'a just safe world' - the good life (buen vivir) in an egalitarian society without materialistic growth marking a great leap beyond anti-utopian orthodoxy and neoliberal hegemony. The Conference was attended by thousands of people coming from all over the world including a large number of US citizens...Inaugurating the conference, Bolivian President Evo Morales described how the indigenous people's incessant bondage with nature since antiquity have evolved the metaphor of mother earth' as the prime mover of being part of the earth and envisioning an alternative model of human development abandoning the catastrophic capitalist dictates of 'supply creates its own demand'. The "Peoples Agreement" that was the outcome of Cochabamba people's conference opens with a statement of the severity and global imperative presented by climate change. The genesis of the Cochabamba initiative has been the reversal in United States-Bolivian relations since Morales was elected President of Bolivia in 2005. The country has long been subjected to aggressive US intervention, supported by the country's comprador capitalists. Bolivia shook off these aggressive intrusions and has now has taken the initiative, rallying international forces against US sabotage of climate justice and world peace. Bolivia broke with US drug war policies and protected coca cultivation in family farms. Bolivia cancelled the practice by which the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank had controls over Bolivia's financial policies, and ended its dependency on loans from these agencies. Bolivia's most effective challenge of North American hegemony has been through steps toward regional integration, a strive for alternative economic relationships on the basis of solidarity to bring forth a coordinated political bloc of concerned countries' resistance to U.S.-led imperialism.

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