REVIEW OF AFRICAN POLITICAL ECONOMY
2023, VOL. 50, NOS. 177–178, 295–301
https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2023.2293419

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

EDITORIAL

The climate emergency in Africa

The world's political leaders gathered in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, from 30 November to 12 December 2023 for COP28 – the latest United Nations Climate Change Conference. The conferences have long been critiqued for their failure to introduce systemic change in the face of the climate crisis, but COP28 has plumbed new depths for the abundance of fossil fuels lobbyists and representatives of the global food and agricultural sector in attendance. The summit president Sultan Al Jaber, chair of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, stated that 'there is no science' (Igini 2023) behind demands for a phase-out of fossil fuels, highlighting the deep contradictions of the entire gathering and its failure to come to terms with the stark realities facing global society and the planet.

The COP28 conference and the crisis that it is intended to address underscore the urgency of current conditions, the roots of the crisis and debates over solutions, highlighting the resistance of those struggling for climate justice. Above all, we recognise the urgency of condemning the disproportionate impact of the crisis on the African continent and of providing a forum for researchers and activists analysing its contours and historical roots.

Despite the outpouring of narratives about the climate and environmental crises in Africa, there is still a gap in attempts to synthesise the dynamics as seen in and from the continent, to generalise and develop a wider understanding of the crisis globally, and to centre the analyses of those most engaged in this work (see Ajl, Ayeb, and Bush 2023). This Special Issue offers a range of interventions within critical and radical political economy analysis. It brings together researchers and activists who are committed to alternative visions of nature–society relations and analysis of the social movements active on the continent.

Manifestations of the depths of the crisis in Africa are stark: from the disappearance of Lake Chad to the flooding in Durban and Derna, Libya, following a devastating dam collapse, and to drought conditions in East Africa and the cyclones of Mozambique. This issue explores why Africa is the continent most vulnerable to climate change, despite being a low contributor to the causes of it. How do we account for this development from a historical and political economy perspective?

This journal has always stressed the character and impact of dependent development in the periphery – how capitalist development in the centre is dominated by a political economy to satisfy mass consumer needs and the linked demand for production goods (Amin 1974). In contrast, peripheral economic systems, albeit unevenly, have been shaped historically to produce luxury goods and exports with the effect of limiting internal mass markets. The consequences of this unequal development have been, among other things, inequality, debt and environmental crises. These latter are not simply the externalities of capitalist production but are systematically entwined, and systemic to the US-driven imperialist system that structures it. As Ali Kadri (2023) has noted, 'capital abuses nature in the process of undermining the working class.' Capital produces waste and capitalists benefit from greater profits linked to war and cost-cutting exercises that are systemic to capitalism: '[w]aste expresses capital:

greater profits require more waste, and capital reaps more as it sells the waste' (Kadri 2023, ix). We encourage the development of this important and theoretically challenging argument in later issues of the *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE).

Ali Kadri offers a challenge to Western Marxism and critiques of environmental crisis as he notes how abolishing private property and 'eliminating the value relation' has dropped off critical policy agendas. Instead, he has argued for the need to understand how 'waste expresses capital' (*ibid.*). Greater profits require more waste, or require that society bear the costs of waste in order to leave more of the social product for profits. As such, the extraction of human lives, the premature death of social beings, holds primacy in accumulation and precedes the extraction of resources. After all, it is the social person or society that negotiates the price of nature, and not inanimate nature. This touches on – but goes beyond – Africa as a continent where waste is created or dumped and lives are shortened by crises that decimate livelihoods. It goes to the heart of how capitalism generates surplus value and profits: reducing the costs of social reproduction to often less than the cost of maintaining bare life raises the profit share over the life cycle of society. Genocide in Palestine, western Sudan and attacks on struggles for national sovereignty in Western Sahara and polluted nature in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and elsewhere, are necessary correlates of capital accumulation. Primitive accumulation did not end, it just assumed more brutal forms of direct and structural genocide. This latter form of genocide shapes people's shortened longevity relative to the achievable life expectancy in the presence of overcapacity to produce and scientific progress that could introduce a realm of plenty. When everything is commodified in capitalism, everything sells for a price, including the pollutants, environmental crises and the wasted lives. Unsurprisingly, exponential accumulation is the 'Moses and prophets' of the capital relation, which governs the pace of social–natural reproduction. In a two-tier global system, imperialism ensures that the de-reproduction of the South feeds the reproduction of the North, albeit in a planet depleted at rates that will make life difficult for everyone, North and South.

Contributions to this Special Issue have embraced the complex interplay of the continent's shifting patterns of capital accumulation, imperialist expansion and competition in relation to the climate emergency. The global consequences of the climate breakdown are expressed in the profound and ongoing environmental crises on the continent and embedded in specific class relationships and inter-imperialist competition. The issue grapples with these questions, highlighting the transformation of the continent's political economy as it becomes profoundly intertwined with the environmental crisis, and the contradictions and opportunities for political mobilisation and organisation.

The contributions ahead deploy a materialist methodology and critical modes of investigation. They especially adopt a critical stance towards the general tenor of public discourse on the climate crisis. In particular, they have upended the comforting formulas of adaptation and mitigation and the guiding framework of 'net zero' which are central to the market-driven approaches in the global South, and have unpacked the persistent refusal to confront the energy giants and their expansion of fossil fuel extraction, pursuit of profit and unending growth.

Africa is particularly impacted by the coloniality of green extractivism (Andreucci et al. 2023), as the proposed socio-ecological fixes that are at the core of ideas of green transitions (as in the New Green Deal) and the degrowth debate are so far limited to technologies – from solar to wind power – that are in themselves more fossil fuel intensive than older ones (*ibid.*). These socio-ecological fixes, while claiming to 'green' energy production, perpetuate the epistemological violence of colonial and neo-colonial relations in the global South. Given that many of the minerals crucial to solar and power technologies are mined in African countries,

the neocolonial continuity of the current version of green transition and decarbonisation plans is here particularly apparent. The stark geographical divide of how multiple environmental crises disproportionately affect people in the global South has assumed tragic proportions, aggravated by the neocolonial burden of adaptation and mitigation policies that make poor people in the global South pay for emissions that they did not produce nor in any way induce. This 'planetary eco-apartheid' (Heron 2023) or climate apartheid affects the working class in the global North too, and increasingly needs to be enforced and protected by military and police structures, especially when its consequences threaten the elites (Táíwò 2020) and represent a menace to the existing class structures. Yet current debates on environmental crises in the global North have been almost exclusively confined to reformist social democratic proposals about green transitions and decarbonisation, revolving around socio-technical fixes. Most importantly, environmentalist discourses have been structured around moralistic ideas of a collective responsibility that erases class from environmental issues. Climate change has been domesticated by liberal capitalist reason as a problem of collective action (Wainwright and Mann 2020). When talking about collective responsibility for the environmental crises, the political actor is always an unspecified 'we' that 'erases class through an ideological sense of collective action and a shared common good that prioritises the stabilisation of a system in crisis, rather than the radical overhaul of the said system' (Greco 2022, 92). As Malm has remarked, this sense of collective responsibility is 'one of the most common tropes in climate change discourse. We, all of us, you and I have created this mess together and make it worse each day' (Malm 2016, 430).

When class politics have powerfully been brought in (Huber 2022), analysis alongside political practice has stumbled across the North/South divide.

But, as recently noted by Heron, we should not have to choose between a politics focused on class struggle and anti-imperialism: this is indeed a 'false choice' (Heron 2022). In the tradition of anti-colonial Marxism that ROAPE has spearheaded since its very inception, we argue that this false choice obscures a foundational question for working-class politics today: national sovereignty in the global South and self-determination of oppressed peoples.

Environmentalist movements in the global North are urged to break the silence over the structural connection between imperialism, war, settler colonialism and the environmental crises. This entails a radical shift in the environmentalist agenda to include open discussions on climate debt reparations towards the global South, which is intrinsically linked to the respect of national sovereignty (Ajl 2021). As Ajl has poignantly argued,

> the struggle for domestic green social democracy as a transitional stage, and shorn of genuine anti-imperialist internationalism, is doomed to fail. No popular development of any kind has ever occurred in the North or South without a fight for something far more radical on the home front and abroad. (Ajl 2021, 186)

Our case studies

Within the overall framework and concerns outlined above, a number of common themes have emerged in our articles, themes illustrative of analyses and discussions of the crisis both on the African continent and elsewhere across the globe.

A critique of the business-as-usual climate change framework – that is, strategies to adapt and mitigate – is trapped in the same 'imperial predation' that Huber has described, and as displayed by the previous history of globalising capitalism. However, the 'business' is taking new turns as a new chapter of 'opportunities' opens up. The contributions from Tobias Kalt, Jenny Simon, Johanna Tunn and Jesko Hennig on green extractivism and energy justice, and from Ben Radley on green imperialism in the Congo examine the scramble for 'green' minerals

and materials, for which Africa is a priority source. Such developments raise the spectre of a new chapter of imperialist expansion. It may introduce inter-imperial rivalry if competition over access to resources between world powers is not effectively mediated by Washington. We also note that China is the largest global producer of renewables and the continent's largest trading partner: it is the driver of Africa as a source for the manifold increase in 'just transition' minerals in the coming years.

Wars and imperialism no less shape the current landscape of climate devastation. As Jason Mueller discusses in a contribution on Somalia, 'militarised accumulation' is yet another facet of unmanaged growth and competition (see also Duffield and Stockton 2023). In the Somalian case, the intersection of extractivism and the 'war on terror' have produced conditions of immiseration.

Africa's very limited contribution to emissions is a mark of the global restrictions that have been placed on its ability to industrialise; this makes sense of demands in Africa for new and continuing extraction of their own finite fossil fuel resources to super-charge development. Japhace Poncian and Rasmus Hundsbaek Pedersen, in their contribution on energy transition in Tanzania, describe how resource nationalism has been a strategy deployed on the continent and elsewhere in the global South to marshal such growth. It also indicates the continued importance of the national question. Decolonisation did not diminish the conditions necessary for African states to promote sovereign national development. On the contrary, as Ajl has noted:

> Because imperialism, the transfer of value from the South to the North and the uneven development accompanying it, continued long after the end of the major wave of formal decolonisation, the national question is not a historical relic, antiquated and anachronistic. (Ajl 2021, 148)

Africa's exceptional resources of sunlight could have allowed it to be an independent contributor to the production of renewable energy, thereby reducing dependence on fossil fuels. With the inherited and continuing technological weakness of African economies, compared to the power and expertise of multinational corporations (and their determination to get in first and control this new field of extraction), the shift to renewables has been blocked, delayed and distorted by a number of factors, such as the high capital cost of various forms of renewable industry. Likewise, the potential for a just transition intersects with historical processes of deindustrialisation driven by the intervention of the structural adjustment programmes and conditionalities that began in the 1980s, and the legacy of debt, as analysed by Grasian Mkodzongi's contribution on southern Africa. Further undermining this transition is the need for African countries to take loans from the multinational energy companies in order to purchase technology to generate renewable development: solutions to climate crisis exacerbate African indebtedness.

The overriding intention of many African states is to invest in renewables not to protect and benefit their own populations, but to target export markets of the global North. The outcome is that energy supplies for the North and global capital profits are secured, and African governments and business classes benefit in the process. In other words, 'climate justice' is not secured; inequality is further embedded, and multinational corporate power to shape African economies is reinforced via, for example, price structures for local consumption of electricity, exchange rate manipulation and privatisation of state energy producers. Susana Maestro-Moreno's contribution illustrates the hollowness of 'sustainability' efforts in the context of fishing agreements between Senegal and the European Union. These have transformed small-scale fishing into an extractivist project that has vastly reduced the availability of fish supplies for local consumption.

Market schemes and false solutions to the climate emergency are endemic to 'growth'-oriented approaches. In the interview included in this issue, Nnimmo Bassey comments that carbon credits and net zero accounting are fake modes of reducing fossil fuel emissions that paper over their production and extraction. Energy transition schemes developed within this framework reproduce all the negative features of capitalist development by turning the climate into a commodity and leaving climate-destroying social relations intact.

Other state-driven energy initiatives, in the context of neoliberal privatisation and commodification, reproduce inequality and environmental crisis. As Mohamed Salah and Razaz Basheir discuss in their analysis of power generation in Sudan, hydroelectricity is not dependent on fossil fuels, but it creates massive disruptions in lives and livelihoods via displacement of local populations. It also has negative ramifications for biodiversity, water supplies and distribution. Renewables and hydroelectric dams require large tracts of land to be cleared, and, as Salah and Basheir describe in the Sudan case, these actions generate resistance, largely from small farmers, peasants and agricultural petty commodity producers.

The recognition that the current policies of mitigation and adaptation, like the UN REDD+ programmes that are very widespread on the continent, generated 'adaptation work' (Johnson et al. 2023) – and that this reproduces and entrenches labour exploitation and class dynamics in the countryside in the global South – is only very recent (*ibid.*). In this regard, the paper by Rocío Hiraldo and Steffen Böhm is pioneering, as the labour and class relations furthered by adaptation and mitigation policies in the global South is a burning political issue that has only very recently been addressed by activists and scholars. Hiraldo and Böhm argue that the Senegalese peasants involved in adaptation work through a REDD+ project have been bearing the brunt not only of further dispossession but also of highly exploitative labour relations in processes of peasant class dynamics in West Senegal through the development of 'conservation' and nature-based tourism schemes, demonstrating that these initiatives reproduce inequality and oppression.

Many ostensible 'solutions' to climate crisis have negative effects on livelihoods and labour relations – through land appropriation, loss of jobs and through more exploitative working conditions. Promises of 'green jobs' are often illusory: as Emilinah Namaganda's analysis of labour and graphite mining in Mozambique concludes, negotiating for jobs is challenged by the contradictions of capitalist extractivism. Ruy Blanes' discussion of what he terms 'infrastructures of state-sponsored climate disasters' in Angola and Mozambique similarly underscores how government technological fixes for energy transition can reproduce the very crises that they claim to address.

Activism and grassroots movements can take a myriad of forms, from local forms of resistance to global organising. Peter Gardner, Olalekan Adekola, Tiago Carvalho and Thomas O'Brien remind us in their comparative study of Extinction Rebellion in Nigeria and South Africa – as also does Bassey – that campaigns and struggles have a political character that coalesces around more radical or more conservative frameworks. This character of the movements can have a material basis: forms of activism emerging largely from the middle class may be narrower in scope and NGOs which depend on donor funding may espouse a kind of radical liberalism but place limits on objectives, fail to make alliances with organised workers in practice and be excluded from state policy influence.

As Alex Lenferna's piece on reparations and a just transition in South Africa makes clear, the politics embraced by movements provide a crucial road map for framing – and realising – the 'true fulfilment of climate debt owed to the global South' (in this issue, 492). Decolonial critiques in the tradition of Walter Rodney and others, highlighted by Mkodzongi and by Salah and Basheir, are offered as key contributions to this political project, while the centrality of the grassroots movement and the many organisations including labour unions across the

continent that are lifting up the climate emergency (among them, Extinction Rebellion chapters in 44 African countries) offer promise for the road ahead.

We also include three book reviews that bring broad perspectives to these issues. Isaac 'Asume' Osuoka reviews Nnimmo Bassey's edited volume, *Politics of turbulent waters: reflections on ecological, environmental and climate crises in Africa*; Zachary Patterson reviews *Climate imperialism in Africa: critical commentary on the political economy of global climate change regime*, by Kola Ibrahim; and Elia Apostolopoulou discusses the collection brought together by editors Hamza Hamouchene and Katie Sandwell in *Dismantling green colonialism: energy and climate justice in the Arab region*.

Our hope is that this Special Issue will be a useful source of insight, information and analysis for researchers and activists alike. The existential nature of the climate emergency compels a thorough engagement that may bring ruptures and disagreements into focus, but that overall can be generative in charting a path towards genuine solutions and a just and revolutionary transformation of human–society relations. We are pleased to offer this contribution to our collective re-imagining of a climate future centred on peasants, workers and people.

Acknowledgements

The editors extend our deep gratitude to all of the authors who contributed to this Special Issue, engaging with us in this urgently needed discussion. We are also very appreciative of Ruy Blanes for the very generous translation of the titles, abstracts and keywords into Portuguese. Finally, many thanks to our Production Editors, Clare Smedley and Adam Houlbrook, for their dedicated, excellent work on this project.

References

Andreucci, D., G. García López, I. M. Radhuber, M. Conde, D. M. Voskoboynik, J. D. Farrugia, and C. Zografos. 2023. "The Coloniality of Green Extractivism: Unearthing Decarbonization by Dispossession through the Case of Nickel." *Political Geography* 107 (November): 102997.

Ajl, M. 2021. *A People's Green New Deal*. London: Pluto Press.

Ajl, M., H. Ayeb, and R. Bush. 2023. "North Africa: The Climate Emergency and Family Farming." *Review of African Political Economy* 50 (176): 173–196.

Amin, S., 1974. "Accumulation and Development: A Theoretical Model." *Review of African Political Economy* 1 (1): 9–26.

Duffield, M., and N. Stockton 2023. "How Capitalism is Destroying the Horn of Africa: Sheep and the Crises in Somalia and Sudan." *Review of African Political Economy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2023.2264679.

Greco, E. 2022. "Engaging with the Non-human Turn: A Response to Büscher." *Dialogues in Human Geography* 12 (1): 90–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206221075704.

Heron, K. 2022. "The Great Unfettering." Sidecar, September 7. https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/the-great-unfettering.

Heron, K. 2023. "Capitalist Catastrophism and Eco-apartheid." *Geoforum*: 103874. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103874.

Huber, M. T. 2022. *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet*. New York: Verso.

Igini, M. 2023. "COP28 Al Jaber Says There Is No Scientific Evidence that Fossil Fuel Phase-out Is Needed for 1.5C Goal: Reports." Earth.org, December 4. https://earth.org/cop28-al-jaber-says-there-is-no-scientific-evidence-that-fossil-fuel-phase-out-is-needed-for-1-5c-goal-reports/.

Johnson, L., M. Mikulewicz, P. Bigger, P. Chakraborty, A. Cunniff, P. J. Griffin, V. Guermond, N. Lambrou, M. Mills-Novoa, B. Neimark, S. Nelson, C. Rampini, C. Sherpa, and G. Simon. 2023. "Intervention: The Invisible Labor of Climate Change Adaptation." *Global Environmental Change* 83: 102769.

Kadri, A., 2023. *The Accumulation of Waste: A Political Economy of Systemic Destruction*. Leiden: Brill.

Malm, A. 2016. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. London: Verso.

Táíwò, O. O. 2020. "Climate Apartheid Is the Coming Police Violence Crisis." *Dissent Magazine*, blog, August 12. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/climate-apartheid-is-the-coming-police-violence-crisis.

Wainwright, J., and G. Mann. 2020. *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of our Planetary Future*. London: Verso.

Lee Wengraf
Activist and independent researcher, USA; and Contributing Editor, Review of African Political Economy
lwengraf@gmail.com

Janet Bujra
Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, UK; and Editorial Working Group, Review of African Political Economy
j.m.bujra@bradford.ac.uk
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6518-2421

Chanda Mfula
University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK; Editorial Working Group, Review of African Political Economy
chandamfula@gmail.com
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1985-6979

Elisa Greco
Editorial Working Group, Review of African Political Economy
eligreco@yahoo.com
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7580-3444

Ray Bush
School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, UK; Editorial Working Group, Review of African Political Economy
r.c.bush@leeds.ac.uk
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2829-551X