

The Colonial Roots of Present Crises

Article by Amitav Ghosh

October 19, 2022

Looking around at the energy crisis, the drift to the extreme right and the mounting climate disasters that the world is facing, the common thread of colonial exploitation may not be obvious. On the sidelines of the Ecopolis festival, we spoke to acclaimed writer Amitav Ghosh who offered a historical perspective on world events from the Pakistan floods to the war in Ukraine and the challenges ahead for green and progressive forces.

Green European Journal: This August, Pakistan was hit with floods that left 50 million people displaced and which killed over 1500 people. It will take months for the water to recede. As a south Asian writer who has written intensively on climate impacts on the region, what is your perspective on the floods and the global response?

Amitav Ghosh: Catastrophes in the Global South barely seem to register, but this time it was clear that people were paying attention. Maybe it's the scale of the catastrophe but it did seem to make an impact on people around the world. Is it enough? No, I don't suppose it is. Considering the scale of the catastrophe, it should have been front-page news everywhere.

This was a disaster foretold because there were major precursors to this flood, in 2010 and 2012. After Antarctica, Pakistan has the most glaciers – over 700. Himalayan glaciers are melting at an incredible pace. We've also seen the same problem with terrifying glacier lake outbursts flooding villages in India.

Pakistan is singularly ill-adapted to coping with a flood like this. Whenever we see these climate catastrophes – and it's true as much of the Global North as it is Global South – these events are hugely worsened by historic interventions in the landscape. One of the reasons why so many people were displaced in these floods is because, going back to colonial times, many nomads who moved with the rhythms of the river were forced to settle by river banks. To colonial and modern developmental regimes, nomadism of any kind is very offensive. They want people to be stable and settled. The areas where these communities settled had a very strange land tenure system because the British gave out huge chunks of land to Punjabi aristocrats to maintain their support.

It is another example of how historical anthropogenic interventions are greatly worsening climate disasters. Many Pakistani spokespeople have been calling for reparations and the floods have amplified the calls for loss and damages, but let's see what comes from it.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, you use the sci-fi term terraforming to describe how empire transformed the world's terrain. Is the degree to colonialism transformed the land and how land is lived and organised undervalued?

Absolutely. The most terraformed part of India is the Punjab, where the British built many canals and distributed enormous quantities of land. Why? Because they wanted to maintain the support of their Punjabi soldiers, the mercenaries on who they depended after the great Indian uprising against colonial rule in 1857.

This intensive terraforming was worsened through the interventions of the Green Revolution, especially on the Indian side. Now a silent catastrophe is unfolding in this part of north India. Since the 1950s, farmers have been pumping up fossil water with subsidised electricity. Today the aquifer is completely exhausted and the traditional forms of irrigation used before the British canals have been neglected. Agriculture will soon become impossible within this region

Mike Davies's *Late Victorian Holocausts* describes how British imperialism destroyed all the mechanisms and institutions that had long existed in south Asia for famine control and water management.

Indeed. They were destroyed in the service of the ideology of free trade. In the past, Indian kings and emperors would prepare for and respond to famines with massive state interventions: distributing food, storing supplies, and so on. The British, literally while famines were unfolding, would refuse to do anything that would interfere with the laws of free trade. Charities were prevented from intervening, just as we see now in America where people are banned from distributing food to the homeless.

As we speak, Europe is going through a deep energy crisis as the resources that it depends on the rest of the world for are no longer easily available because of war and sanctions and because other countries want them too. Are the legacies of colonialism and extraction backfiring on Western countries?

The more I look at the world, I see colonial practices which were previously inflicted upon populations in the colonised world deployed in the home countries. For example, the present British government is again subsidising the fossil fuel companies, while making people bear the costs of the energy hike. In the United States, there is an uncanny similarity between the opioid epidemic and what Britain and the United States did to China in the 19th century. The Big Pharma companies that began to target vulnerable populations in mining and industrial regions are engaging in the same predatory practices as the old colonial elites. It is the same logic that deems some people disposable. These same populations will bear the burden of climate change too. Who will pay for the people displaced by the catastrophic flooding in Le Marche this September? It was hardly mentioned in the Italian elections.

In Europe, I see an intensifying rage against the political class. We've already seen it in France a few years ago with the *gilets jaunes* movement. By the end of this winter, I think you're going to see popular uprisings of various kinds across Europe. Sadly, I think they will manifest themselves in ways which feed the radical right.

The radical right were the main winners in both the Swedish and the Italian elections. We're clearly living through a period of crises and uncertainty, but can we draw a connection between the environmental crisis itself and the anger that these parties draw upon?

Absolutely. One of the things that's striking when you look around the world right now is that even with 1.3 degrees of warming, we see incredible disruption. Not just in physical or economic systems but in political ones too.

Britain has presented itself as a bastion of stability for centuries. Who would have thought that Brexit would initiate a profound destabilisation of the country in the space of four or five years? What prompted Brexit? Migration, and there's a clear and accelerating connection between migration and climate change. Demographically speaking, there may not have been a vast number of migrants going to Britain, but it was enough to create a kind of fundamental instability. So much so that many of the decisions taken by large numbers of British people seem inexplicable. You just can't place them within a normal framework of politics.

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This instability is going to intensify, and it will empower the Right. The Left – and here I'm also talking about the Greens – made the decision some time ago to move towards a technocratic centre. They started doing all this wonkery and addressing policy to establish their credentials as serious politicians and administrators. Of course, it's necessary to be serious about administration and governance. But the problem appears when you leave out the political impulse. The danger of technocracy is that you cannot tap into the general discontent with the political class because you are completely identified with the political class.

The Right, on the other hand, has been viscerally political. They create symbols and run a nonstop outrage machine enabled by social media. But the Left seems to lack imagination and is unable to tap into the energy of young climate activists. Are you going to try to persuade people that your wonkery is going to solve these issues? Everyone can look around and see that it's not.

Green politics can trace its roots back to the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Do you think that they might have swung too far from idealism to pragmatism?

The movements of the 1960s and '70s were trying to address the industrial rat race which has built an industrial doom machine. Many of these concerns were present in the imagination of the counterculture. Allen Ginsberg, for example, one of the great godfathers of the hippy movement, was talking about climate change back in the '70s. But over time, Green parties put on their suits and ties and washed their hands of the counterculture.

Looking back now, it does seem to have been a mistake because they're not able to tap into the energy of the young. I was travelling in Italy recently and Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future are very strong there. Young people turn out in huge numbers, but it does not generate the political clout that it should. The ground for visceral, anti-

establishment, politics has been seized by the Right. It's such an irony because what the Right is doing, and not just in Italy but everywhere – Britain, the US – is using populism to hand everything over to the big corporations and billionaires.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, you call for a more “vitalist politics” that recognises the value of all life on Earth and that stands in contrast to an economicistic way of looking at the world. In North America and other parts of the world, there are indigenous cultures that bring different views of life and being and so on. But most European societies are highly urbanised and industrial if not post-industrial. Isn't it much harder to create a vitalist politics when its basis, which may have existed for example in peasant traditions, has been lost?

It is true that in Europe there is a complete cleavage between the lives people lead and the lives that were tied to the soil even a generation ago. You see that most clearly in France. The European Union has also encouraged this divorce by pursuing an agricultural policy based on the centralisation and industrialisation of agriculture. Incentives were created for farmers to take up industrial agriculture, even though it is highly unsustainable as we see in the nitrogen crisis in the Netherlands. Small farmers who literally eke out a marginal living have no option but to carry on down the path of industrial agriculture.

There has been this massive fracturing and people can see that things have gone radically wrong in Europe and the wider West. There is a resurgence of earth-centred religions and beliefs. A counterculture does exist, it just hasn't achieved critical mass yet. In a time of instant communication, it could happen very quickly and take us all by surprise.

Greta Thunberg's strikes rippled around the world in a matter of weeks and months so there is the potential...

Whether it will happen one can't say, but I think it certainly could. So far, it almost seems history is conspiring against us. The climate movement was gathering momentum throughout 2019 and it crested in 2020. Then, the pandemic intervened and forced everybody to get back into their isolated little corners. Collective movements became impossible and people were forced to retreat into their interior spaces. I think that will be considered a real historical catastrophe. It also teaches us that so much of history is actually just accidental or contingent. Who knows where the movement could have gone?

An even greater catastrophe is the Ukraine war. Not only has it taken away all attention from the climate crisis, but it's also given the fossil fuel industries a new lease of life. In every way, it seems like every faltering step we take forward leads to ten steps backwards. If there are historians in the future, they're going to look back on this period as one where accidents and contingent factors deepened the crisis at every turn.

We're speaking ahead of COP27 which will take place in Egypt. Last year in Glasgow, many fine promises were made but now it seems like the world is more divided than ever. What is your view on the state of global climate politics?

We mustn't delude ourselves. When we look at what's going on in the world, we cannot indulge in fantasies. Even before Glasgow, it was perfectly clear that global institutions have essentially disintegrated. The pandemic had a lot to do with it; the world's failure to

mount a global response with systems for distributing vaccines is evidence of the complete fracturing of global institutions.

Three of the most important players didn't turn up for COP 26: Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro literally thumbed his nose at the Glasgow meeting. He was in Italy at the time, he could have gone but he didn't. COP 26 ended up as a sort of parade for the Anglosphere. That's all it was – a show. What was promised doesn't even come close to rising to the urgency that's needed.

What we are really seeing is a massive fracturing of the global order into new power blocs. Xi Jinping has withdrawn from climate cooperation with the US. China and Russia are two of the biggest players in this whole scenario and how do you expect countries that are under severe sanctions to cooperate on other issues? It's just not realistic.

If we had to look for hope then all we can point to right now are the youth movements. But we shouldn't think about this in terms of hope and despair. We should think of this in terms of duty and what we have to keep on doing. But that doesn't require us to be blind to the situation as it is.



Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. He is the author of two books of non-fiction, a collection of essays, and ten novels. In 2018 he became the first English-language writer to receive India's highest literary honour, the Jnanpith Award. His most recent publication is *Gun Island*, a novel.

Published October 19, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

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