Reflections on Crisis: Capitalism, Climate Change, and Resistance

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"My baby saw the future; she doesn't want to live here anymore. It's lousy science fiction, gets on your skin and seeps into your bones..."

David Byrne, *Dance on Vaseline*

As the most recent (April 14, 2014) report from the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] clearly indicates, the earth's ecosystem is undergoing a radical transformation. A key conclusion of the new IPCC report is that sea-level rise has accelerated in recent years. Yet, before many, many more people become climate refugees as their communities become submerged, most people on the planet will be confronted by extreme weather events. Record-breaking hot months now occur five times more frequently than they would in a stable, unchanging climate; these heat waves cause droughts, wild fires, proliferation of contagious diseases, widespread extinctions, poor harvests, and, inevitably, loss of life. The increase in the earth's surface temperature means more warm air rising, carrying more evaporated water into the atmosphere, which entails greater condensation and precipitation, thus a significant increase in violent flooding across the globe, hence more landslides, and more loss of life. As atmospheric carbon dioxide levels rise due to anthropogenic climate change, average temperatures will also continue to rise causing weather patterns to become less and less stable. Rainy seasons throughout the world, for example, which used to occur more consistently due to the interconnected planet climate systems, have now become erratic, prone to extreme shifts, which entail positive-feedback loops accelerating climate change itself.

In light of such dire planetary conditions, and some scientists now believe that the IPCC report is conservative, it seems appropriate to reflect upon the many insights offered in Christian Parenti's latest book *Tropic of Chaos*: *Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*. In the following pages I offer a review of Parenti's work in order to better assess how climate change is impacting the geopolitical landscape of our world, but first I will briefly introduce another thinker's recent contribution to an essentially related topic: planetary resource control. Michael Klare's investigations, spanning the past thirty years, into the global pursuit of vital resources have profoundly shaped the discourse of geopolitical analysis, and thus his work seems highly relevant to Parenti's own investigations into the structural dimensions of our global political, economic, and social realities.[1]

In Klare's most recent book, *The Race for What's Left*: *The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources* (Picador, 2012), readers are presented with a stark depiction of a global reality wherein existing energy and vital mineral resources are "being depleted at a terrifying pace and will largely be exhausted in the not-too-distant future" (12). Governments and resource corporations, with full knowledge of the rapidly declining reserves, are embarking on a concerted drive to control the remaining sources of the world's raw materials base. The "global drive to find and exploit the world's final resource reserves," Klare explains, will engage the consuming powers in "an intense competitive struggle, and will also, if the future resembles the past, likely erupt in armed combat in contested resource zones" (12, 17). Worse still, Klare avers, "in the near future, the most precious natural resource of all—food—will also become scarce in many parts of the world" (11). From this disturbing glimpse into the future, Klare draws the sobering conclusion that if the world is to avoid war, widespread starvation, or a massive environmental catastrophe, "what is required is nothing less than a complete transformation of industrial society, with all finite resources [being] systematically replaced by renewable alternatives" (234). In what is perhaps his most succinct explication of his work's findings, Klare writes:

As the race for what's left gains momentum, it will intrude with greater force into world affairs, threatening the survival of animal species, local communities, giant corporations, and entire nations. The global economy as it currently stands cannot grow and prosper without an increasing supply of numerous critical resources—but acquiring these materials will pose an ever-greater threat to the safety and stability of human society and the natural world. Only if we abandon the race altogether, focusing instead on developing renewable resources and maximizing efficiency, can we hope to avoid calamity on a global scale (210).

Klare's assessment may be read as a call for a movement of transformative social change, his forceful command to abandon the race for the planet's remaining resources is akin to what philosopher Istvan Meszaros, in *Beyond Capital*, refers to as the process of forming a new system of "social-metabolic control," by which Meszaros means a post-capitalist sustainable society formed through multiple anti-capitalist struggles in various, and reinforcing, environmental, social, economic, and political spheres of activity. It is from this framework of anti-capitalist struggle, therefore, that the following review of Parenti's work can be considered, although it should be made clear from the outset that Parenti himself does not offer such a standpoint. His own view, as will become apparent, is for capitalism itself to deal with the problem through the workings of its dominant political manifestation as plutocratic "representative" democracy. Once we have reviewed his work as a whole, we can better judge such putative solutions.

In *Tropic of Chaos*: *Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, Christian Parenti takes the reader on a selective tour to some of the front lines of Klare's somewhat dystopic future, though it is not actually to the future that Parenti intends to guide us, but to the past and the present. As Parenti points out, his book may, at first glance, appear to be "a book about the future, [but] in fact [it is] a book of history." And such a history is needed to "better analyze both the present and the dangerous future ahead" (11). Consisting of four parts and covering three continents, Parenti's engaging tour explores five conceptual categories of recent geopolitical history: *violence*, *poverty,* legacies of *the Cold War*, *neoliberal economic policies*, and, most importantly, *climate change.* These five categories of social disruption coalesce into what Parenti refers to as "the most colossal set of events in human history: the catastrophic convergence …" (5).

Between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Tropic of Cancer lies the eponymous "Tropic of Chaos" that "belt of economically and politically battered post-colonial states … [that] violent and impoverished swath of terrain around the mid-latitudes of the planet," wherein "we find clustered most of the failed and semifailed states of the developing world" (9, 11). It is from this geographical region of the planet that Parenti draws his alarming prognosis of the doleful portents the catastrophic convergence has already reaped and will continue to reap from climatically triggered social breakdowns. The catastrophic convergence may be summed up as the "collision of political, economic, and environmental disasters … [which] compound and amplify each other, one expressing itself through another" (7). Parenti's fifth category of analysis, climate change, is of course the most recent addition to the global disaster team he has assembled, and, as Parenti avers, it "now joins these [other] crises, acting as an accelerant [or as] the Pentagon calls it a 'threat multiplier'" (9). "In the case of climate change," Parenti informs us,

the prior traumas that set the stage for bad adaptation, the destructive social response, are Cold War-era militarism and the economic pathologies of neoliberal capitalism. Over the last forty years, both these forces have distorted the state's relationship to society … [thus inhibiting] society's ability to avoid violent dislocations as climate change kicks in (8).

It is here that Parenti's historical insights throughout the book become the most chilling for readers who are left to ponder the only slightly unimaginable horrors that lie in our planet's future.

Whether it is the slow doom already underway of the clustered geographical territories within or near the chaotic belt, or the gradual deterioration of the "neofascist islands of relative stability" elsewhere in the world, Parenti's analysis can leave us in little doubt that our futures will of necessity be more difficult, and many throughout the globe will surely have no future at all. For developed economies like the United States, their futures as "fortress societies" marred by the "politics of xenophobia, racism, police repression, surveillance, and militarism" may already appear unavoidable. This ghastly future of grim global ecodeterioration will precipitate in such advanced economies what Parenti calls "the politics of the armed lifeboat," (11). "But," Parenti wearily adds, "a world in climatological collapse—marked by hunger, disease, criminality, fanaticism, and violent social breakdown—will overwhelm the armed lifeboat. Eventually, all will sink into the same morass" (20). Indeed, it is clear from Parenti's work that climate change is the radical "game changer" geopolitically, as it endows its unholy inheritance, global poverty, violence, Cold War remnants, and neoliberal economic policies, with a colossal destructiveness that only nature itself can manifest, and in comparison to which even the most outrageous human carnage has always appeared diminutive.

In the first part of *Tropic of Chaos*, "Last Call for Illusions," Parenti introduces his main ideas for the text as a whole, which I have, in part, summarized above, and he also provides a historical framework within which those ideas may be situated. He calls this framework "the geography of empire," which has involved continual conflicts over resources and produced war as its most reliable feature. "War," Parenti explains, evoking the first two categories of his analysis of the catastrophic convergence, violence and poverty, "has an uneven geography that follows the history of imperialism and the uneven development of capitalism on a global scale" (18). Coupled with war is "permanent counterinsurgency as planetary crisis management [which involves containing] and policing failed states …" (19). Parenti explains that "counterinsurgency has been central in setting up the catastrophic convergence of poverty, violence, and climate change" (25).

The history of counterinsurgency has simultaneously been the history of what Parenti refers to as the United States' "small wars," which have followed three distinct phases: (1) "asymmetrical wars," which involved European and U.S. imperial conquests of the Global South from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century; "counterinsurgencies" against communist or nationalist liberation struggles; and "postideological" containment conflicts which inaugurated the era of open-ended counterinsurgencies that now permeate our global reality, and usher in a future of an ever "rising tide of violence" (26-27). This contemporary historical moment, the era marked by "the social wreckage of counterinsurgency," has in the past twenty or so years displayed basically uninterrupted military interventions intensified by climate change and hence has significantly increased violence around the globe. As Parenti rather starkly puts it at the end of part one: we now live in the "militarized adaptation to climate chaos: dirty war forever" (36).

In the second part of *Tropic of Chaos*, Parenti focuses upon Africa, in particular the legacies of post-Cold War militarism and neoliberal economic restructurng in East Africa, which are being imbricated with the deleterious effects of climate change. Flooded with cheap weapons provided by Cold War competitors, several East African countries now confront national disintegration. Parenti cites Somalia as a prime example of this horrible tendency, writing that its "war and constant instability have infected the entire region. The flow of weapons, ammunition, contraband, and armed men across borders has created a lawless zone" (86). Parenti concludes the second part with what appears to this reader as a very realistic speculation: "If conventional war making produced the modern state, then asymmetrical warfare, social breakdown, intercommunal strife, brigandry, and open-ended counterinsurgency in the age of climate chaos may well be the modern state's undoing" (94).

In the third part of his text, Parenti takes his readers to Asia where water shocks—droughts and floods—in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and India are becoming the new normal. Climate

stress, in places like Afghanistan, fuels violence. Parenti explains this causal relationship by describing what the catastrophic convergence looks like in Afghanistan: "… eroded soil, limited water, greedy police, foreign troops, popular anger, and an insurgency that protects poppy crops from eradication" (99). In Kyrgyzstan and India, neoliberal economic shock therapy provides the backdrop to climate change. Neoliberal reforms removed from agriculture many government subsidies in these countries thereby trapping farmers in a downward economic cycle due to the extensive debt they incur in order to invest in well and irrigation systems required, in large part, because of climate-change-precipitated droughts (147). The internal wars in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and India provide a stark example of the catastrophic convergence. In such nations, "poverty," Parenti writes, "[is] made worse by neoliberalism [and then tragically combines with] counterinsurgency, repression, [and] climate-driven ecological crisis" (153). "Sadly," Parenti notes, "the dialectical connections between climate change, war, and environmental degradation become mutually reinforcing" (110). Parenti views the introduction of climate change into the already toxic mix of poverty, violence, Cold-War-inherited counterinsurgency, and neoliberalism as likely to promote ever greater social disintegration, and thus makes societal collapse in many of these nations of Asia a realistic possibility.

In the fourth and final part of the *Tropic of Chaos,* Parenti returns to the West with examinations of Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. In Latin America, rapid urbanization, weather shocks, severe water stress, and displaced populations are the outcomes of the catastrophic convergence. Parenti writes that "… the climate crisis adds its propellant power to the already unfolding, highly destructive legacy of neoliberalism and Cold War military adventures" (182). In Rio, for example, Parenti witnesses a form of "societal rot" produced, in large measure, by neoliberal economic policies, which have resulted in higher unemployment, rising poverty, crime, and massive growth of peri-urban areas as the rural poor migrated to Rio to find work. Parenti finds "a whole society infected by the gangrene of sub-rosa economics, corruption and violence" (171). Essentially, Parenti views the social polarization produced by neoliberalism in Brazil and Mexico as exacerbating deprivation, and he sees climate change converging with the legacies of repression and criminality in each state to produce a vortex of social anomie and violent class apartheid (199).

In the United States Parenti sees an authoritarian, crypto-racist state encapsulated by the war on immigrants that projects a menacing sadism as its chief mechanism of control and promotes fear, resentment, and hatreds that are fundamentally changing the dynamics of our society. The U.S. is returning to its more primitive state, Parenti concludes, "a *herrenvolk* democracy based on segregation and routine violence, in which race and nationality mask raw power. … Immigrants are the canaries in the political coal mine, and immigration is the vehicle by which the logic of the 'state of emergency' is smuggled into everyday life, law, and politics" (209). Parenti wants his readers to grasp the ideological spectacle taking place in the United States as a symptom of his book's overarching theme in order to properly assess how the empire is responding to the catastrophic convergence. "The flow of people from south to north," Parenti explains, "people deracinated by the structural violence of neoliberal economics, Cold War militarism, and now climate change—is met not only with walls, armed patrols, and cells but also with the calumny, hatred, and ideological spittle of right-wing demagogues" (215).

Parenti does locate pockets of resistance to neoliberal capitalism in the Global South, citing such examples as the landless people's movement [MST] in Brazil's northwest. Parenti describes a community engaged in land occupations and "a form of mixed-crop agroecological farming, agroforestry, and integrated pest management …" (174-175). And in his final chapter Parenti brings up that shining star of radical resistance Bolivia, a poor country of the South that has seriously challenged all the typical socio-economic and political barriers of underdevelopment by organizing itself, and is now proceeding on "a new path of mixed economic development, [that takes]

environmental issues seriously, and then … [brings] all of this to the international stage with dignity …" (236). These pockets of resistance, however heroic, do not seem to provide, in Parenti's mind, a robust alternative to the late capitalist neocolonial, inter-imperial onslaught he describes so well over the course of his book. It is on this point that I would like to offer my final reflections, for I find Parenti's proposals for dealing with the catastrophic convergence profoundly limiting in imaginative scope if not hopelessly utopic.

Parenti concludes *Tropic of Chaos* with two basic proposals for dealing with the catastrophic convergence in the United States: adaptation and mitigation. Both of these are to be engaged primarily through political and technological avenues: first, pressure the EPA to lower emissions of greenhouse gasses, and second, direct government procurement of clean energy technologies as a catalyst to spur private sector investment in the same. Such tepid solutions are the only that remain viable, according to Parenti, because there is no longer enough time, nor the likelihood even, for large-scale fundamental social change. Parenti forcefully writes,

The fact of the matter is time has run out on the climate issue. Either capitalism solves the crisis, or it destroys civilization. Capitalism begins to deal with the crisis now, or we face *civilizational* collapse beginning this century.

We cannot wait for a socialist, or communist, or anarchist, or deep-ecology, neoprimitive revolution; nor for a nostalgia-based *localista* conversion back to the mythical small-town economy of preindustrial America as some advocate (241).

But surely the two solutions Parenti offers in the face of the terrible probability of civilizational breakdown are themselves, in light of his own work, insufficient to genuinely help us avoid the worsening collapse he anticipates if those solutions are not implemented. How, for example, is the U.S. EPA to be spurred to implement the drastic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, which, as Parenti points out, would require the closure of coal-fired power plants (238), and dramatic restrictions on fossil fuel extraction, to name only the two most necessary actions, if not by the construction of a mass revolutionary movement to pressure the executive of the ruling class to such radical implementation? Furthermore, such a movement, if it is to develop in the United States, is already structurally insufficient as anthropogenic climate change is an *international* crisis. Parenti clearly informs us that climate change is not "a *technical* problem, nor even an *economic* problem: it is, fundamentally, a *political* problem" (226). But, as Chris Williams correctly pointed out in his 2011 review of Parenti's book, "capitalist nation states are prevented from genuine international solutions by economic competition for markets as expressed by inter-imperial conflict. The evidence to back up such an analysis is confirmed by almost twenty years of fruitless international negotiations specifically meant to address climate change."[2]

After presenting in such devastating detail over the course of two hundred pages capitalism's corrosive effects on various societies around the chaotic global belt, and conclusively demonstrating the irrational and structurally destabilizing nature of the capitalist social formation itself, particularly in its latest death-dealing, monstrously destructive configuration, neoliberalism, Parenti's putative solutions ring hollow, and his hopefulness, if it is that, barely sounds at all. Parenti must be aware of the overwhelming evidence of the many failures regulatory schemes have endured in the last twenty years when seeking to even slightly ameliorate the externalities that capitalist production necessarily produces. Witness the tiresome charade we must repeatedly endure whenever the United Nations attempts to address climate change. Yet, with apparently full awareness of late capitalism's fetish for short-term thinking oriented solely toward profit maximization, Parenti seems to somehow believe that the contemporary capitalist political formation can deal with the long-term consequences that the catastrophic convergence portends. Parenti cites the development of sanitary standards in the Progressive Era as a successful model of

governmentally imposed transformation to follow, but that model appears antiquated in light of today's socio-political reality. In an oligarchic society wherein corporate dominance of the political system is nearly total, I find waiting for the abusers to change less compelling and less attractive frankly than attempting to build anti-capitalist resistance movements intentionally designed to confront the abusers and remove them permanently from the scene of their many crimes. The many struggles to resist capitalism that have been and are being waged throughout the globe that Parenti clearly cherishes, fraught with limitations though they be, hold out greater prospects for the type of transformative change the catastrophic convergence requires if we are to have a world left to fight for at all.

Tropic of Chaos is an important book. In a growing body of literature concerned with the contemporary environmental crisis of global capitalism, it presents, in jargon-free prose readily accessible to nonacademic activists, a disturbing portrait of an unfolding planetary crisis. The friendly, yet critical attention here to the weakness of its recommendations in no way diminishes the profound insights into our present that the book does offer. If Parenti's prescriptions for resistance seem, to this reader anyway, as less than useful, if not, indeed, unwittingly obfuscatory, then his profound analysis of the present must require ever greater imaginative verve on the part of those struggling to respond to the catastrophic convergence in the interests of the human and nonhuman exploited and oppressed everywhere.