

Migration in the age of Imperialism's four horsemen

By Brian Parkin

For the past year a growing refugee crisis on Europe's borders has allowed the political right to capitalise on xenophobic and paranoid fears spread by racist politicians and media. Even those who have rejected the more outrageous expressions have often accepted the classification of those seeking resettlement along the lines of the 'deserving' refugees and asylum seekers and the 'less deserving' 'economic' migrants and 'benefit seekers' who the press demonise as a threat to jobs and welfare resources.

The rise in the numbers of those desperate to seek refuge is just the beginning as the unconstrained consequences of imperialist conflict and climate change combine to displace whole populations amid the conditions of a growing world economic crisis.



Albrecht Dürer *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1498)

A climate of chaos

In medieval Christendom an ever-fearful population was accustomed to balancing a precarious life on Earth with the very real prospect of eternal damnation in the after-life. And popular among the images of life-threatening forces were the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse- War, Famine, Pestilence and Conquest.¹ So it is ironic that many centuries on and with the advent of science and reason, that thanks to the persistent crises of capitalism, the four horsemen still stalk us.

¹ The Bible. New Testament, *Book of Revelations* 6.2. In some versions the fourth horseman was Death (usually regarded as a consequence of Conquest). *Revelations* was written in the first century AD, probably at the time of severe persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities. With its vision of the fall of great empires, it appears to have antecedents in earlier Hebrew resistance literature, including from a Jewish uprising reflected in the book of *Daniel* of the Old Testament c.160 BCE.

But unlike the inhabitants of the dark and middle ages of Europe, we have no excuse in thinking that the blights confronting humanity arise from the sources of divine intervention or fate. And apart from the irresponsible excesses of human economic activity exacerbating the extremes of natural processes and events, it is clear that the four horsemen is a posse pretty well in the pay of big business and their corrupt client governments.

In the case of war, the persistent use of armed force as the default mode for obtaining economic hegemony and resources access are now the established means of dispute resolution over strategic energy supplies in particular. Unable to plan the rational and responsible management and extraction of fossil fuels, capitalism via the devices of its most 'developed' phase of imperialism can- and often does- deploy quite incredibly advanced technologies of weaponry to resolve market 'blockages'.

So famine can rapidly follow as food resources and distribution systems become disrupted or destroyed and gangsterised black markets then arise operating on the currencies of fear and extortion. And where warfare, often conducted amid civilian populations, leads to the dislocation of civil society and the wrecking of already under-developed water and sanitation systems, then the effects upon an already malnourished population provide a society scale petri dish for the pathogens of pestilence.

A chaos of climate

Since the earliest period of human social development, the capture and use of fire was probably the most revolutionary means by which we both developed the abilities to form settlements as well as modify the natural environment. Today, as the residues of carbon based fuels in the atmosphere begin to cause irrevocable changes to our global climate, the most dramatic manifestations of our technological prowess now also threaten the future existence of our species.

In previous times the emissions from fuel burning would have been sufficiently modest to have been contained within a natural 'carbon cycle'² with little negative impact on the climate. But with the advent of capitalism and its rapid phases of accumulation through industrial growth, the influences on the chemistry of the atmosphere and consequently the very dynamics and equilibriums of natural processes have resulted a quickening of a chain reaction of climate events.

Until about forty years ago, the main concern about the burning of carbon fuels was around low level pollution in the form of smog and, more seriously, acid rain. A

² The carbon cycle is a natural process by which carbon gases – mainly carbon dioxide (CO₂) – are absorbed by terrestrial vegetation and marine 'phytoplanktons' and locked up in 'carbon sinks' in the form of plant tissue.

number of relatively low-cost technologies³ have proved able increasingly to control these mainly sulphur dioxide (SO₂) and nitrogen oxide (NO_x) emissions – although the speed and scale of urbanisation without planned mass transit infrastructures is now permitting the internal combustion engine to overwhelm all previous abatement strategies in many cities.⁴

But by far the greatest concern is the climate change influences from carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels and the speed to which they are contributing to a quickening rise in mean global temperature.

It is a paradox that we have developed the scientific means of understanding both the causes and possible means of reducing climate change whilst being locked into a mode of production for which the appetite for petroleum fuels in particular seems insatiable. Meanwhile, processes of globalisation and neoliberalism have meant that any attempts at political or technical solutions that threaten rates of accumulation or profit can be blocked through the collusion of international institutions, state and corporate elites.⁵

Climate change is a result of the industrial development propelled by fossil fuels that has been integral to capitalism. Only the overthrow of capitalism and imperialism can save our planet from destruction driven by the endless search for profit. In the current system, governments and big business work together to ensure a licence to wrest profit from both labour power and our planet's resources with neither political accountability nor environmental responsibility.⁶ We need to change that.

³ Sulphur dioxide has traditionally been a product of power stations and large industrial plant. This is increasingly being controlled with the fitting of Flue Gas Desulphurisation (FGD) plant. Nitrogen dioxide is now usually controlled by fitting Selective Catalytic Reduction (SCR) equipment to both motor vehicles and power stations and refineries.

⁴ In many developed economies various clean air acts of legislation were brought into effect by the mid-1950s, initially to prohibit localised pollution from the burning of solid fuels. But by the early 1960s photo-chemical smog's produced from a combination of massively increased motor vehicle exhaust fumes and sunlight forced the introduction of catalytic converters which could restrict NO_x emissions by c.70%. But it is the sheer growth in motor vehicle usage that has returned many urban areas to centres of respiratory and cardiovascular disease. The acid rain 'precursors' mentioned above should not be confused with 'greenhouse' gases in that they actually contribute to atmospheric *cooling* for the brief periods they remain aerosols.

⁵ Note the symbiotic relationship between energy companies and many governments who invest considerable time and money in the misinformation of climate denial. For an entertaining account, see: Greg Palast, *Vultures' Picnic: A tale of oil, high finance and investigative reporting*. London: Constable and Robinson, 2012.

⁶ Karl Marx emphasised the importance of nature as a source of wealth. In 1875 he took the leadership of the infant German Social Democratic movement to task over their apparent failure to recognise this in their platform, 'The Gotha Programme'. Where they had written: 'Labour is the source of all wealth and culture', Marx rebutted: 'Labour is not *the source* of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labour, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power'. K. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 5th May 1875.

Migration as population flight

Migration is as old as the history of humanity. And as old as the history of our species has been the constant impact of human activity upon the natural environment. It is now generally accepted that progressive deforestation in what is now central Africa induced population movements of both nomadic herding groups as well as the seeking of sites for more permanent settlement. Much of the surface of the globe that we often assume to be a natural landscape is in fact an artefact brought about by over 100,000 years of human activity.

But with initially a small human population, the impact on the natural environment would have been gradual, against which would be environmental changes brought on by natural processes which would be equally slow. This meant that earlier human populations would have had time to adapt either by migration or through the development of technologies by which the problems of environment change could be mitigated. For example, the sinking of wells in seasonally arid periods.

In more recent periods, particularly since the last ice age of around 11,700 years ago, natural pressures for population movement have given way to problems associated with the growth of bigger settlements, such as diseases associated with transmission through close proximity or water-borne parasites and pathogens such as malaria and cholera.⁷ But with the growth of class society and conflict, war has grown to be a major driver behind mass migration.

Surpluses and slavery

In earlier times a combination of war and religious persecution provided a 'push' factor associated with fear-driven flight with little or no 'pull' of a certain place of safety to flee to. It is only with the emergence of class societies and the production of surpluses upon which relative prosperity could be based that an economic 'pull' factor developed in the form of security, shelter and nutrition that stable settlements offered.

However, an essential phase of pre-capitalist societies is a process called 'primitive accumulation' in which intensified labour power is often harnessed forcibly to early and low productivity forms of production by way of producing surpluses which are then at the disposal of the dominant classes and elites. In these (usually) slave societies either slaves in the form of those captured in battle, or a vanquished

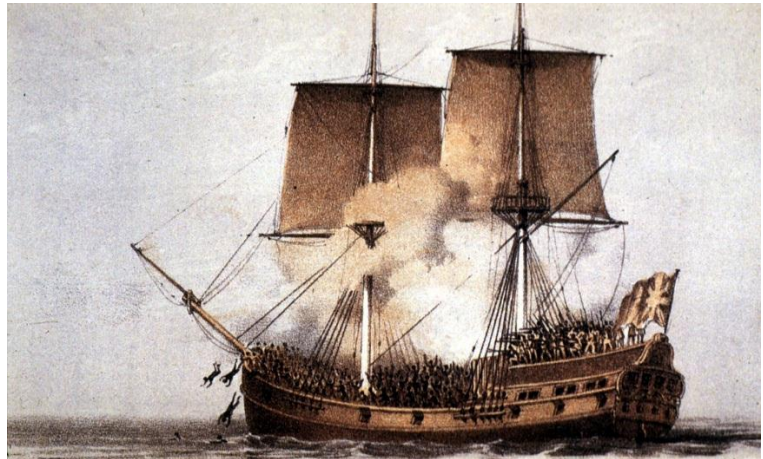
⁷ The over-loading and stagnation of quite elaborate canal and reservoir systems and consequent epidemics is thought to have been the major contributory factor behind the collapse of the Kmer civilisation of ancient Cambodia c. 1300 CE.

population over-run by conquest might form the involuntary workforce of governed provinces or colonies.

In much later phases of early capitalism and in an extension of 'primitive accumulation' we find the dislocation and often forcible resettlement of rural populations through land enclosures and 'clearances'. In Britain this forced internal migration occurred as late as the 15th-17th centuries in England with enclosure and as recently as the mid-18th century in the case of the highland clearances of Scotland.

Revolt aboard a slave ship, 1787. Image No. E007, www.slaveryimages.org

Although himself bitterly opposed to the slave trade, Adam Smith, the founder of modern political economy, explained the economic rationale for slavery in relation to certain crops best suited for cultivation in the Americas.



In our sugar colonies....the whole work is done by slaves, and in our tobacco colonies a very great part of it. The profits of a sugar plantation in any of our West Indian colonies are generally much greater than those of any other cultivation that is known in Europe or America; and the profits of a tobacco plantation are superior to those of corn ... [Therefore] the number of slaves accordingly is much greater, in proportion to that of whites, in our sugar than in our tobacco colonies. ⁸

Hence the continuing technical development of capitalism being no guarantee of social progress. Despite the rise of the Reformation in much of Europe which was an essential contribution to the 'Enlightenment' and the eventual rise of liberalism, a frenzied scramble for colonial possessions in the New World saw a widespread disregard of humanitarian Christian values with the rise of the slave trade. It is estimated that between the late 16th century and the early 1800's some 10 – 15 million Africans were sold into slavery for the cultivation of 'new' crops in the colonies of America, the Caribbean and the northern coast of Latin America. ⁹

⁸ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ch 11: 'The Discouragement of Agriculture'.

⁹ J. Rawley, S. Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, Lincoln, 2006. Although any exact estimate of Africans actually traded is impossible, it is possible through ships manifests and maritime insurance records to estimate the number dying ('lost') in transit to be reliably put at 2 million.

In the cases of the enclosure of the English rural population and the clearances of the highland Scots, a 'pull' factor in the form of moving to the growing cities provided the human feed-stock of a new proletariat for the industrial revolution¹⁰ or alternatively for an initial population of 'planters' for colonial settlements.¹¹ Although in both cases there was little in the way of choice involved, they provide early examples of what has euphemistically come to be termed 'economic migration'.

Another form of enforced migration- but by no means as barbaric as the African slave trade was the transportation of criminals to penal colonies such as Australia, too distant for the slave trade to be economic and with little in the way of a native population to capture and render as bonded labour or otherwise to the needs of the colonial economy. Many of those transported, usually for lesser crimes, were classified as indentured labour: effectively as a working possession of a master willing to pay their upkeep.

Continued further phases of mass migration affecting European populations marked the 19th century with, for example, the human made catastrophe of the Irish potato famine creating an effective depopulation of the Irish countryside and mass out-fluxes to the UK mainland and the United States. During the same period a heightening of repression in Eastern Europe, and in particular, the Russian Empire created a westward migration movement of people escaping serfdom, pogroms, poverty and political persecution. Essentially these migrants were in fact refugees and in the majority of cases were Jews trying to escape what was often murderous persecution. And although initially permitted entry into the UK, it wasn't long before a deep-seated anti-Semitic streak in the British ruling class meant by 1905 the introduction of the Aliens Act which under the stewardship of arch-imperialist Winston Churchill was able to 'stem the tide of the un-Christian and subversive alien filth'.¹²

¹⁰ The early and often traumatic movement of populations from countryside to the towns takes place in a developmental phase of capitalism usually called 'primitive accumulation'.

¹¹ Of course a major source of mass migration from the 17th century onwards was in the form of slavery as virtually the sole form of labour in colonial plantations usually organised along pre-feudal lines.

¹² These words were used by Winston Churchill when defending his decision to use the army and artillery in the famous 'Siege of Sidney Street' of 3 January 1911 in which Latvian anarchists, suspected of an armed robbery at the London Exchange building were cornered. A later investigation revealed that the leading member of the gang, 'Peter the Painter', was in fact the non-Jewish Janis Zhaklis, an exiled member of the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party. He escaped, only to turn up in Petrograd in 1917.

Migration in the age of Imperialism

Capitalism as a mode of production characterised as commodity production based on wage labour is also a set of social relations of production prone to crisis. As such when the 'system' is booming there is an almost insatiable demand for labour. And when it slips into reverse labour is shed. And although at its inception and at the stage of primitive accumulation the demand for labour can usually be sourced from the internally displaced indigenous population, further phases of expansion require a larger pool of labour.

In the years following the Second World War much of Western Europe was rebuilt through the combined agencies of the US funded Marshall Plan and massive state infrastructural investment. As a consequence economies such as the UK and France as they were entering the 'long boom' were able to draw on their former colonies to meet the shortfalls in labour supply. And for the better part of 30 years this economic 'pull' in drawing in workers and their families in their thousands did much to transform the cultural mix of the host countries. Initially, migrant populations to the UK from Ireland or Eastern Europe¹³ often faced a xenophobic reception from an already impoverished settled population- a situation usually exploited by employers eager to see workers compete in a wage race to the bottom. But with the arrival of black or Asian migrants from the former colonies, the experience could often be one of discrimination and out-right racist hostility.

For a country like Germany with no former colonies upon which to draw labour and an economy experiencing a massive industry-led recovery, the sources of available labour were more constrained and with no post-colonial 'obligation' required, the treatment of migrant workers as Gastarbeiters (guest workers) marked by an outright denial of basic civil rights let alone



Jean Mohr. From John Berger, Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man* (1975)

¹³ Immigration from Europe all but ceased with the passing of the 1904 Aliens Act but resumed to a modest degree following the end of World War 2.

the opportunity to integrate and seek permanent settlement.¹⁴

But by far the greatest migration of modern times has been the flow of a Chinese rural peasant population into the booming cities during China's 15 year industrial transformation. It has been estimated that over 300 million people have undertaken an internal migration which requires them to have employment contracts as a basic right of settlement and to stay in barrack-like dormitories on the perimeters of pollution-choked mega-cities. With a growing appetite for the fight against poverty wages and government official 'unions', this mass of humanity in flexing its muscles could become a revolutionary force for change.

Climate and Imperialism: welcome to the imperialist Anthropocene

With the concept of an Anthropocene we are in effect overlaying a transparency of late human activity measured in less than three centuries over a geological record of periods measured in millions of years. We are also suggesting that it is within such a period of a few human generations that the Earth's climate has been subjected to stresses that now threaten the viability of sustainable human existence on this planet.

It is clear from the carbon record dating from the late 18th century that levels of carbon dioxide have been building up in our planet's troposphere. The natural 'greenhouse' which has made our world inhabitable and sustainable for millennia has been progressively augmented by emissions to critical levels datable from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution of around 250 years ago. The result has been to trap reflected ultra-violet radiation from sunlight within our greenhouse with an inevitable result in a progressive rise in global mean temperature.

Having once got going, the capitalist mode of production, forever calling upon science and technical innovation, has grown exponentially. And with that growth has come the spread of industries on a global scale demanding ever more labour power and natural resources. By the time that Frederick Engels was collating Marx's *Capital*,¹⁵ the internal combustion engine had not been patented, electricity was only just emerging from the entertainment stage as a bourgeois parlour trick, the principal source of horse-powered transport was the horse, airborne travel was

¹⁴ Such workers were usually drawn from Turkey, Spain and Southern Italy and were required to live in barrack-like accommodation and with no tenure once the work permit had expired. Their 'guest' status denied them the right to bring their families with them and the mandatory hostel living was designed to make them available for mandatory police and immigration agency checks. For a moving account of their plight see John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man*, London 1975. Also see Colin Barker's tribute to *The Seventh Man's* photographer Jean Mohr at <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/barker-c/1975/06/migrants.htm>.

¹⁵ Volume 3 was edited from Marx's final notes and published in 1898, the same year that Otto Benz sought a patent for his 'Benzol' powered engine and Nikola Tesla was being ridiculed by Edison for his advocacy of alternating current as a means of electricity distribution.

the stuff of Jules Verne or HG Wells and street lighting was by town gas, the sole source of which was coal which was mined by men crawling in a darkness and danger with hand-tools little changed since Roman times.

Yet even by then capitalism was leaving its indelible imprint on the carbon record. But it is within the intervening 117 years that capitalism has evolved through the processes of consolidation and monopoly into its ultimate and most barbaric phase of imperialism. Scientists divide the natural history of the earth into periods defined by particular geological characteristics. We are presently living in a period called the Pleistocene, which is 65 million years old. Modern humans became widespread within the Upper Pleistocene, which began 126,000 years ago. Within this is a period called the Holocene, which began 11,700 years at the end of the last ice age. Recently, scientists have noted marked variations in both the climate and carbon records which have led some to suggest an alternative name for an 'intermediate' period we are living in.

In May 2000 climate scientist Paul Crutzen and geologist Eugene Stoermer presented a paper in which they suggested a new age that 'denotes the present time as an interval in which many natural processes are being profoundly altered by human activities'.¹⁶ This age they suggested should be called the **Anthropocene** or an 'age of man' in which the consequences of human activity, in particular the impact on the troposphere, stratosphere and the oceans, overtaking and negatively 'enhancing' the natural rates of change and the impacts on our planet's eco-systems. Among the outcomes of these changes they marked out global temperature rise, persistent rising in sea levels, stratospheric ozone depletion and the acidification of the oceans.

This is a contentious concept, and some socialists have criticised it for blaming the human species generally, rather than the capitalist mode of production specifically.¹⁷ However, the basis of the concept does locate discernible changes in the carbon record and related climatic change within the narrow historical period of capitalist development. The dates Crutzen and Stoermer denote are also reflected in the ocean sediments and coral reef records indicating a rapid rise in ocean acidification from 250 years ago – more or less the agreed date that the Industrial Revolution began. But what is more compelling is the evidence of acceleration of CO₂ build up and ocean acidification dating from 1950 onwards – the date which denotes the beginning of the 'long boom' in which capitalism grew fourfold in terms

¹⁶ Volume 3 was edited from Marx's final notes and published in 1898, the same year that Otto Benz sought a patent for his 'Benzol' powered engine and Nikola Tesla was being ridiculed by Eddison for his advocacy of alternating current as a means of electricity distribution.

¹⁷ See for example Andreas Malm, 'The Anthropocene Myth', *Jacobin*, 30 March 2015 (<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/anthropocene-capitalism-climate-change/>).

of output in less than 20 years. And it is the extension of this period in terms of hydrocarbon fuels consumption which now marks a speeding up of CO₂ concentrations whilst the rate of consumption of petroleum intensifies.¹⁸

But another dimension of the Anthropocene has to be the sudden and massive rise in migrations which are the result of an intensification of resource conflict which is now blighting the Middle East energy hub region as imperialist rivals put their surrogate dogs into fights by proxy. It is in the present day tragedies of Syria and Iraq and beyond that we now see the terrifying 'push' of war without seeming end but without the 'pull' of burgeoning economies elsewhere willing to accommodate refugees into their labour markets. So the imperialist Anthropocene period we have now entered is one in which capitalist competition and conflict within and around the world's most strategic energy hub confronts humanity with economic anarchy, social collapse, mass human displacement and climate catastrophe.

When we then add climate factors to the present period of crisis within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) we see that prior to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the desperate Tunisian food stall holder, who set off the Arab Uprisings of 2011, much of the region had experienced protracted periods of drought since 2006. The resultant food shortages combined with unpopular neoliberal austerity which included VAT on food, combined with the very public suicide of an impoverished food seller became the stuff of which revolutions sometimes happen.

But regardless of deep divisions, the major imperialist players initially recognised their mutual interest in subverting the Arab Uprisings of 2011 in a way that sought to restore despotism and a functioning energy economy to the MENA region. And although chaos has ensued in many instances, the world's main hydrocarbon hub has been restored to global warming rude health.

¹⁸ See Brian Parkin, 'As Middle East goes nuclear, climate change goes critical', *rs21.org.uk* (goo.gl/fsyOKI)

The end of the world may be nigh?

In the course of 30 years in which an understanding of global warming, its causes and possible mitigation strategies have been widely discussed, there has been scant evidence of a global effort being made to deal with the most pressing crisis ever to confront humanity.

Once again we are confronted by the four horsemen that for a few perhaps optimistically naïve decades had seemed like phantoms of the past. And given models of local governance and social and emergency support based on market principles we need look no further than the example of Hurricane Katrina to see how we may fare in the future.

On 29 August 2005 a hurricane struck the city of New Orleans and in the space of a few hours had killed hundreds, displaced over 1 million people and virtually destroyed the civic infrastructure of one of the biggest cities in the richest and most powerful nation on Earth.

As the majority of the victims were black and poor and uninsured and as a neoliberal city administration as well as cutting flood defence funding had also virtually abolished its emergency and

welfare budgets, the poor of New Orleans presaged the lot of the victims of climate change tragedies to come. They scrambled for high ground and shivered as they waited for Red Cross tents, food parcels and medical aid. And for many, a year later, they were still in emergency accommodation.

The case of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath is illustrative for two reasons.

Firstly, because the hurricane itself was with certainty a result of climate change. Katrina was the final of a vector of five storms that had been identified several days earlier forming in the Western Atlantic.¹⁹ The pattern and seasonal occurrence of that vector was consistent with previous episodes that had long convinced weather scientists that several once in a hundred years events *happening five times within a*



New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Inscription on garage of formerly flooded house

¹⁹ US Weather Bureau, Eastern seaboard report. 24 August 2005.

single decade was consistent with a trend towards a new and possibly permanent period of extreme weather.

And **secondly** because even with a relatively limited and seemingly isolated event, the sheer inability to plan for and invest in the essential contingency planning and aftermath resolution showed how unprepared even the most advanced economies are in the face of growing crisis.

Yet the evidence of the scale of things to come seems to fly in the face of the official view of most governments who although these days less inclined to outright climate denial, nevertheless opt for wishful thinking over responsibility. But a glance at even 'central case' (least-worse) data that now informs the scientific mainstream demonstrates how overwhelming and sudden the climate change crisis could be.

The end of the world in statistics?

In April 2014 the **International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** ²⁰ published an interim report that showed that we are now heading for a global temperature rise of 2°C over the pre-industrial period by 2040. It also confirmed that sea temperature rises since 1950 have been higher than at any similar period on available record and since the mid-19th century has been higher than any time in the past 2000 years and that sea level rises are also higher than past 2000 years whilst greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere are now the highest in 800,000 years.

Another report by **Climate Central**²¹ using a combination of IPCC data and satellite topography imaging concluded that between 147 and 216 million people currently live on land that will be below sea level by 2100. Another report²² as early as 1990 had projected a figure of there being over 200 million 'climate refugees' by 2050 due to a combination of crop failure and sea level rise which translates to 1 in every 45 people being a climate change refugee by the mid-point of the 21st century. And yet another report²³ predicted on current data a 30% fall in crop yield in Central and South East Asia as early as 2050. Additional data²⁴ also suggested a crop failure of 50% for Sub-Saharan Africa over the same period. Nicholas Stern,²⁵ in 2006 modelled regional water resource impacts for the Southern African and

²⁰ IPCC Interim report 2014. Geneva, Switzerland.

²¹ Climate Central, *New Analysis Shows Global Exposure to Sea Level Rise*. New York 23 September 2014.

²² IPCC 2nd quarterly report 1990, Geneva, Switzerland.

²³ IPCC Working Group 2: *Climate Change Impacts. Adaptation and vulnerability*. p.10, April 2007, Geneva.

²⁴ IPCC *Ibid*, p.11.

²⁵ Nicholas Stern; *The Stern Report; Economics of climate change; the Stern review*, Columbia University Press, Colombia, NY 2006.

Mediterranean regions based on a 4°C rise and concluded that there would be a 50% loss of fresh water by 2050.

A recent report²⁶ by the **International Energy Agency (IEA)** has estimated that far from meeting a 2°C limit in mean temperature rise by 2040, the present data indicates a more probable continued rise to **3.6°C** – possibly by mid-century. The report also projects a rise of 14 billion barrels per day of crude oil to 2040 with an overall rise of 20% in greenhouse emissions over the same period.

Perhaps one of the few good things to emerge from these reports is the increased use of the term ‘climate refugees’ when referring to the victims of environmental chaos. And given the intersectional relationship between capitalism with its imperialist manifestation in growing conflicts with the deepening global economic crisis and a quickening climate crisis, it is high time we dropped the term ‘economic migrant’ and simply used the term refugee to describe all of those in flight from capitalism’s chaos and terror.

Another solution? Revolution!

In science fiction movies that deal with the theme of Apocalypse and how to survive it, a kind of global version of the Titanic is usually played out with those privileged enough to have access to the first class lifeboats being the chosen ones to survive. And the rest of us get to flounder among the icebergs – although with climate change, of course, there won’t be many icebergs.

What of course is missing from any such fictional narrative is the same omission we find in the various quack strategies that belatedly recognise the scale of the climate crisis whilst failing to imagine any agency capable of confronting it. Nowhere do we find suggestions of how to divest the energy companies and their client governments of their assets to pollute us and their legislative means to deceive us. Nowhere do we find a recognition of the horrors of war with a courage to stop them. And nowhere do we find anything but crocodile tears at the sight of poverty and disease in a world of plenty. Such things are a reflection of the natural functions of markets and/or the naturally flawed nucleus of human nature. We are told.

Thirty years ago in West Texas vast swathes of land were put under cotton cultivation. For the cultivation and harvesting of the cotton crop thousands of Mexican workers were invited from over the border to work in the fields. In their migration for wages they were also seeking refuge from acute poverty and a violent narcotics war that ravages the border towns. But they were also seeking refuge from a Mexican economy that through the imperialist snare of the North American

²⁶ IEA World Energy Outlook 2015, *New Policies Scenario*. Factsheet.www.worldenergyoutlook.org

Free Trade Agreement²⁷ allows US oil companies to divest Mexico of oil revenues by insisting on maintaining output even when the world oil price will presently not cover the costs of production. The NAFTA however has had far from an easy ride. When the agreement was signed in January 1994 a revolt of landless labourers – many forced into US cash crop migrant labour – resulted in the Zapatista revolt which has since grown to initiate the seizure of land and water rights as well as both labour unions and human rights campaigns. Against the most seemingly impossible odds, resistance will through.

But in West Texas – like all the southern US states – crops have been falling in yield because of droughts for the past five years. Rainfalls have not come and the aquifers are all but dry. But not too dry to prevent oil companies obtaining access to land for the purpose of fracking the underlying Permian shale strata for oil. So the aquifers are further depleted, or contaminated, by oil fracking. The water table continues to fall and because of climate change the droughts continue. And when the fracked oil is eventually combusted, another contribution to the cycle of poverty and climate chaos will be released. So the Mexican cotton workers are laid off and return to the poverty of their broken petro economy or they are absorbed, often as ‘illegals’ into the lowest levels of the US labour market where fierce competition ensures the lowest wages and life chances.

This pathetic microcosm illustrates the combined cycle of imperialist abuse, climate degradation, labour market insecurity and a refugee workforce locked into a pact of poverty and fear that is the daily lot of millions. It is this same process, albeit on a global scale that is not only destroying our humanity. It is also costing us our Earth.

Only by winning the world, it seems, do workers – quite uniquely – have a chance of saving it.

Brian Parkin, Leeds rs21, 22 September 2015.

²⁷ The North America Free Trade Agreement was signed between the USA, Canada and Mexico on 1 January 1994. The agreement essentially enshrines US corporate and dollar hegemony in exchange for the junior partners enjoying US cover in matters of international tariffs and trade as well as incorporation into US copyright law.