

Violent Silence: The Erasure of History and Justice in Global Climate Policy

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Many people know the insult of being looked at and dismissed—erased on account of their color, gender, orientation, age, ethnicity, caste, class, religion, profession, or disability. They know what it means to be feared or derided and then avoided. These denials do damage, excluding people from the everyday courtesies of being recognized and affirmed. By blotting out their claims to equal recognition in the world and their histories, these erasures also perpetrate a second layer of violence, silencing explanations of the causes behind the damage they must bear.

Many individuals, communities, and nations live in a climate of injustice perpetrated by the failure to acknowledge history—the causes of, and therefore the responsibility for and solutions to, their pain and suffering. Climate change politics and status quo policies are complicit in occluding the causal histories that turn weather events into crises. Bringing causality back in, however, identifies the origins of unjust vulnerabilities, so they might be attended to—thus enabling people to adapt both to present and to changing climate stress.

A drought or storm may seem like the cause of the hunger and dislocation that follows. But the weather can only launch crises when those in its path are already exposed and precarious. Without attending to both causes and solutions for underlying precarity, climate advocacy can contribute to hiding the roots of climate-related crises, giving rise to new injustices. Unless they address the historical injustices that have generated precarity on the ground, climate action (particularly adaptation) and advocacy risk deepening the very crisis they seek to resolve.

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Justice movements can backfire by misrepresenting those affected by injustice, despite progressive intentions. Climate change discourse and advocacy is permeated by such intersecting injustices. Northern agendas and frames of discussion dominate debates and action, and the focus on climate change (despite its importance) obscures longer-term causes of exposure and precarity that enable weather events and trends to trigger crises.

US and European climate movements now seek to “integrate” a social justice perspective as part of an agenda of radical climate action, yet they do not represent those for whom they speak. As historian Jennifer Thomson has argued, an influential contingent of climate justice activists in the United States imagine themselves to be “New Abolitionists” selflessly “speaking for the masses that are unable to speak for themselves,” including the poorest people in the poorest countries. This exported justice agenda focuses on climate, diverting attention from the inequalities that make people vulnerable and make climate events—whether ordinary or intensified by global change—dangerous in the first place.

WHO SHOULD PAY?

Responsibility is a key term in climate justice, as in any other arena. But over time, discussions of responsibility seem to have become less central in climate-action politics. Governments in the global North and South alike are now blaming the climate and weather for crises that stem from inequality—avoiding blame for conditions that they created and could redress. This is not to deny that they are changing the climate; they certainly are. But they also created the precarities on the ground that allow ordinary or new climate events to cause disasters.

In international climate change negotiations, countries in the global South demand that the global North pay to address the climate-related

crisis that it caused. Unfortunately, these demands for reparations are about funding only the “adaptations” required to avoid additional damage associated with increased climate hazards. Invoking the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP), they neglect to demand reparations for the vulnerabilities also produced by the long history of Northern domination and extraction—let’s call it the Exploiter Pays Principle (EPP).

We know the history of extractive relations that created the marginality and poverty that makes people vulnerable in the face of climate events. Historians and social scientists find this self-evident. But many technocrats and climate scientists do not recognize that vulnerabilities have historical causes, an omission that can be seen in many “climate impact” models (as if damages that follow climate events can be assumed to be “impacts” of climate). This blind spot is what enables the technocratic climate establishment to insist on merely shielding people from climate events or paying for those “additional” damages that they associate with climate stress—damages calculated from a snapshot of precarious social arrangements that are seen as having no causes.

The precarities that climate change finds already in place are taken as a given—as “initial conditions.” But these conditions have histories and causes that can be traced back to the same powers that generate carbon emissions. Thus, to avoid mere climate proofing, “adaptation” funds and ordinary “development” assistance must merge—and be considerably augmented—to redress the conditions that enable climate to cause damage. Applying the PPP, we can identify who polluted and assess who is affected. So why not also apply the principle that the colonizer or exploiter pays—our EPP?

There has been a notable recent uptick in references to climate justice in global climate debates. Climate policy analysts often acknowledge that climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. For example, they have argued that climate adaptation finance should not come at the cost of international development aid, which seeks to address socioeconomic vulnerabilities in some cases. This seems to be the underlying logic in the negotiations on adaptation finance, where developing countries have demanded transparent

accounting and separation of climate finance from “normal” development assistance.

By creating a fundamental distinction between development aid and climate adaptation finance, this stance reinforces the dominant understanding that vulnerability to climate change exists independent of historical injustices that international aid may address. Instead, there is a need to strengthen international aid and improve its effectiveness for addressing the historical injustices and underlying socioeconomic inequalities that make the changing climate a stratified crisis. The damages it triggers are a function of vulnerability.

The crises of rain-fed farming and other rural livelihoods in West Africa—from long ago to the present—have been wrongly attributed to the weather and climate change. Farmer suicides in India are also being attributed to climate change. Scientists, the media, and politicians tend to prefer blaming the weather to asking why people suffering hunger, famine, dislocation, or suicides are vulnerable in the first place. They fail to examine the origins of exposure and precarity.

It is easy to blame the weather or even the climate for the precarity of farmers and pastoralists. It merely requires the erasure of history. Just assume that the problems of people who are fleeing their homelands, killing

themselves, or going hungry start when the weather varies—never look back at the histories that placed these rural producers on a cliff of precarity such that even a little wiggle in the weather could push them over the edge.

FROM FAMINES TO ‘CLIMATE REFUGEES’ IN THE SAHEL

Past famines in the West African Sahel and recent Europe-bound migrations from the region have been widely blamed on drought. As anthropologist Jacqueline Solway wrote in 1994, “Drought is a perfect scapegoat; all social and economic dislocation and suffering can be attributed to the drought and underlying problems can be left unacknowledged and, therefore, unfronted.”

The conditions that enabled widespread hunger and famine in the Sahel, and that more recently have spurred outmigration, were established by a long history of colonial and postcolonial exploitation. Climate-change narratives allow former colonial powers, international donors, and current

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governments to blame climate, rather than their own policies and actions, for the deep inequalities that make migration preferable to staying in place for most pastoralists and farmers.

Massive hunger and dislocation to the cities and neighboring regions followed severe drought in the Sahel in the 1970s and 1980s. In their 1980 book *Seeds of Famine*, anthropologist Richard Franke and sociologist Barbara Chasin describe the historical roots of this crisis. The precarity of Sahelian farmers and pastoralists was caused by colonial and postcolonial policies promoting export-oriented agricultural monocropping and the sedentarization of nomadic pastoralists to encourage adoption of commodity production systems sought by governments to boost export earnings and tax revenue. Traditional farming and pastoral practices had been diversified for risk management and adapted to local and regional weather patterns. Colonial policies made farmers dependent on drought-sensitive crops and hindered pastoralists from moving to better pastures following their normal drought response.

Geographer Michael Watts titled his 1983 book *Silent Violence* after this creeping production of widespread vulnerability that left farmers and pastoralists exposed. Living on the edge, even a localized drought could push them into crisis. Recurrent dry periods in the 1970s and 1980s sent them over that low threshold into famine. The former colonial powers and most of the newly independent Sahelian governments blamed the crisis on drought. But social scientists such as Franke, Chasin, and Watts viewed it as a product of colonial deprivations and cruel policies. From the slave trade and colonial extraction to green revolutions and neoliberal economic policies, little attention was paid to local security and well-being.

Adding insult to injury, Northern development experts and Sahelian government agents blamed the “irrational” behavior of Sahelian farmers and pastoralists for “desertification” and the drought. Yet, as climate scientists Michela Biasutti, Alessandra Giannini, Kate Marvel, and Céline Bonfils have recently established, these Sahelian droughts were actually caused by European and US industrial emissions that shifted hemispheric sea-surface temperatures. While severe, these droughts would have triggered much less damage if Sahelian farmers and pastoralists had been more secure and able to exercise traditional coping strategies. Instead, the droughts were triggers for a devastating crisis

that perhaps merits retroactive evaluation of responsibility and reparations.

As is now evident, the crisis was a result of the precarity left in place by colonialism and neocolonial policies; the triggering climate events were also generated by Europe and the United States. Both precarity and drought stemmed from Northern policies.

More recently, trans-Saharan migration from the Sahel toward Europe has been attributed to global climate change. Here, too, the diagnosis is deeply flawed. A recent case study of migrants traveling toward Europe from Tambacounda in eastern Senegal (by Papa Faye, Jesse Ribot, and Matt Turner, in a 2020 issue of *Public Culture*) shows that extreme precarity due to exploitative policies explains the new wave of departures. Despite prevalent discourses of drought-driven migrations and the media’s labeling of these farmers as “climate refugees,” the rains have generally been improving across the region over the past 20 years, along with harvests.

When asked why they are leaving, the Senegalese farmers never talk about the weather. They talk about subsistence anxiety, the low prices of peanuts, cotton, and charcoal, and having no sense of a livable, dignified future in Tambacounda. Yet just as in the 1970s and 1980s, when drought was blamed for a crisis of vulnerability, scientists and the media now blame global climate change for migration decisions rooted in local struggles—obscuring the causes of suffering that are only tangentially related to weather.

Northern fears of “climate refugees” and “climate migrants” are now being imposed on West Africa and many other parts of the world. In an attempt to bring greater attention to climate change by highlighting the crises it will generate, climate scientists and activists project a near future when millions of poor southerners will flee over land and water from droughts, floods, or rising seas. The narrative’s power comes partly from the image of masses fleeing toward Europe, which helps mobilize climate activism in Europe. But while it evokes sympathy, this narrative also stirs up xenophobia by raising the specter that some Europeans fear more than climate change—an inundation of foreigners, of dark people infiltrating their purity.

FARMER SUICIDES IN INDIA

Obfuscation of complex and multiple causes of vulnerability also has serious consequences in

India, as illustrated by the epidemic of farmer suicides. Data from India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows that 296,438 farmers committed suicide from 1995 to 2013, averaging over 16,000 deaths a year. These suicides have continued. Although the data likely reflect an undercount amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCRB reports that a total of 10,281 farmers and farm laborers died by suicide across the country in 2019.

There is little doubt that the impact of climate change on seasonal weather patterns such as the frequency, duration, and intensity of monsoon rains exacerbates the misery of India's farmers. Yet farmer suicides result from a long-festering agrarian crisis, deepened by austerity measures that led to the decimation of an already weak agriculture extension and credit system, poor physical and market infrastructures, and the failure of successive Indian governments to develop the rural non-farm sector of the economy.

Even so, a widely circulated study by economist Tamma Carleton, published in 2017 in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, attributed 59,300 farmer suicides to the added stress effects of global warming over the last 30 years. But Indian journalist P. Sainath, who is known for his lifelong work on India's agrarian crisis and wrote the 1996 classic *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, argues that blaming farmer suicides on climate change avoids addressing deep-seated structural and policy failures. The ongoing farmers' movement in India has also highlighted these questions. Tens of thousands of farmers have protested for months in New Delhi against agricultural reform laws passed in September 2020.

In an extensive review of various aspects of farmers' suicides in India, published in the journal *Life Sciences, Society and Policy* in 2017, Giges Thomas and Johan De Tavernier found that although the Indian state has instituted various committees and inquiries to examine the problem, it has consistently ignored their recommendations for supporting small and marginal farmers. Meanwhile, successive Indian governments have implemented and institutionalized damaging pro-market reforms, which defunded agriculture extension programs, weakened state-supported rural credit provision, and allowed greater penetration of agribusiness operations.

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Economist Utsa Patnaik argued (in a 2002 article in *Social Scientist*) that the root causes of the crisis in agriculture and other rural livelihoods in India—and much of the global South—date back to the emergence and subsequent dominance of highly mobile and fluid forms of global finance in the wake of the 1970s oil shocks. (We now know that this was also the juncture when Exxon and other fossil fuel companies sowed the poisonous seeds of climate denialism.) The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund imposed deflationary policies that required cutting government spending, maintaining high interest rates, and providing opportunities for global financiers to pursue unrestrained speculative gains.

Patnaik's work suggests how such deflationary fiscal policy regimes are comparable to colonial regimes, which also facilitated free flows of cheap goods and human labor, under slavery or other forms of bondage, while protecting consumers and financiers in the colonizing countries. The suicides in India are largely associated with farmers' debt and market volatility and exploitation caused

by these historic and contemporary flows of transnational finance.

The United Nations has showcased India's crop insurance program, covering 40 million farmers, as a successful case of climate risk mitigation and adaptation.

Yet instead of addressing the structural causes of farmers' vulnerability, the government seeks to privatize crop insurance. In 2017, the federal watchdog agency, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, implicated the state-owned Agriculture Insurance Company for paying up to 36.2 billion rupees (around \$500 million) in premium subsidies to 10 private insurers without due diligence between 2011 and 2016.

Meanwhile, farmer suicides continue unabated. In July 2017, the Supreme Court of India reprimanded the government for its recurring failures to protect "hapless farmers." But instead of bolstering protections for farmers, the government in January 2018 made it more difficult for states to qualify for federal aid for drought-affected populations.

India and other rapidly growing economies seek concessions in international climate negotiations by arguing that national efforts to address poverty must take priority. While hiding behind their poor in these talks, they fail to address widespread

poverty and marginalization with domestic policies. Mainstream climate narratives (including those focused on climate justice) that do not recognize either the legacies of colonialism or the domestic socioeconomic origins of inequalities help national leaders cover such failures under simplistic explanations of climate impacts. When history and context are erased, leaders are free to cynically exploit the poverty of their citizens as a bargaining chip.

MODELS OF JUSTICE?

Sidestepping of the social causes of—and responsibility for—climate-related loss and damage is explicit in the language of international agreements. Article 8.1 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)'s 2015 Paris Agreement states: “Parties recognize the importance of averting, minimizing and addressing loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change, including extreme weather events and slow onset events, and the role of sustainable development in reducing the risk of loss and damage.” Item 52 of the Paris Agreement’s document of adoption, however, sets responsibility aside by affirming that “Article 8 of the Agreement does not involve or provide a basis for any liability or compensation.”

This language is absurd. If we show that losses or damages follow from specific actions—those that create vulnerabilities or change the climate—then there is always the possibility of establishing liability within the law or politics. The link between cause and intention or negligence is basic to establishing culpability in tort law. Even if the language of immunity were legally binding, making this link visible would still enable public demands for accountability and compensation—via political engagement.

Obfuscating UNFCCC language perpetrates a double injustice. First, it is telling the guilty parties that they are immune to prosecution—an assertion that remains to be tested in the arenas of law and politics. Second, it steers analysis away from social causality. Even the language used in the Loss & Damage section of the Paris Agreement refers to “climate change impacts” and “loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change.” Note that both phrases implicitly attribute the cause of damages to the climate itself, while erasing any references to historical and existing vulnerabilities in societies.

Recent studies by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are bringing social and

historical causes into discussions of the effects of climate change, but still underplay their effects. Their starting point for analysis remains shallow, rooted in agent-based computational models in which quantifiability often determines the factors that are counted. Not all relevant causal factors are either quantifiable or reducible to computation. Those criteria exclude the bulk of social and political-economic or structural determinants. These can involve traceable processes that may be unique or so locally contingent as to require description rather than quantification. Many such cases may ultimately be codified into quantifiable variables, but this is not always possible.

Although they acknowledge distributional inequalities, the IPCC reports frame their analysis of vulnerability by identifying, in very general terms, *who* is vulnerable—paying inadequate attention to *why* different groups are vulnerable. When the UNFCCC and others call for an assessment of vulnerability as part of their adaptation strategies, are they asking us to identify who is vulnerable, or are they aiming to understand the causal chains behind such vulnerability?

The latter would draw attention to the many causal elements that might be addressed to reduce vulnerability. Such analysis would also establish links to those responsible, helping to apportion blame and make the case for reparations. But instead of asking why people are vulnerable, vulnerability assessments rarely go beyond establishing who is vulnerable and some proximate causal variables such as poverty—as if poverty is just a terrible condition without cause. In a full analysis of vulnerability’s causes, the origins of poverty would have to be included.

The Global Goal on Adaptation, included in the Paris Agreement, is forward-looking in a way that neglects analysis of past causes. Its stated objectives are “to enhance adaptive capacity and resilience” and “to reduce vulnerability, with a view to contributing to sustainable development.” The UNFCCC accordingly now calls for assessments of progress in vulnerability reduction and adaptation policies. But it merely requires an understanding of how much more secure a person or community has become in the period that the assessment deems relevant. The longer history that produced the vulnerabilities in the first place is thus erased. While short-term achievements are important to understand, studying longer-term causes might help identify the basis for achieving greater justice and more durable security.

LOOKING BACK FOR WAYS FORWARD

Who is responsible for supporting—through finance and policy—climate-related adaptation? (We use the adjective “climate-related” since adaptation really entails reducing social vulnerabilities that exist independent of the weather, though they enable weather events to wreak havoc.) Without an analysis of the root causes of social vulnerabilities in the Sahel, India, and elsewhere, there can be only a superficial indication of responsibility, at best.

Effective adaptation comes with understanding the origins of the structures within which the agents of agent-based models act. It requires addressing the full range of both immediate and root causes. Those who pump excess (not basic needs-related) emissions into the atmosphere should, of course, be blamed for climate change. But the histories behind the existing fragilities that a changing climate encounters also must be examined if security is to be enhanced.

Too often, when loss or damage associated with a given climate hazard is measured, the “initial” conditions found in place are taken as given—as if the history of exploitation that produced vulnerability never happened. Europeans, as the anthropologist and historian Eric Wolf observed in a 1982 book, have long viewed the poor and the colonized as “people without history.” Such erasure of history is the mother of all injustice.

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Were the people most affected to have a real say in the agenda, both their precarity and its multiple causes—well beyond the singular insult of climate change—might be taken into account. Yet the Paris Agreement, while adopting an ambitious and admirable goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, also includes Article 52, which attempts to dismiss any possibility of determining historical responsibility, whether for emissions or for vulnerabilities.

As historians Jo Guldi and David Armitage urged in their 2014 *History Manifesto*, we must acknowledge and analyze the multiple long-term causes of

the concentric social, economic, and ecological crises that produce the current global crisis, and the many local crises of which it is constituted. To do so, we must also uncover the institutionalized assumptions—such as those incorporated in the

models used by the IPCC, the policy instruments of the UNFCCC, and the Paris Agreement—that avoid history, spurred by the desire (or compulsion) of some parties to avoid responsibility and blame. This is violent silence.

A just response would not merely treat precarity as a climate phenomenon. It would see vulnerabilities for the colonial and neocolonial legacy they represent. It would acknowledge that responsibility arcs to the North both through the sky, in the form of climate change, and over land, through the history of extractive violence. Ungag history—its silencing perpetuates such violence. ■