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زبانهای اروپایی

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30.12.2020

Black Lives Matter and the Future of Humanity



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Using an intersectional, anarchist analysis we can see how racism, patriarchy, and class society are intertwined producing a society that actively is changing the climate. We can begin to untangle these relationships, digging into the history of white supremacy to see how it reinforces capitalist social relations producing the ecological crisis we confront. The Black Lives Matter movement offers us the chance, both through its critique and methods, to move closer to a society that no longer changes the climate.



Several hundred protesters crowded the streets of Rochester, New York to demand justice after video was released showing the murder of Daniel Prude while in the custody of police. Photo by Maranie R. Staab.

If we view various forms of domination as forming a ball of twine, we can see how pulling on one string can start to unravel the whole thing. Approaching racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation, for example, as interlocking and mutually reinforcing, organizing against any one of these might begin to reveal connections and relationships to the whole. Each is a potential entryway to understanding the complexity and interconnection of contemporary hierarchies. Better comprehending these relationships offers the possibility of beginning to detangle them. In this way we can relate the movement for Black lives, for instance, to the movement for climate justice.

As with police violence, pollution disproportionately impacts Black and poor communities. For instance, [a recent study](#) found that Black people are exposed to twice the particulate matter as white people, and that Hispanics had more exposure than non-Hispanic whites. The study also found that people in poverty had more exposure than people not in poverty. That the people of Flint, Michigan, almost half of whom live in poverty, were drinking lead contaminated water is only one of the more well-known recent [examples](#).

What is known as “environmental racism” is the result of rigid social and political hierarchies, in which a large segment of the population is viewed as [expendable](#). The dominant structures of US society seek both to control Black and poor communities through things like militarized policing while also treating those communities as dumping grounds for hazardous wastes and polluting industry. Environmental racism also makes Black communities more vulnerable to Covid-19, contributing to infection and fatality rates far [out of proportion](#) to the rest of the population. In Louisiana, Mississippi, and Michigan, where data is tracked, coronavirus cases seem to be clustered in mostly [poor Black neighborhoods](#).

Climate Catastrophe

The changing climate is the result of an economic system that relies primarily on burning oil and coal to fuel production and enable the transportation of people and goods. The complex inter-relationships that make up “the economy,” from food, consumer and industrial production, to air and sea transport, contribute to varying degrees. This is the intricacy we must confront, examine, and replace. The modern capitalist economy is intimately bound up with a history, and continuity, of colonialism, racial domination, and patriarchy. These are interlocking systems of domination and exploitation that drive a world that is jeopardizing the continuity of human life, and they are quickly unraveling before our eyes. It is not “the planet” that is in danger, but human civilization itself.

The dominant economy and the modern nation-state facilitate the process of making profits. Capital accumulation creates profits for a small percentage of the population instead of the vast majority of us who do the work to make those profits possible. This has resulted in a system in which eight men have as much wealth as the 3.6 billion people that make up [half the world](#). This system also relies on unpaid reproductive labor in the home, primarily done by women, a role historically enforced through male violence. Even as women entered the workforce outside the home, they were not financially compensated at the same rate as men, and continue to be subjected to domestic abuse, rape, and everyday harassment. And with the coronavirus pandemic, women with children have been forced to leave their jobs and stay home to [care for them](#).

But not all women’s experience is the same. Because Black women are among the most marginalized people in the US, their political struggles often bring them into conflict with the harshest realities of capitalism. As the writers of the [Combahee River Collective](#) write, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.” The type of intersectional analysis these Black feminists developed has many [similarities](#) to anarchist politics.

Capitalism favors profit over the ecological integrity of the land that provides the resources for production, and treats the environment as a dumping ground for byproducts and waste. Capitalism directly contradicts the delicate foundations of life by operating as a grow-or-die system on a finite planet. Capitalism, bound up with and mutually reinforcing white supremacy, is the driving force of both environmental racism and ecological destruction more generally. The way to solve the ecological crisis, of which climate change is only one aspect, is to replace capitalism with a different social and economic model.



A small fire burns near the Federal Courthouse amidst weeks of racial justice protest on July 29, 2020 in Downtown Portland, Oregon. Photo by Maranie R. Staab.

Black Lives Matter

The 2020 uprising in response to the murder of George Floyd is the type of social movement that can help address race and class disparities, and also has the potential to lead to a different kind of world. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is decentralized and particular to various places and circumstances. At its best it is militantly uncompromising, often operates outside the constraints of what is considered legal, and addresses the root of the problem of police violence by locating it in the structures and history of white supremacy. BLM confronts a long history of racial oppression that began with early capitalist development and the enclosures in Europe before being exported through colonialism and the slave trade.

Following the US Civil War white elites did not address the crimes of slavery through material compensation to former slaves. The horrors of slavery have never been truly reconciled by white institutions; the bill has never been paid and is still due. Despite the sacrifices and tireless work of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, countless organizing efforts and perennial riots, Black people in the US continue to be structurally and materially subjugated.

Anti-Black racism is a central tenet of the standard operating procedure of the US. Racism divides working people, seducing white workers into identifying with the capitalist class. The majority of Black people in the US are poor and working-class and the working-class will soon be predominantly made up of people of color. Race in the US is based in class exploitation.



Several hundred protesters crowded the streets of Rochester, NY to demand justice after video was released showing the murder of Daniel Prude while in the custody of Rochester police. Photo by Maranie R. Staab.

Militarism and Climate Change

Anti-Black racism intertwines with racism against people of color more generally. The mindset and institutions of white supremacy, intersecting with the needs of capitalism and US empire, necessitates overt military and covert action in what is sometimes referred to as the Global South. The mechanisms of US imperialism have resulted in millions of dead the world over. Some are targeted by US trained death squads, as in Central America in the 1980s and in the Middle East and Africa today. Civilians are regularly killed, both those targeted and those who die because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Carpet bombing of Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 70s and the unilateral military invasions, covert actions, and drone strikes in the Middle East and Africa for the last twenty years have resulted in massive “collateral damage:” countless civilians dead. One can never forget the images of the US carpet bombing Vietnamese villages and surrounding jungles if one has witnessed them.

In addition to the victims of US military and covert operations, capitalism also has more indirect forms of collateral damage: those people of color who are displaced, driven into desperation, and killed by rising sea levels, extreme heat, typhoons, and weather made worse by climate change. Climate change results in food scarcity and hostile environmental habitats that make subsistence impossible.

Capitalism, and very specific corporations and nations, are the primary drivers of climate disruption which disproportionally impacts people in the Global South. It is estimated that there will be 143 million climate refugees by 2050 from the regions of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. The dominant economic system benefits people in the

US and the West, at the expense of people in the Global South, whose resources are stolen and whose labor and natural environment is exploited to provide cheap goods made available at places like Walmart.

The most exploited in the Global South are women, who do the majority of the unwaged and waged work, and who suffer both from economic exploitation and male violence. It the women of the Global South who suffer the most from climate change, as they increasingly struggle to hold their families and communities together under circumstances of increasing privation, violence, and war. They represent the intersections of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. The people most impacted by climate change are those the least responsible for causing it.



Protesters in Portland used blow torches, ropes and chains to bring down a statue of Theodore Roosevelt as part of an organized “Indigenous People’s Day of Rage” on October 11, 2020. Photo by Maranie R. Staab.

Towards a Free Society

The Black Lives Matter movement, perhaps the largest social movement in US history – with between 15-26 million people estimated to have joined the protests – has been met with both reforms and massive police violence and arrests. For instance, in Portland, Oregon, since the movement began, there have been six thousand documented instances of police use of force. Yet despite severe police repression, the Black Lives Matter movement has succeeded in changing the conversation around race, helping create a new “common sense.” The widespread participation in and persistence of this movement is beginning to change the opinion of those not personally impacted daily by anti-Black racism. Increasing numbers of white people better understand the role of white supremacy in US society and the role of the police in violently upholding it. Getting a critical mass of the population on one’s side is crucial for any movement to succeed. Support for Black Lives Matter reached a highpoint in

June, 2020 (67 percent support) and though it declined towards the end of summer, is still [supported by the majority of US adults](#). Walking around neighborhoods in cities across the US, one sees countless BLM signs in people's windows.

Black Lives Matter is a tenacious movement and, while it ebbs and flows, will likely persist as long as police continue to murder Black people. It is a decentralized grassroots movement largely led by Black women. By confronting white supremacy the movement moves us all closer to living in a free and cooperative society and offers us the opportunity to make connections to other forms of oppression while showing the way to organize for fundamental change. As we work to create a society in which Black lives matter we should understand the need for creating the material conditions for that to be actualized. If race and class are intimately bound up capitalism must also be abolished in the course of liberating all people. Capitalism, intertwined with racism and patriarchy, is the driving force changing the planet's climate and threatening the future of humanity.



Donning a helmet, gas mask and eye protection a protester holds colorful balloons and a homemade shield outside of the Federal Courthouse in Downtown Portland, Oregon on July 30, 2020. Photo by Maranie R. Staab.

Carbon emissions already released into the atmosphere will continue to warm the planet for years to come. Although a certain level of climate change is guaranteed, it is still possible, through radical action in the coming decade, to give our descendants a better chance at a decent life: to lessen the possibility that they will inherit the hell-scape environment we currently are on course for. In Portland, Oregon people mobilized in their thousands, standing up for Black lives, putting on gas masks, making shields, and bringing leaf blowers to defend against toxic gasses and less-lethal munitions used by Federal forces. People did this night-

after night, suffering many injuries, until those troops stood down. Although local police continued their brutality, this was an inspiring tactical victory.

Those of us organizing and theorizing need to see commonalities between movements and recognize we are in this for the long haul. If we follow the logic of Black Lives Matter to its conclusion, we need to work to fundamentally transform society to make that possible. Adopting an [intersectional](#), [anarchist](#) analysis, we can make connections and nurture solidarity throughout our organizing as we confront together an uncertain future.

DECEMBER 29, 2020

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