

Cancun and After:

A Sociology of Climate Change

Arena, 2011, No. 110, 24-31.

Ariel Salleh

Who benefited from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meeting held in Cancun, Mexico, in December 2010? Answer: COP16 closed by advancing the economics, politics and culture of competitive neoliberalism, reinforcing the interests of the transnational ruling class. And this was no surprise, for as the international peasant and Indigenous organisation Via Campesina observed at the start of the meeting:

The agenda imposed in Cancun is that of the banks and investment funds, of the major gas, petroleum, carbon, electricity and automotive companies, of the agribusiness corporations and others who ... speculate on the climate and nature ... <www.viacampesina.org>

A year earlier, COP15 in Copenhagen had been a scene of intense confrontation between global climate NGOs and governments. Then just as Copenhagen wound up, five out of the nearly zoo participating countries tried to save the day with an informal Accord. WikiLeaks, via *The Guardian*, now shows how in the months that followed, the US government actively cultivated 'multilateral support' for this Accord among smaller states:

diplomatic cables reveal how the US seeks dirt on nations opposed to its approach to tackling global warming; how financial and other aid is used by countries to gain political backing; how distrust, broken promises and creative accounting dog negotiations; and how the US mounted a secret global diplomatic offensive to overwhelm opposition to the controversial Copenhagen accord.

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol and 2007 Bali Agreement are built on fair and democratic principles, like 'the polluter pays' and 'international cost sharing'. But affluent industrial polluter states consistently ignore such an approach. Instead, as EcoEquity campaigner Tom Athanasiou points out, there is emerging in Europe and the United States a mood of austerity—arguments for contracting foreign aid abroad and minimising social services at home. The corporate funded Tea Party even opposes research into climate science. Obama's adviser Todd Stern denies any particular US obligations in relation to the climate crisis. The US EPA has regained its powers to regulate, but will not act until after the 2013 Presidential election. The Saudis, Russia and China are equally intransigent, while the Europeans offer both stronger emissions targets (up to 30 per cent below 1990 levels in 2020), while turning a blind eye to emissions-accounting loopholes.

For reformists like Athanasiou and the US Earth Island Institute, a successful UNFCCC process calls for legally binding science-based targets and timelines; a climate fund to finance adaptation; North-South technology and investment

co-operation; strategies to pacify intellectual property and trade disputes; sound accounting systems; forest and land-use agreements; and planning for zero carbon development in the future. All the Copenhagen Accord offered was a promise of 'transparency' in emission accounts and 'fast-start finance' to assist climate adaptation initiatives in the global South. The Accord's keywords—measurement, reporting and verification—were vacuous in the absence of any commitment to funding timelines, and climate activists everywhere have been justifiably frustrated by this neo-liberal voluntarism.

It needs to be said that the approach to climate change adopted by Athanasiou, and liberals like him, is an ecological modernist one, embracing a social vision not all that different materially from the industrial capitalism that it seeks to correct. This is an environmentalist equivalent of the classic social democratic welfare state, and as such serves the interests of the Western—now also non-Western—middle class. EcoEquity thus promotes 'greenhouse development rights' based on a belief that the global South is driven by 'dreams of development'. However, there is a fair degree of projection in this technocratic assumption. In fact as climate crisis opens up opportunities for an emancipatory politics at the geographic periphery of corporate capitalism, it simultaneously demands a new cultural reflexivity from those classes, races and genders that benefit from the hegemony of the global North. In short: middle-class environmentalists should be asking themselves if they are not complicit with the neo-colonial agenda of the transnational economic elite. Many activists in the global South actually see technology transfer for adaptation to and mitigation of climate change as a mopping up operation for polluter states in the global North and an imposition on their own way of life.

And there is yet a further concern arising from the sociology of class interests. In the developed nations, most people are embedded in the industrial capitalist system and dependent on it for their

Cancun and After

Ariel Salleh

Ariel Salleh's latest book is *EcoSufficiency & Global Justice* (Spinifex). A researcher in Political Economy at the University of Sydney, former Associate Professor in Social Inquiry at UWS and a co-editor of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, she is widely published: <www.arielsa.lleh.info>



02 2011-03 2011
N2110

employment and very survival. The transnational middle class has the option of designing an ecologically sustainable lifestyle, and even inventing theories of eco-socialism, but working-class people do not enjoy this well-resourced freedom. Many aspire to the image of the affluent consumer promoted unconsciously by the media. But either way, climate politics is a difficult call for the working class. The painful historical contradiction that they inhabit is summed up in the rhetorical phrase 'green jobs. In the Illawarra region in NSW, for example, trade union advisers are even attempting to expand the coal mining industry as 'green', on the basis that it supports the manufacture of renewable technologies. The climate policies of the ACTU and International Trade Union Congress rest on a very superficial analysis of what can be achieved by technological innovation. Following the 'efficiency school' of ecological modernisation, the unions underplay the social and environmental costs of industrialisation, not factoring in how these get to be externalised by displacement on to other lives in other places, in other words, the global South.

In the global meetings of the UNFCCC, working people's response to the climate crisis is actually dominated by folk outside of the industrial system, namely peasants, Indigenous gatherers and women carers like wives and mothers. This meta-industrial class has a unique understanding of the ecological crisis, because such workers are skilled in the labour of reproducing metabolic processes in nature and in human bodies as nature. They are economically marginalised and often deeply exploited by the global capitalist system, and they do not identify with its productivist values. For this reason, their rejection of corporate globalisation and the hegemony of neo-liberalism is more radical than the conventional socialist critique. This can be seen in their assessments of Cancun.

Nevertheless, some of these meta-industrials - peasant, Indigenous and woman-focused—work alongside socialists in the network Climate Justice Now! (CJN!). For them, the Kyoto Protocol, with its recognition of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities', is central to climate politics. While the liberal notion of 'greenhouse development rights' is effectively neo-colonial and assimilationist, CJN! puts the goal of 'difference' up there with equality. That is to say, its members see a synergistic relationship between struggles for social justice, environmental sustainability and cultural autonomy. By failing to look into the cultural dimension of change, ecological modernists like the EcoEquity group or trade unions tacitly support unexamined and self-serving Eurocentric notions of development and poverty. Unwittingly, this so-called realism extends the grasp of the transnational ruling class by bringing ever more areas of the economic periphery into the ambit of global finance. Moreover, the assumption that technological

solutions can correspond to ecological problems is a problematic intellectual leap.

Following the top-down Copenhagen Accord, President Evo Morales called a People's Climate Summit in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in April 2010 (see the article by Taegen Edwards and Pablo Brait in *Arena Magazine*, 106). This was hosted by the Indigenous peoples and the women of that plurinational state, and dedicated to exploring their traditional principle of Living Well (*buen vivir*). Some 35,000 activists from around the world came to formulate new resolutions for the December COP16 in Cancun. Among the ideas to emerge from Cochabamba was a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth and an International Climate Tribunal to test crimes against nature and peoples, not least, climate refugees. The Cochabamba Declaration also demanded:

- no carbon markets, instead less consumption in affluent countries
- payment of ecological debt owed for the ravages of colonisation
- 6 per cent of the North's GDP to go to the South
- no more nature commodification, and respect for Indigenous rights
- no intellectual property rights over climate mitigation technologies
- 20 per cent reduction of emissions by 2017, with temperature stability at 1.°C, and carbon at 300 ppm.

Despite the efforts of Bolivia's UN Ambassador Pablo Solon, these people's recommendations were not taken up into the UNFCCC negotiating documents for Cancun. And despite massive grassroots support from people worldwide, Bolivia remained a lone dissenting voice among the governments at Cancun, ultimately silenced by the gavel.

Reflecting on the Cancun COP16, Nicola Bullard, a campaigner with Focus on the Global South, describes the methodology used by UN organisers as manipulative. Negotiations were carried on in small groups or informal meetings where dissenters could be readily pacified, or offered financial incentives to come on board with the transnational ruling-class agenda. The Cancun discussions guaranteed neither the amount of resources to be committed to the proposed new Climate Fund, nor clear directions on how these might be accessed. In typical laissez-faire style, corporate and government monitoring of agreements would be voluntary, without fixed timelines, The World Bank—a prime mover of neo-liberal economics and closely implicated in the ongoing Global Financial Crisis—was nominated to administer the fund. As Bullard notes, over several decades, World Bank loans have broken the back of many a developing country. And since the Bank today funds many extractive and polluting projects, it could face something of a conflict of interest as the manager of a Climate Fund.

An editorial by the Netherlands-based Transnational Institute at the close of Cancun also summarised the outcomes as a 'backward step: According to TNI's hot off the press report:

Document effectively kills off the only binding agreement, Kyoto Protocol, in favour of a completely inadequate bottom-up voluntary approach

Increases loopholes and flexibilities that allow developed countries to avoid action, via an expansion of offsets and continued existence of 'surplus allowances' of carbon after 2012 by countries like Ukraine and Russia which effectively cancel out any other reductions
Finance Commitments weakened: commitment to 'provide new and additional financial resources' to developing countries have been diluted to talking more vaguely about 'mobilising [resources] jointly', with expectation that this will mainly be provided by carbon markets
The World Bank is made trustee of the new Green Climate Fund, which has been strongly opposed by many civil society groups due to the undemocratic makeup of the Bank and its poor environmental record

No discussion of Intellectual Property rights, repeatedly raised by many countries, as current rules obstruct transfer of key climate-related technologies to developing countries

Constant assumption in favour of market mechanisms to resolve climate change even though this perspective is not shared by a number of countries, particularly in Latin America

Green light given for the controversial REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) programme which often ends up perversely rewarding those responsible for deforestation, while dispossessing indigenous and forest dwellers of their land

Systematic exclusion of proposals that came from the historic World Peoples' Conference on Climate Change including proposals for a Climate Justice Tribunal, full recognition of indigenous rights, and rights for nature.

<www.tni.org>

Commenting on the business-as-usual agenda, the Transnational Institute was appalled at the seeming capitulation of Greenpeace to the results at Cancun. Having labelled Copenhagen 'a crime scene', Greenpeace now saw 'the building blocks back in place'. Oxfam similarly appeared to disregard the people's agenda, describing Cancun negotiations as a 'resuscitation' which put the UN negotiations on 'the road to recovery: What is happening, one might ask, to the big environmental and social justice NGOs? What are the class, race and gender identifications and aspirations of their directors and campaigners? Power is economic, but it is also cultural.

As international NGOs become increasingly like the political establishment they interact with, other groupings rise up from the grassroots, and in the context of climate justice, activists with meta-industrial class origins are forceful. According to Via Campesina, the current model of production, trade and consumption is simply untenable environmentally and must be replaced by an alternative kind of development: an eco-centric one. Now, since the Western Enlightenment mindset is premised on a sharp dualistic separation of humans and nature, this insistence on holistic thinking is a major cultural challenge to the modernist hegemony and the economic interests of those who buy into it.

At Cancun, Via Campesina mounted its own Global Forum for Life, Environmental and Social Justice, claiming that 'The people hold thousands of solutions in their hands: They pointed to attempts by the transnational ruling class to privatise common lands, thus undercutting the independence of meta-industrial livelihoods. And they denounced the trend to ever more complex hierarchies of speculative carbon trading. They also condemned as false climate solutions technology transfer for mitigation and adaptation, geo-engineering and nuclear power generation, as well as the Clean Development Mechanism, which was seen as an insidious policy innovation:

Through Clean Development Mechanisms, industrialized countries and multinationals can continue contaminating in their places of origin and still fulfill their emissions reduction goals through carbon certificates financing 'clean development' projects in other places. CDM projects are also highly polluting and cause great environmental and social devastation, since projects such as large dams, methane recovery from industrial farming, massive dumps and plantations, etc. fall into that category.

Via Campesina recommends alternative development models designed for food and water sovereignty; models inspired by the long-established low-carbon economies of the global South and local techniques for water catchment management.

A Cancun wrap-up from Patrick Bond of the Centre for Civil Society in Durban throws further light on the class, race and gender implications of COP16. He reports that members of the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) were harassed, and their leader Tom Goldtooth denied entry to official proceedings because of his opposition to the REDD policy mechanism (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). The IEN sees REDD schemes as enabling land grabs by ruling-class elites North and South, as well as promoting carbon markets and speculation in offsets. Goldtooth observes that while nature is commodified as a 'carbon sink' by such programs, the language of rights is also co-opted by their market logic, leaving no protection for Indigenous peoples, peasants, women or youth.

Some poor communities in Africa and Asia are readily seduced by the monetary promise of REDD; and in Patrick Bond's view, wealthy NGOs like the Environmental Defense Fund play a divide and rule politics by endorsing it:

REDD is one of several blackmail tactics from the North, by which small sums are paid for projects such as tree-planting or forest conservation management. In some cases, as well as through CDMs such as methane-extraction from landfills, these projects result in displacement of local residents or, in the case of Durban's main CDM, the ongoing operation of a vast, environmentally-racist dump in the black neighbourhood of Bisasar Road.

Bond argues that carbon markets are an unstable and ineffectual climate solution, even encouraging corruption among the players. There is no substitute for regulation by elected governments.

It is not only the meta-industrial class of peasant and Indigenous voices that is excluded from the formulation of climate policy. Women have been trying to introduce gender balance into the UNFCCC process from the outset. Of course, women are not a single universal bloc; they are characterised by differences of class and race. But when it comes to environmental politics, women readily put aside such differences and work together—for life on earth. Middle-class women researchers from Sweden to Costa Rica have established that the climate crisis is culturally masculinist at every level; that is; in its consumption footprint, in its displacement of impacts on to the powerless, and by its style of governance. However, women's efforts to make gender transparent at the United Nations by demanding gender-

A Sociology of
Climate Change

Arial Salleh



Continued on page 31

02 2011-03 2011
N9110

From page 26

disaggregated statistics from governments continually falls flat. The international network GenderCC, mobilised from Germany, hopes to raise gender literacy in political circles by focusing on the liberal feminist objective of women's equal representation in UN delegations. The New York based advocacy network WEDO also tries to 'mainstream' women into equal voting capacity. WEDO's slogan is 'no climate justice without gender justice, but progress is pitiful, as seen in the language gendering of Cancun texts.

Women constitute half the global population, so should have an equal voice in every decision-making arena. But after hour after hour, decade upon decade of struggle within the UNFCCC, women are barely heard. One problem is that the liberal feminist emphasis on equal voting rights does nothing to shift the terms of reference that have been framed in men's interest. There is no opportunity to go deeper than the discourse on rights and, just as in the case of Indigenous peoples, this discourse affords women little protection. Under neo-liberalism, the market is the core social institution, so rights and freedoms pertain to that (or rather to the class, race and gender that controls it). When peasant and Indigenous members of the meta-industrial class bring an alternative model of sustainable development to climate talks, this looms as a fundamental threat. In the case of women, there is no opportunity to air the eco-feminist critique of Enlightenment reason and reductionist science, and their unanticipated consequences in perpetuating climate change. Besides, in the standard patriarchal understanding, 'woman is body not mind': This framing is very plain in the UNFCCC where women are typically seen as 'objects; victims—and vulnerable bodies at that.

Women's contribution to the UNFCCC process is subject to the classic 'divide and rule' in other ways. For example, women, like Indigenous activists working for the large environmental NGOs, can become invisible as a distinct social constituency. Yet a petition circulated by the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) clearly spells out the reasons why gender and cross-cultural literacy are essential in climate policy:

REDD+ as currently designed will contribute to a global land grab from communities and Indigenous Peoples, which will particularly affect women ... as their property rights are less secure.

The current REDD+ design is that actors will receive carbon credits for reducing their deforestation. Women are, overall, less responsible for deforestation and forest degradation and therefore ... [will] be less eligible for forest carbon credits.

REDD+ as an offset mechanism will not address climate change as it takes away the responsibility for mitigation from the North


and shifts it to the South ... Women and girls in these communities carry a disproportionately higher amount of this burden.

<www.gender_cc.org>

At Cancun, women stated their opposition to fossil fuel extraction, large-scale hydroelectric dam construction, monocultural plantations and logging, beef ranching, palm oil and industrial bio-energy projects. A fourth clause in the WRM petition touches on the meta-industrial skills and values shared by women care givers, peasants and Indigenous workers.

The commercialization of life and carbon markets are incompatible with indigenous tribal traditions in their historic responsibility [to] protect the sacredness of Mother Earth ... [They] are defenders of the Circle of Life which includes biodiversity, forests, flora, fauna and all living species.

This statement combines a proud spiritual sensibility with firm materialist analysis. It is critical that those who operate and benefit from the mega-machine come to understand how their consumption (renewable or otherwise) is embedded in nature's metabolism. Once they can see how the meta-industrial class meets human needs and simultaneously holds the ecosystem together, then a democratic quantum shift will have been achieved.

Without an acknowledgement that human civilisations have limits, the global citizen is as free as a guzzling infant at the breast. The greedy opportunism that has invaded the UNFCCC process is revealed in barely disguised land grabs like REDD; profiteering from technology transfer; and speculation with carbon trading and risk derivatives. More climate meetings are coming—COP17 in Durban 2011, the Rio Earth Summit plus 20 and, one might hope, a Second People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. But for now, given the old cultural dualisms that prop up the ideology of transnational domination, the UNFCCC is split in two. Unless some self-searching reflection takes place, climate talks will simply lurch along—humans versus nature, white versus black, men versus women, North versus South. The achievement of Cochabamba, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, offered the masters of globalisation a chance to escape their unhappy world of failing markets, failing governments, failing relationships, and failing souls. Can these big men receive the gift of history that is being handed to them? 

Bibliography:

ACTU and ACF, *Green Gold Rush: How ambitious environmental policy can make Australia a leader in the global race for Green Jobs*, ACTU & ACF, Melbourne, 2005.

Tom Athanasiou, 'The Cancun Setup: One Year after Copenhagen, and Counting', 16 November 2010, <www.ecoequity.org>.

Patrick Bond, 'Climate Capitalism Won at Cancun—Everyone Else Loses', *Transnational Institute*, 10 December 2010 <www.tni.org>.

Nicola Bullard, 'COP16 ends: Cancun climate change talks disappoint global expectations', 12 December 2010, <www.focusweb.org>.

Damian Carrington, 'WikiLeaks Cables Reveal how US Manipulated Climate Accord', *The Guardian*, 3 December 2010.

Green Jobs Illawarra Steering Committee, *Action Plan*, Wollongong, 2009.

Ariel Salleh, 'Climate Change and the Other Footprint', *The Commoner*, no. 13, 2005, pp. 103-113.

Ariel Salleh, 'Climate Strategy: Making the Choice between Ecological Modernisation or Living Well', *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 66, 2011, pp. 124-149,

TNI Editorial, 'Cancun Agreement Stripped Bare by Bolivia's Dissent', *Transnational Institute*, 10 December 2010, <www.tni.org>.