

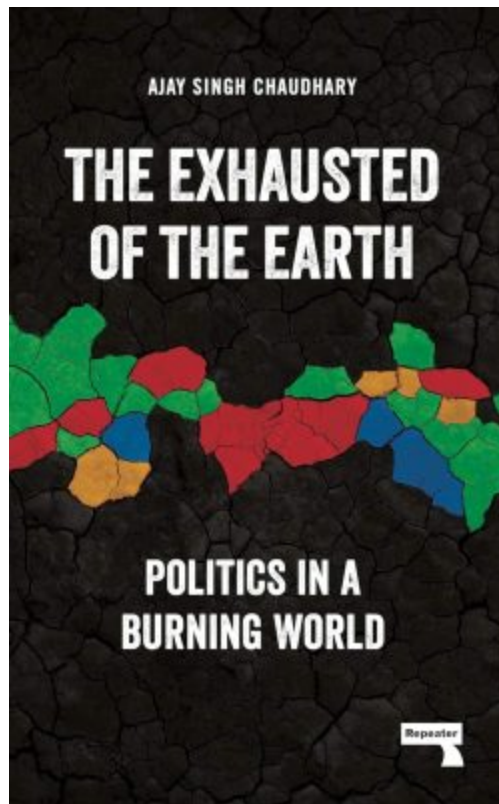
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Review of The Exhausted of the Earth

POLITICS IN A BURNING WORLD

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The Exhausted of the Earth: Politics in a Burning World
by **Ajay Singh Chaudhary**

It is now a cliché in some circles to say that all politics is climate politics. Yet it is also common to not take this seriously. The ways in which climate change is affecting society are not always easy to recognize, and left politics often fails to seriously integrate the climate dimension. Moreover, Marxist attempts to directly address climate change and other aspects of the ecological crisis are often insular. As Ajay Singh Chaudhary observes in *The Exhausted of the Earth*, “Marxological debates – incredibly prolific in eco-Marxist literature – aren’t particularly germane to climate politics.”¹ Chaudhary’s book, intended as a corrective to those trends, offers much that is helpful for thinking about the politics of climate change.

The Exhausted of the Earth situates its arguments against the threat of right-wing climate realism—understood as “a political-ecological scenario of the concentration, preservation, and enhancement of political and economic power.”² Such a scenario, Chaudhary argues, “is not only plausible and possible, but probable.”³ Today, right-wing responses to climate change often don’t involve outright denial; they simply aim for “maximal extraction for maximal maintenance or cash out that much better.”⁴

A world shaped by right-wing climate realism therefore wouldn’t require “some cataclysmic break”; we are already accustomed to euphemisms like “net zero” (which is “often *not* zero; it is continued emissions and ‘magic’”) and to “realistic” policies like the Paris Agreement, which are “predicated on fitting genuinely admirable and aggressive goals in tune with broad climate scientific understanding into a *framework* that assumes only modest – at best – deviations from ‘dominant’ socioeconomic conditions.”⁵ Right-wing climate realism would simply entail “another intensification of the existing world,” with vast inequalities, controls on migration, repression, and social murder becoming qualitatively worse.⁶ Because of the structures of capitalist class power, including imperialism, “the world we actually know and the one we can observe through the historical record makes the ‘politics of the armed lifeboat’ far from a bad gamble for those whose stake promises a payout.”⁷

However, Chaudhary also suggests that most people will not be allowed on that lifeboat and that it would be a hellish vessel for its proletarian crew. He clearly demonstrates that capitalism today is increasingly destructive for people and the rest of nature: “Even with anemic growth rates, every little bit of real capital accumulation requires yet more inputs, more extreme extraction, increased dispossession, and new ‘sacrifice zones’ – completely given over to exhaustion and debilitation,” and with “a *necessarily* ever-increasing *speed-up*.”⁸ Capital is neither evolving towards a non-ecocidal relationship with nature nor lightening the burdens it places on most people; on the contrary, we are burning up and burning out. Rightly noting “how income and wealth at US median levels does not translate into standard-of-living or quality-of-life conditions,” Chaudhary argues that “for the first time in modern history, there are majorities” in both imperialist and imperialized countries “whose most mundane, material interests *align*.”⁹

Accordingly, Chaudhary argues for “left-wing climate realism,” “the politics of a world relieved from social, economic, and ecological despair and exhaustion.”¹⁰ By realism he means a politics that takes seriously “how ends and means relate in the world as it stands, how existing power works, and how these might change.”¹¹ This emphasis is important, because the false hope that the Bidens and Trudeaus of the world can be persuaded or nudged into something other than right-wing climate realism still persists. Crucially, Chaudhary also refuses the “conviction that it is simply ‘more’ or ‘less’ of *this* life – of wealthy capitalist modernity – that defines the boundaries of the politically possible,” an assumption accepted by most of the reformist left and far too many on the revolutionary left and in between.¹²

From this position, he conducts a welcome polemic against “Climate Lysenkoism”: “a broad range of self-ascribed ‘left’ and ‘Marxist’ perspectives that subordinate both natural scientific and historical realities to a quasi-mystical technophilia and an ahistorical romance of the mid-twentieth-century Northern nationalist welfare state.”¹³ He focuses on two left ecomodernist writers with significant profiles on the Anglosphere left (not least through their writing in *Jacobin*), Leigh Phillips and Matthew Huber. Chaudhary hits the nail on the head in criticizing their calls for “more ‘stuff’

more ‘growth,’ more ‘progress’—each term accepted in its capitalist meaning, simply redecorated as ‘socialism.’”¹⁴ Left ecomodernism offers its own versions of distracting mirages first put forward by or on behalf of some sectors of capital, such as counting on the large-scale use of carbon capture and storage (CCS) and greatly increasing the use of nuclear power. These politics easily lead its supporters to tail those officials of energy workers’ unions who, sadly, are in blinkered collaboration with their employers. Yet an alternative course for labour is possible: Chaudhary points to unions that have “fought tooth and nail in concert with environmental social movements” for inspiration.¹⁵

Instead of capitulating to short-sighted conservatism among workers, Chaudhary affirms C.L.R. James’s argument—originally made with respect to Toussaint Louverture during the Haitian Revolution—that it is dangerous to explain to the masses the true difficulty of their situation, “but even more dangerous not to explain.”¹⁶ Chaudhary also argues for the left to take seriously the “affects, feelings, passions, and emotions all vital to political possibility” and “the ‘social desire’ for the world to be otherwise” felt by exhausted people.¹⁷ Instead of fantasies about nuclear-powered green growth, he proposes an orientation toward the “minor paradise” of a “sustainable global human ecological niche” based on a rapid planned just transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, decommodified access to necessities, agroecological food systems, and a shift of power and resources to the Global South and to the workers of the world.¹⁸ In such a world, most people could live better, slower, freer lives than they do now, without blasting across all the planetary boundaries that many ecologists urge humanity to respect.

In advancing left-wing climate realism, Chaudhary also offers a scathing critique of the ideology of resilience, “a management strategy and apology for the status quo.”¹⁹ Instead of resilience, he argues for the politicization of exhaustion. All over the world, we find exploited people who, in various ways, agree with US Civil Rights movement leader Fannie Lou Hamer: “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”²⁰ They are “the historical bloc, the mass political subject” that can be brought together across differences to fight for what needs to be won.²¹ The goal of left climate realism can be thought of as in some ways like the abolition of slavery in the US, given how much wealth would have to be destroyed and redistributed and how it would take something like civil war to attain.

In thinking about the changes needed, Chaudhary emphasizes that we're not starting from scratch and don't need high-tech fantasies; there are many examples in the world today that could be expanded. These include promising forms of agriculture, ways of organizing urban life, and building techniques like those that help structures stay cool without power-gobbling air conditioning. The key point is that "the material potential for human flourishing ha[s] long since been achieved within global capitalist development."²²

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I have emphasized what is of real value in *The Exhausted of the Earth*. However, in addition to a few questionable ideas about historical matters, such as scorning the claim that China under Mao was qualitatively similar to the USSR, the book has some significant weaknesses that are directly relevant to "politics in a burning world."²³ Chaudhary characterizes capitalism as forever stuck in low GDP growth, but this assumption (which shapes his outlook) is unwarranted; the system may well never again perform as it did during the long boom after the Second World War, and since the 2007–09 Great Recession it's been unable to create conditions for a return to higher rates of profit and investment, but that does not mean it could not create such conditions at enormous cost to most people and the rest of nature.

Continuing a concerning trend on part of the ecosocialist left, Chaudhary also denies that China is an imperialist power (he asserts at one point that this is a "pure myth") and refuses to see China for what it is: a fossil capitalist society whose ruling class is weaker than their US rivals but equally an enemy of the global working class.²⁴ In a similar vein, he asserts that "most Global South states are committed to...a form of the politics of exhaustion, but lacking a path beyond the layered caste system of the global economy."²⁵ This is an unconvincing view of capitalist states that are imperialized by the global system, but whose governments administer capitalism even while signing on to climate justice declarations or criticizing Western imperialism.

Alongside these consequential mischaracterizations, some parts of the argument are insufficiently developed. Chaudhary's case for fighting for "minor paradise" is compelling, but the relationship between such a society, capitalism, and transition to ecosocialism is not clear. Saying that it wouldn't be "a fully classless" society is reasonable, but why would "features of a fully socialist society... actually be *impediments*" to "socioecological transformation"?²⁶ How would the "minor paradise" be "a 'lateral' project all its own"?²⁷ Here the book's brief discussions are lacking.

Moreover, Chaudhary does not grapple with crucial questions about goals and strategy. For example, what changes in class relations and the organization of production would be required to build the "minor paradise"? What would it take to bring them about? What would the historical bloc forged by supporters of left-wing climate realism need to do? What could probably be won through struggle as reforms under capitalism, and what would require breaking with capitalism and starting a transition? Its discussion of tactics, including attacks on property, is limited, and it seems to advocate a form of green popular frontism in which some sections of capital can be allies of left-wing climate realism.²⁸

The book's emphasis on the political importance of emotions is smart, and its attention to the global experience of exhaustion is perceptive. Chaudhary thinks that this experience of exhaustion can be channelled into urgently needed organized support for an internationalist politics of left climate realism. Regrettably, *The Exhausted of the Earth* doesn't have much to say about how this is possible, and what it does have to say is sometimes unsatisfying. Nevertheless, this book's ideas about many important issues are powerful and eloquently expressed. People who appreciate that "We have yet to mount the challenge to *stop* fossil capital, to reverse the extractive circuit, to seize the opportunity found in crisis" and that "crises are not in short supply" would do well to read it.²⁹

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