
Attack of the Space Cadets. Offworld Colonies, Racist Repression and 'Nature-Based Solutions'

For the world's richest men, the environmental crisis has finally arrived. From fleeing into outer space or fantasylands to science-fiction solutions, capitalists desperately seek fossil-fuelled business as usual to continue, while most people are asked to look the other way as ecological collapse accelerates.

For the world's richest and most powerful men, the global environmental crisis has finally arrived. But what it means for them is not what it means for most people.

Take the examples of Jeff Bezos (Executive Chair of e-commerce giant Amazon), Elon Musk (CEO of electric vehicle manufacturer Tesla), Larry Fink (CEO of the world's largest asset manager BlackRock), Mark Carney (former governor of the Bank of England and Bank of Canada) and Bill Gates (co-founder of technology giant Microsoft).

For these men, ecological crisis doesn't mean a planet warming so fast it is threatening their own civilization. It doesn't mean the worldwide decline of insect life that is now undermining human subsistence. It doesn't mean dangerous pandemics emerging out of industrial agriculture, deforestation and globalization. (1) It doesn't even mean the deteriorating vitality of ordinary workers, who have seen so much of their wages, benefits and living conditions stolen by the rich over the past 50 years.

What ecological crisis means to these men, as capitalists, is the effect it has on investment. Ecological crisis means popular rebellion, as livelihoods are ruined and workers get fed up. Rebellion means pressure on governments to regulate and repress. To do either has a cost. Worse, to do either can result in further reductions in the living work that living things can be induced to donate to corporations to ensure profits. Fewer handouts to corporations mean fewer destinations for profitable investment.

A Science-Fiction Solution

Bezos and Musk (the two richest men in the world) have one colourful solution to the difficulty. If environmental catastrophe and the popular movements that result from it have become a problem for capital accumulation, then we must move to outer space. We must mine the moon and the asteroids, devastate Mars, or put the earth's inhabitants in colonies in orbit. Both Bezos and Musk are investing billions in such schemes. Bezos calls it "going to space to save the earth." (2)

To normal people, this might seem like what logicians call a *reductio ad absurdum* (an argument whose impossible conclusion demonstrates the absurdity of one of its premises). If capitalist assumptions ultimately require shifting the earth's people into space to exploit nature there, there must be something wrong with the assumptions.

But as capitalists, Bezos and Musk have no other option but to affirm those assumptions. For Bezos,

the sole choice is between “dynamism and growth” and the horrors of “stasis and rationing.” (3)

So for them, climbing into rockets is only logical. And they are right. Their interplanetary fantasies are not an eccentric or amusing hobby like dressing up in Star Trek outfits. They are a deeply reasonable outcome of their capitalist commitments.

Back on Earth

Fink, Carney and Gates – who occupies the No. 3 spot on the world rich list – lack the imaginative flair of Bezos and Musk. They would prefer not to be seen as ‘space cadets’ (US slang for people out of touch with reality).

But their own favoured approach, though seemingly more mundane, is basically no different. For them, the challenge is what Fink calls “capital reallocation” here on earth. Where can the rich invest their money on an increasingly debilitated and uninsurable planet full of potentially crippling environmental lawsuits, unruly affected communities, restive green consumers, and troublesome carbon regulation, so that profits can continue accumulating in their hands?

Fink, Carney and Gates figure that one answer might be green technology. (Musk does too; for all his interplanetary enthusiasms, his real claim to fame is still earthbound electric cars.) To all these men, the current crisis of the old ‘brown’ technology signals one of those bouts of “creative destruction” (4) that periodically spur capitalism into reinventing itself. They know that rewards will go to those who pick the right commercial gambles for a new age of ecological disasters.

The trouble is that the gamble these privileged men have chosen – green tech – is fundamentally no different from the old brown variety. Green tech extends racist frontiers of extraction just as brutally as brown tech did, demanding basically the same old unsustainable sacrifices from nature and workers. More and more cobalt, nickel and copper must be mined in the DRC, Indonesia and Chile for ‘low-carbon’ digital devices and infrastructure. Wind farms are projected to take over 50 million hectares of land in the US alone by 2050, (5) and even more in China, with modern wind turbines requiring many tonnes of balsa wood each, mostly from Ecuador. Electric cars need lithium from Bolivia and elsewhere, to get which, as Musk has forthrightly declared, “we will coup whoever we want.” (6) And all this mainly just to supplement – not supplant – oil, coal and gas. Alexander Dunlap, a US expert on green tech, puts it bluntly: “industrial-scale renewable energy is fossil fuel+.” (7)

What can all that mean in the end but yet more exhausted frontiers, accumulated waste, rebellious communities, extinction events, meddling regulators, police payrolls and desperate attempts to locate even more untapped resources in even more out-of-the-way places? It’s enough to make any capitalist into a space cadet.

Outer Space Here on Earth

Luckily, there are still other ways to try to colour the old brown tech green. One is to extend the earthbound plantation frontier and dig deeper into the ‘ecosystem services’ of forests, oceans or underground caverns. The idea is not to escape the earthly devastation clogging up industrial capitalism by rocketing off to other planets. Nor is it to halt the destruction itself. Instead, you just grab, manage, retool and exploit the living things that haven’t yet been destroyed here on earth in order to try to ‘compensate’ for those that have. The oil company BP, for example, wants its customers to invest in wind turbines in China and forest conservation in Mexico to help make up for its participation in six billion tonnes of additional crude oil production in the Russian state-subsidized

Welcome to the world of ‘carbon neutrality,’ ‘biodiversity offsets,’ ‘net-zero emissions,’ ‘circular economies’ and now ‘nature-based solutions.’ Mark Carney wants to multiply voluntary carbon offsetting 15-fold in the next nine years to help make the world safe for industrial investment a bit longer. (9) Using forests, electric vans and the like to ‘compensate’ for its greenhouse gas pollution, Jeff Bezos’ Amazon pledges to be ‘net zero’ by 2040. (10) Larry Fink claims that BlackRock already is. (11) Floating similar gambits, Microsoft is even promising to be ‘carbon negative’ within a decade. (12) In the last two years, these businesses have been joined not only by hundreds of other large banks and corporations, but also by 127 nations worldwide now busily preparing to become ‘carbon neutral’ instead of stopping fossil fuels coming out of the ground.

All this amounts to a kind of Ponzi scheme. In a Ponzi scheme, you string along naive investors by assuring them that they are backing some (fictional) commercial enterprise while paying them fake ‘dividends’ consisting solely of cash swindled from new investors. In an offset or ‘nature-based solutions’ scheme, you tell naive economists that investments in unsustainable, waste-multiplying extraction are being made ‘sustainable’ by what in fact turns out to be ... yet more unsustainable, waste-multiplying extraction.

Bill Gates takes the idea still further. Not only does he urge corporations to seize land and underground geological formations, transform them into sponges to soak up carbon, and then sell the result to others in the form of permits to pollute more. He also says that the proceeds from this expropriation can be used to scale up industrial production of imaginary ‘green steel,’ ‘green cement’ and ‘green airplanes,’ making them commercially competitive with the old ‘brown’ varieties. (13)

Of course, you can’t expect any Ponzi scheme to last forever. Tree plantations designed to clean carbon from fossil fuel burning out of the atmosphere – like biofuel plantations or solar farms that supposedly ‘replace’ those fuels – leave behind waves of devastation and exhaustion among humans and nonhumans that are just as unsustainable as anything else in industrial capitalism. Biodiversity offsets, too, used mainly by the mining industry, just add a new layer to the old extractivism. Indeed, as Ivonne Yanez of Acci?n Ecologica in Ecuador has long argued, offsets may be even worse than mining, in the sense that they threaten to take away vital sustenance from communities for even longer than mining concessions do. No wonder so many opponents of extractivism, like Acci?n, are also standing in the front lines against ‘nature-based solutions.’

But then again, Ponzi schemes aren’t *supposed* to last forever. At best, they fill the pockets of clever fraudsters for a few years until they can make a getaway, are thrown into prison, or kill themselves. Similarly, ‘net zero’ policies and ‘nature-based solutions’ aren’t designed to sustain the earth and its inhabitants. Their job is just to allow fossil-fuelled business as usual to spin out a few more years, relatively safe from lawsuits and still insurable, while the public is asked to look the other way as ecological collapse accelerates.

Back to the Future

The ‘nature-based solutions’ concept isn’t new. It goes way back to the beginning of the neoliberal era in the 1970s US. Then, as today, business was moaning about environmental regulation potentially becoming a ‘growth ban’ (read: ban on capitalism). Then, as today, there were no other planets available to flee to.

Business' solution was never to stop governments from regulating. Capitalists have always needed and craved state regulation, in order to keep control over workers, guarantee private property rights, tax the poor, help business exploit nature for profit, and dress the whole thing up with plausible, mutually-agreed fake numbers. Instead, the strategy was to get out in front of any temptation the state might have to overreach and put really serious checks on industry's drive to rob the earth from end to end. After all, subsidies from nature (including human nature) have always been the source of all capitalist profit – and, indirectly, of much state revenue as well.

That's why business-support organizations such as the US's American Legislative Exchange Council have never opposed state regulation as such. They just want to write it themselves. Hence the last half-century's flood of national and international environmental laws that permit and encourage offsets for devastated wetlands, depleted biodiversity, degraded water and land, extinct species, nitrous oxide, sulfur hexafluoride and carbon dioxide, all the way down to the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. Much of the detailed technical planning for offsets and 'nature-based solutions' legislation comes from corporate-friendly Washington-based NGOs including Environmental Defense Fund, the Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Defense Council, WWF, World Resources Institute; universities throughout the world; and United Nations and other international bodies such as the World Bank and IUCN.

Naturally, this approach is controversial even among capitalists. Right-wing despots like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Narendra Modi take a somewhat different view. Their own instinctive formula for capitalist renewal is to turbocharge racial and patriarchal repression while ditching as much regulation as possible. Their dream is that this will make labour and resource extraction just as cheap as it was in the old days. Neither offsets nor green consumption nor green accounting nor even green tech, Trumpistas suggest, are options for 'real men.' Instead of fleeing into outer space, Trump and his global followers propose escaping into a different fantasyland – one of perpetual, unquestioned ethnic and male dominion over humans and nonhumans alike. For them, it doesn't matter that their particular fantasyland's ecological lifespan would be even shorter than that of a Disney World of 'nature-based solutions' or daily Mars shuttles. As with Gates and Carney, all they are hoping for is some way of holding an imploding capitalism together for a few more years.

Institutions, not just Individuals

Of course, these squabbles rage not only among powerful individuals like Bezos, Carney, Bolsonaro or Modi. They reflect a debate over ecological strategy that is convulsing every institution of capital around the globe.

Bezos and Musk, for example, are not isolated space cadets, but well-regarded industry leaders in the suppression of labour rights. (14) Green-tech advocate Larry Fink is not just a fabulously rich Wall Street executive but the "fourth branch of government" in the US, his investment firm BlackRock holding major stakes in more than 90 per cent of the 500 biggest publicly-traded companies there. Mark Carney, similarly, is not just a retired Goldman Sachs banker but also an ideologue appointed by the United Nations to further the interests of the whole financial sector. And Bolsonaro and Modi are riding a huge global wave of racist and patriarchal reaction that may still be a long way from peaking. Whatever their differences, the diverse factions that these elite figures represent are strongly united in their collective search for innovative ways for capital to continue to plunder an earth that is almost plundered out. Figures like Modi and Bolsonaro, for example, while promoting racial and gender violence as one capitalist approach, are also very happy to be used by commercial interests behind green tech and 'nature-based solutions.'

Where will undecided middle-class environmentalists and conservationists place themselves in this intra-capitalist dispute? Will they refuse Trumpist racism only to welcome 'nature-based solutions'? Will they reject offsets only to embrace a Green New Deal dependent on resource colonialism? Will they throw in their lot with the explicitly outer-space politics of Musk or Bezos?

Or will they instead join the thousands of grassroots movements who are already confronting directly the root of the crisis: the old capitalist imperative of finding ever new ways of getting something for nothing while leaving the earth and its inhabitants in ruins?

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- (1) Monthly review, [COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital](#), May 2020
- (2) Musk's space ventures are also already posing a severe threat to West Papuan peoples and their forests and seashores here on earth. Musk plans to contract with the Indonesian government to convert Biak island off the West Papuan coast into a 'space island' launching pad for 42,000 satellites. [See an International Appeal to stop this here](#).
- (3) [Going to Space to Benefit Earth](#), Blue Origin movie, May 2019.
- (4) Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1942.
- (5) [Net-Zero America, Potential Pathways, Infrastructure and Impacts](#), December 2020
- (6) [Elon Musk Tweeter](#)
- (7) Verso, [End the 'green' delusions: Industrial scale renewable energy is fossil fuel+](#), May 2018.
- (8) Financial Times, [Rosneft's massive Arctic oil push undermines BP's green turn](#); BP, [Energy with Purpose](#), 2019
- (9) [Taskforce on Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets](#), January 2021
- (10) CNBC, [Jeff Bezos unveils sweeping plan to tackle climate change](#), 2019.
Bezos is also pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into pro-capitalist, Washington-based environmental organizations that promote offsets and large-scale green energy, and has hired Andrew Steer, a notorious hack from the British 'overseas aid' world, as president of his new \$US10 billion Earth Fund. See CNBC, [Jeff Bezos names first recipients of his \\$10 billion Earth Fund for combating climate change](#), 2020.
- (11) BlackRock, [BlackRock's 2020 Carbon Footprint](#).
- (12) Microsoft, [Microsoft will be carbon negative by 2030](#), 2020.
- (13) World Economic Forum, [Carbon Markets: A Conversation with Bill Gates, Mark Carney, Annette Nazareth and Bill Winters](#), 2021.
- (14) The Intercept, [Amazon Workers are Organizing a Global Struggle](#), 2020; The Guardian, [Tesla workers speak out: 'Anything pro-union is shut down really fast'](#), 2018.