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*Assessment*

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## Everything Stays the Same while Everything Changes

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### INTRODUCTION

The last years have seen bombshell reports dropped from international institutions with mounting frequency, including reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2018, 2019, 2021) and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2019). These reports appeared at the same time as highly visible Euro-Atlantic proposals to deal with the climate crisis, for example, Ocasio-Cortez's 'Green New Deal' resolution,<sup>1</sup> the 2021 'Biden Plan'<sup>2</sup> and the European Commission's 2019 'Green New Deal'.<sup>3</sup> Against a background hum of mounting popular unease with structural inequalities and polarization, such reports share at least two notable traits: first, these documents now acknowledge that 'business as usual', in every sense of the phrase, blocks the shifts they demand. The 2018 IPCC report, for example, calls for 'rapid and unprecedented societal transformation' (IPCC, 2018: 77). Second, these reports register unease about the degree of social polarization and how it and poverty heighten exposure to climate disasters.

Accordingly, these reports sometimes discuss or at least refer to capitalism as having produced income inequality, and even ecological crisis. Furthermore, in response to rising anti-racist (Ransby, 2018) and anti-colonial

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1. For US Representative Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal resolution, see: [www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text](http://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text)
  2. For US President Joe Biden's Plan, see: <https://joebiden.com/clean-energy/>
  3. For the EU Green New Deal, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)

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mobilization (Estes, 2019) within the imperial core, such rhetoric is scattered throughout these reports. Yet, if they at times discuss colonialism and capitalism, the reports never explicitly theorize them (although they do have a theory for them).<sup>4</sup> Sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, these documents suggest modern capitalism has gone awry — prices are ‘wrong’, finance is running rampant (see, for example, UNCTAD, 2019: 27) and democratic institutions and social movements need to re-tame capitalism so that it does not fatally undermine its natural-ecological substrate. However, the reports do not take aim at capitalism: the production of commodities through private monopoly control of the means of production towards the ceaseless and globally polarized accumulation of surplus value. They avoid analysing capitalism as based on exploitation, and in doing so, they write warrants for a new, tamed, ecologically sensitive capitalism that enfolds the natural world into its accounting matrices. Thus, by failing to see it and remedy it, the reports make exploitation inevitable. They do the same for South–North resource transfers and the degraded participation of Southern states in the international system (Mundy, 2021) — the varied patterns of oppression and exploitation marked by such flows and full or partial denudation of sovereignty, which have been identified historically and in the present as colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism. Such false assumptions are cumulative. Erasures beget erasures: if one can see the past only in its grossest detail, one is unlikely to take account of the demands of those whose pasts shape their particular paths to the social-ecological horizons these reports often outline.

This is the background against which we can interpret the *Human Development Report 2020. The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene* (hereafter, HDR 2020 or the Report), which distils, represents and crystallizes such contradictions.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I first provide a framework for interpreting a wide array of calls for change coming from the global North and South.<sup>6</sup> I then summarize the Report’s key interventions and critically assess them, focusing on the deployment of categories such as Indigenous, colonialism, capitalism and nature-based solutions. I use the framework of accumulation on a world scale and the national question, the bundle of political issues related to self-determination, imperialism, sovereignty and national liberation, to interpret the Report and to compare it with kindred and more radical calls for worldwide green transformation.

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4. Thanks to Kai Heron for pointing this out to me, and for his several important suggestions to improve the text.

5. Subsequent references will use page numbers, and can be presumed to be from the HDR 2020 unless indicated otherwise.

6. I use ‘South’, ‘global South’ and ‘periphery’, and ‘North’, ‘global North’ and ‘core’ interchangeably. These are descriptions of positions within a system of polarized accumulation, not geographies.

**BACKGROUND: A TEMPLATE FOR INTERPRETING CALLS FOR CHANGE**

Calls for change, both local and global, can be grouped into four general ‘types’ of transformation, blurring and blending into one another at the margins (Ajl, 2021a). Each type is partially distinguished from the others on a series of axes, including ambitions for domestic social and technological change; ambitions and responsibilities vis-à-vis international social and technological change; the presence or absence of agriculture/agricultural land bases and resources in any transition; and — touching on one of the preoccupations of the HDR 2020 — which social and political agents, conceived not as abstract structural elements or ideal-typical elements of a class society but as historical and contemporary forces, have agency and legitimacy within the world system. A final central element is how each approach tends to analyse the world social-ecological system, and whether they consider the colonial legacy and neocolonial present, a point I reserve for the following section.

Proponents of one such type of proposal, ‘transformation from above’, defend current distributions of property, in some cases evincing disinterest in suppressing carbon dioxide emissions at all. Accordingly, these calls converge on the following point of unity: there is no mention of climate debt/reparations. Furthermore, the Climate Finance Leadership Initiative (CFLI), an online consortium which includes Bloomberg, Goldman Sachs and HSBC, calls for greening the US military and envisions agriculture as a new frontier for financialization (CFLI, 2019). Then there are calls for mobilizing public investment in the North and South to ‘crowd in’ capital currently sitting in the bond sector and push it towards Southern state-guaranteed low-risk loans (see, for example, Gabor, 2020). Spratt and Dunlop (2018) focus extensively on control of population movements, while organizations such as the Energy and Resources Institute (2020) calls for biofuels in lieu of current hydrocarbon deployment in sectors difficult to decarbonize like maritime and aerial transport and steel. Others, such as Dutkiewicz et al. (2020) and Willett et al. (2019), call for extensive intervention in diets and pastoral or small-farmer production. Agriculture is mentioned only as the object of climate-smart interventions and possible land-sparing intensification (Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015; Rifkin, 2019). Additionally, the CFLI has warned that fossil fuel assets may be forcibly retired and may not receive public compensation (CFLI, 2019: 276), and uses the language of ‘just transition’ for dealing with the consequences for workers in the energy sector. This model does not mention core–periphery or North–South polarization. Southern actors have no role outside of the concern that they might nationalize newly installed clean energy infrastructure.

A second type of transformation maintains large portions of the first and is notable in having no clear constituency. It is essentially a green Keynesian industrial growth policy, one that seeks to increase social wealth, avoid hard internal redistribution and renew the core industrial base. Proponents of this

type of proposal, such as the US Government's 'Green New Deal',<sup>7</sup> call for massive investments in renewable energy, often but not always targeting a zero-carbon energy system in the US by 2030 through full renewables replacement (Jacobson et al., 2015; see also Trainer, 2018). This type of transformation proposal incorporates the following elements: some attention to inequities, but passed through the prism of non-class variables like 'frontline' or 'historically oppressed' communities;<sup>8</sup> more attention to clean technology transfer, but as a new frontier of commodification and industrialization, rehearsing the US as a 'workshop of the world' à la the post-World War II interregnum, and with an ambiguous sense of whether such technological transfers would be in the form of industrial exports, the 1945–65 model, or control over knowledge and major capital goods, the 1965–present model. Furthermore, this type of transformation lavishes attention on racial and gender inequalities (see Ferguson, 2013) and pays some attention to colonialism and even more to an opaque 'Indigenous question' — as we shall see, an axial element of the HDR 2020. To reiterate: it is silent on demilitarization and climate debt and often but not always silent on agriculture. Southern actors, especially peasants, the semi-proletariat and pastoralists are likewise absent.

A third type of transformation is the most ambiguous, not to say ambivalent, and reflects the mercurial nature of redistributive or structurally transformative demands which lack the social agent to push them through. Proponents of this 'type', such as US Senator Bernie Sanders and his 'Green New Deal',<sup>9</sup> call for major redistributions of wealth, always domestically, sometimes on a world scale via debt cancellations or some measure of climate debt payments (see also Aronoff et al., 2019). This type of transformation emphasizes infrastructural investments to improve the use values available to core populations, and social wealth redirected towards social reproduction and purportedly carbon-free occupations like healthcare and teaching. It calls for a massive renewables push, sometimes with a target of zero carbon emissions by 2030, sometimes targeting less ambitious horizons, while rejecting climate debt repayments/reparations as unfeasible (Chomsky and Pollin, 2020). It furthermore has a highly evasive and unsubstantial relationship with internationalism, often erasing core political engineering of the periphery, such as Riofrancos (2020: 173) who refuses to call the 2019 coup in Bolivia a coup, who avoids mention of US support for it, and who suppresses demands for climate debt reparations

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7. For more on the US Government's Green New Deal, see: [www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-resolution/59/text](http://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-resolution/59/text)

8. Ibid.

9. For US Senator Bernie Sanders's Green New Deal, see: <https://berniesanders.com/issues/green-new-deal/>

(Cohen and Riofrancos, 2020).<sup>10</sup> Such positions similarly reject calls for global energy use convergence, and inveigh against any possibility of radicalized Third World experiments such as Zimbabwe, which Selwyn (2021: 795) describes as ‘authoritarian populist’, or Venezuela, which Klein (2019: 251) attacks as ‘petro-populist’, to lead structural transformation.<sup>11</sup> Others similarly but more broadly suppress any consideration of agrarian-national or agrarian-ecological questions within the world system and pose the question of redistribution and systems change in pure abstraction (Malm, 2020; see also Ajl, 2020). Finally, there is an increasing element of technological fetishism within these proposals, one that focuses on non-viable laboratory-made meat, carbon capture and storage or geoengineering (Bastani, 2020).

A fourth type of transformation proposes a reduction in world aggregate energy use, a reduction in core energy use and an increase in peripheral energy use towards per capita convergence, retooled and appropriate industrialization, fair terms of trade, and attention to the problems of Third World energy producers (see, for example, Perry, 2020). It also calls for worldwide agrarian reform associated with agroecological and sustainable pasturing for land husbandry; biodiversity preservation; decentralized national-popular development and carbon dioxide drawdown (Ajl, 2021b); climate debt reparations of 6 per cent of Northern GDP per year (PWCCC, 2010); decolonization of settler states (PFLP, 1969; The Red Nation, 2021); and retooling the global political regime to avoid peripheral nations facing degraded citizenship through lack of sovereignty within the world system (Moyo and Yeros, 2005; Mundy, 2021).

It is against the backdrop of this four-fold path that we should place the HDR 2020. The Report looks like another ‘great transitions’ manifesto, with several distinguishing elements including token nods to correlations between world income and responsibility for emissions. Furthermore, it is critical to keep in mind the other main ‘types’ of proposals, precisely because types one, two and three converge on several critical themes: they reject any theory of uneven accumulation; they are effectively silent on climate debt; they are silent on Third World sovereignty; and they pay almost no attention to agriculture, except to treat it as an object of ‘greened’ or ‘socialized’ versions of capitalist technocratic or investor-led transformations, as with biofuels, climate-smart agriculture, or radical interventions in diets to return land to ‘wild nature’. They are generally warm to techno fixes in lieu of social transformation, rehearsing the basic elements of modernization theory, by prescription or omission, thus suggesting that the global South should simply follow the developmental path of the North (Chachra, 2020). And they are silent on or openly delegitimize many of the actual

10. It is noteworthy that the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, a philanthropic foundation created in 1940 and run by members of the Rockefeller family, is supporting a great deal of the intellectual production within this quadrant.

11. On such characterizations, see Moyo and Yeros (2007).

critical anti-systemic struggles of the past and present. Below, I outline the major theoretical, methodological and programmatic elements of the HDR 2020, and situate them within the existing literature.

### **ANALYSIS OF OUR WORLD AND REMEDIES: SUMMARIZING THE HDR 2020**

The HDR 2020 opens with a description of the problems of the world today: ‘marginalization’, a world of wide and growing inequalities, which worsen exposure to and impacts of rising risks (p. 8), and ‘large inequalities in the distribution of income, assets and resources’ (p. 57). More broadly, the Report posits a set of contradictions between ‘colonial power’ and ‘colony’, ‘privileged groups’ and ‘racial/ethnic minorities’, ‘elites’ versus ‘low-earning workers’, and ‘large companies’ versus ‘local communities’ (p. 75). Class as a relationship to the means of production is not present. Rather, ‘classism ... weaken[s] long-term human development’, and precariousness of working ‘conditions’ is part of contributing to ‘productive processes that yield rents for the elite or large companies’ (ibid.). Finally, the Report notes that the richest 10 per cent of the world’s population emit more carbon emissions than the rest of humanity collectively, and those responsible for controlling investment are potentially responsible for the emissions which come from the physical plant created (p. 249ff).

The Report states that current ‘industrial societies’ based on business models of ‘unlimited economic growth’ and ‘consumerism’ lead to time-place displacement of damages, and a separation between the few (pp. 36–37, 96) who benefit without bearing ‘negative consequences’ and the multitude who ‘disproportionally bear the costs’ (p. 71). Since the current social-political system is subject to interference and pressure from those beneficiaries, circularly, the system produces more over-exploitation, over-pollution and harm. These power asymmetries either produce or reinforce a price system which crystallizes a set of incentives which leads to further harm because the marginalized have a narrow range of options within the existing system (ibid.).

In essence, HDR 2020 posits capitalism as broken: a system unable in its current form to provide ‘nature-based human development’ (p. 10), unable to deal with extant equity concerns, unable to control inequality, unable to pare down rents and unable to avoid social incohesion (p. 113). What mechanisms would head off these negative aspects of human development, enhance equity, foster innovation, instil a sense of stewardship of nature and achieve ‘nature-based human development’, and who will implement them? The HDR 2020 lists a set of ‘interaction dynamics’ which damage sustainability, and it identifies a set of actors ‘to be empowered’ who can set in motion new dynamics to restore sustainability (p. 77). In turn, the Report argues that if human societies expand capabilities, enhance

agency and change values, it will be possible to achieve environmental justice, and fulfil international responsibilities (pp. 6, 8). Indeed, it argues that the former two pathologies are linked to social inequality (p. iii). The Report claims, for example, that currently prices produce patterns of consumption, production and investment which are deleterious to those ends. It calls for governments to act, alongside ‘individuals, communities and social movements’ (pp. 11, 27), but the Report only vaguely clarifies which individuals: those suffering racial prejudice (pp. 39, 62), or Indigenous peoples, lifted up for their capacities for management of the biosphere (p. 33). Here ‘enhancing equity’ comes in, alongside a range of policies and possible pressures. If those who ‘lack ... power’ can act, they may remediate inequities and change unbalanced or unfair decision-making processes (pp. 71, 77). Thus empowered, they can demand ‘fiscal measures’ and ‘regulation and competition policies which preclude the *excessive* concentration of economic power in monopolies’, at least in ‘more cohesive societies’ (p. 78, italics added), whereas in ‘less cohesive societies’ extra-institutional forces like the ‘environmental justice movement’ are needed to break the impasse (ibid.). In all cases, ‘democratic deliberation’ is a means to these ends, whether it occurs within formal institutional structures or outside of them (p. 113).

Within this tableau, ‘innovation’ is critical, from digital monitoring of pollution, storage, smart grids, precision agriculture, to dietary shifts (pp. 81–87). Any such changes occur against the background of a set of norms, which affect how people make individual choices vis-à-vis ‘transportation, production and consumption’ (p. 133). How to shift such norms? The Report suggests that one possibility is through education (pp. 134–36). But even with excellent internalized norms, individuals do not act in vacuums. In capitalist societies, people and institutions respond systematically to the signals and cues crystallized in the price system. Accordingly, the HDR 2020 calls for revamping such a system: prices are ‘wrong’ in not considering the full range of social and ecological concerns. For example, they allow for displacing ‘problems across borders and time’ (p. 96). Against this, the HDR 2020 suggests ‘internalizing environmental and social costs in the true value of goods and services’ (pp. 113, 159). Furthermore, governments, the arenas for public action within cohesive societies, can attach fiscal supports to green policies, and push ‘industry towards a viable low-carbon future’ (p. 171). Other mechanisms include not merely putting an imputed dollar price on non-human nature but actually making ‘payments for ecosystem services’ (p. 173). In other words, the HDR 2020 essentially accepts neoclassical theory’s commitment to hedonic and rational actors reacting to prices but calls for changes in a variety of institutional and informational signals, including reworking prices, so that actors will align short-term actions with long-run nature-based human development, and realize a society in which social power will be less unequal.

## NAMING AND NOT NAMING THE SYSTEM

The HDR 2020 emerges against a political background in which capitalism and colonialism have been delegitimized in their current forms, in which Indigenous agency is increasingly viewed as critically important, in which it is no longer deniable that extant systems of production, distribution and consumption are severely damaging the environment, and in which intra-national and international suffering from damaged ecosystems is widely acknowledged. The Report contends with these realities, but does so in a pro-systemic way, deploying a strategy of containment, accepting elements of the anti-systemic critique but insisting that nature-based human development is possible within the parameters of the existing system (p. 129). In what follows, this Assessment considers some of these elements and suggests alternative conceptualizations. The HDR 2020 uses a two-fold strategy to avoid engagement with the literature linking capitalism with ecological breakdown (Duncan, 1991; Foster, 2017; Moore, 2015). First, it suggests closing ecologically damaging frontiers of accumulation and opening up new ones. Second, it considers functionally equating capitalist and non-capitalist development paths through the notion of an industrialized Anthropocene. This Assessment considers each strategy in turn.

### **Nature-based Solutions: Breakthrough or Mirage?**

Reworking the price system and barring certain excessively ecologically damaging activities could accord with continued capitalism only if new arenas of accumulation appear, in particular the green economy, the strategic sectors for re-embedding production in non-human nature. According to the HDR 2020, this new ‘frontier’ of accumulation has the capacity to ‘unlock \$10 trillion in financial opportunities and create 395 million jobs by 2030’ (p. 198) alongside widespread payments for ecosystem services. This is an explicitly pro-market and pro-capitalist position, derived from the plan of the World Economic Forum for ‘industry to lead the transition towards a nature-positive economy’ (World Economic Forum, 2020: 4). This includes embracing widespread criticisms from agroecology about the social and ecological effects of industrial capitalist farming and alchemizing them into a pro-capitalist ‘productive and regenerative agriculture’ (ibid.: 11) alongside nature-positive design, denser cities, circular economies, renewables and alternative proteins (ibid.: 11–14, 47).

This emphasis on nature-based solutions is not novel, although it is noteworthy that the business literature has stolen a march on large portions of Western ‘critical’ climate literature which generally ignores the potential for natural carbon dioxide drawdown, or focuses on extensive reforestation, afforestation, Half-Earth biodiversity corals (Büscher et al., 2017) and the eradication of global pastoralist populations (Ajl and Wallace, 2021).



However, the deployment of aspects of ecological criticism of current methods of production brings with it immense problems. First, such ‘solutions’ may be used as an alternative to ceasing carbon dioxide emissions, with hydrocarbon companies opting for reforestation/afforestation to fend off expropriation and shutdown, as the oil and natural gas conglomerate Shell Energy is currently doing (DiChristopher, 2019). ‘Natural’ or ‘non-natural’ climate solutions need to occur under popular control and should be evaluated with respect to human capacity to control their implementation. Second, there are enormous risks in the calls of the HDR 2020 for payments for ecosystem services (p. 173). Superficially, the widespread attraction stems from a recognition that capitalism was not ‘recognizing’ the value of these ecological processes. In fact, such ‘externalities’ have long been internal to exploitation and accumulation. On the one hand, if the natural environment in the South is destroyed and degraded, causing people to lose their lives from flooding or to cancer, it is above all lives in the South which are under-reproduced relative to their potential historically given levels.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, under capitalism, if they are untrammelled but furthermore uncommodified, such ‘services’ allow for the reproduction of peripheral labour forces without capitalists directly paying the wage bill (Federici, 2012; James, 2012).

Furthermore, the ‘services’ the HDR 2020 uses as an example are sometimes linked to paying farmers not to pollute, naturalizing property rights of polluters. Frequently, such ‘services’ are performance based; in the case of forests, for example, the ecosystem ‘service’ which is compensated is the reduction of emissions. Meanwhile, writes Prasad (2020: 194), ‘the labour that goes into the maintenance of the forest is not remunerated’, under the assumption that humanity is implacably opposed to nature, a long-standing apartheid concept underpinning Western capitalism (Merchant, 1990). This opens the door to ‘de-bundling’ such services from the social natures which they help compose, and in turn, allows for the possible replacement of isolated services by analogues, for example, invasive species, hybrid cyborg techno-natures or, for that matter, tree plantations, leading to losses in biodiversity (Redford and Adams, 2009). Finally, bringing nature into the cash nexus risks treating the use values it provides as fungible with those from services or industrialization, forgetting that ‘ecosystem services’ are not all fungible, for they are not all replaceable. There is no correct price possible for use of the world as a sink for carbon dioxide if the world enters a runaway heating spiral (Duncan, 1996).

Nature-based solutions are thus (flawed) technical interventions, operating within a social logic of commodification and exploitation which the

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12. Here I draw on Marini’s theory (1973) of super-exploitation as producing the under-reproduction of peripheral labour; pollution and carbon dioxide emissions and their effects can lead to the under-reproduction of the environment which manifests itself in society as shortened life spans, etc.

HDR 2020 upholds. The types of agents and actions envisioned as capable of contributing to some form of decentralized control of these ‘nature-based solutions’ are limited to ‘participation’ and ‘local communities’, words which do not elucidate the social context or shifts in the class structure necessary for communities — inherently internally differentiated — to participate in development (p. 185). Similarly, women’s ‘extensive knowledge of their communities’ is invoked (p. 189) without examining women’s poor access to land and the agrarian question of gender as it interacts with that issue. Such praising of de-contextualized knowledge sidesteps the power dynamics which limit the capacity of poor women to contribute to preserving non-human nature (Ayeb and Saad, 2013; Ossome and Naidu, 2021). Finally, the Report’s seeming acceptance of agroecological techniques avoids mentioning agrarian reform (p. 194), nor does it mention how agroecological flourishing requires a larger framework of national development planning. That is, the silences embedded in the HDR 2020 around fundamental structural shifts in property speak: those silences announce the preservation of large-scale private property.

### Capitalist and Non-capitalist Ecological Damages

The other strategy the HDR 2020 uses to blunt the criticism of the historically unique role of capitalism, including colonialism and imperialism, in ecological devastation is to separate out national development efforts into discrete and comparable units (see McMichael, 1990). The Report addresses the anti-capitalist challenge only in passing, and only as part of a larger discussion of theories of the Anthropocene (p. 54). It considers the argument that ‘capitalist modes of production... [and] longstanding historical legacies of colonization’ are the core makers of ecological dislocation (*ibid.*), but demurs, claiming the problem is industrialization, the taproot of the Anthropocene (pp. 31–33, 54). It implicitly deploys a Millian method of comparison: if the common denominator between capitalist and non-capitalist development is industrialization and damage to the environment, then it follows that the Anthropocene (as general approach) and industrialization and broken norms are the common taproot of damage to non-human nature.<sup>13</sup>

The HDR 2020 follows a great deal of the literature, including that of the IPCC, in equating emissions linked to state-socialist and planned economies with those from capitalist economies. This approach is problematic, and fails to understand colonialism (Patnaik and Patnaik, 2016: 195). First, colonialism was part of historical capitalism (Patnaik and Patnaik, 2021). Indeed, colonialism and neo-colonialism have meant widespread denial of peripheral self-determination, inducing a corresponding need for self-defence.

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13. This contrasts with an eco-socialist approach based on controlling industrialization while eliminating capitalism.

Rupturing with the colonial legacy demanded national liberation movements, and the post-colonial states had to carry out national development in conditions not of their choosing: in particular, the burden of defensive industrialization and attendant pollution, including carbon dioxide emissions. Second, HDR 2020 and the broader literature do not engage with the social-political origins of emissions pathways. Equating the emissions of Annex 1 developed countries with those of the former Soviet bloc and China equates industrialization linked to the North's historical abrogation of other countries' sovereignty with industrialization meant to resist that abrogation, since the USSR and China took resource-intensive development paths in large measure because of defensive industrialization (Kontorovich, 2015; Kueh, 2006: 708). Positivistic emissions accounting sidesteps the fact that not all industrializations are the same.

Second, HDR 2020 does not theorize the ecological effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Endogenous Soviet or Chinese primary accumulation and the (settler-) colonialism and slave trade which subtended Euro-American primary accumulation (Bagchi, 2008; Rodney, 1972/2018) were not kindred processes. The former entailed local ecological damage and social costs and benefits, and in China, pre-1978 sustainable agricultural methods contributed to popular development (Ajl, 2021c; Schmalzer, 2016). The latter entailed global damages, from carbon dioxide emissions to deforestation to soil erosion. In this respect, HDR 2020's positivism follows in the train of much contemporary carbon accounting, which tends to paint colonial and neo-colonial responsibility for ecological disaster in brighter colours than it deserves. Such calculations seldom outright deny the impact of colonialism, but they frequently downplay it. Overseas colonial emissions, for example, are attributed to the post-colonial states which inherited their territories (Evans, 2021), even though the value which accrued from such production systematically flowed to the core through colonial drain (Gordon, 2010; Patnaik, 2017). Land-based emissions linked to deforestation for soy and palm oil are counted in territorial terms, and attributed to Brazil and Indonesia (Henders et al., 2015), rather than consumption-based terms. This is in part because of measuring difficulties (Bhan et al., 2021), and in part because metrics are ideological, and decisions about how to allocate resources to create them are political. Reliance on these metrics, then, becomes the norm in the scientific literature, including of the most critical kind (Hickel, 2020). They are symptomatic of most of that literature's non-interest in using the national question to organize thinking around the climate crisis and the developmental crisis more broadly (Moyo et al., 2013).

Although HDR 2020 clearly and repeatedly states that through colonialism, 'most benefits were concentrated in the colonial power', particularly the flow of 'natural resources for the colonial power', adding 'the differentiated dynamics in capital accumulation, in turn, affect people's wellbeing across generations' (p. 75), this does not lead to any particular vision of anti-colonial or post-colonial development. Indeed, recognition of the

colonial legacy can play the role of supplicants confessing their sins in church and praying for forgiveness, a mechanism to accept what is by now an overwhelming civil society discourse which points out that emissions are highly uneven North to South and within the North, correlating to incomes (Gore, 2020). Oblique recognition of this fact is present in nearly every single report dealing with climate change (CFLI, 2019: 14, 62). As the US climate negotiator Todd Stern stated in 2009: ‘We absolutely recognize our historic role in putting emissions in the atmosphere, up there, but the sense of guilt or culpability or reparations, I just categorically reject that’ (Reuters, 2009).

### WHOSE DEVELOPMENT?

This Assessment considers there to be a second set of problems in HDR 2020, related to an interlocked cluster of arguments and concepts in terms of who is to carry through the Report’s proposals. Repeatedly, the Report uses the idiom of ‘agency’ and ‘voices’. In fact, the word agency appears over 100 times in HDR 2020. Yet the Report lacks clear criteria for whose ‘agency’ is respected and ‘supported’ and whose ‘voices are heard’ (p. 68). What if certain ‘voices’ say things which run against the grain of HDR 2020 recommendations, and what can we infer about which Third World voices are audible in the Report and which are suppressed? Whose agency is suppressed is largely a deliberate decision: HDR 2020 ‘organizes its recommendations not around actors but around mechanisms’ (p. 9), a choice sidestepping the power dynamics of envisioning specific mechanisms. Such a ‘view ... from nowhere’ is ‘truly fantastic, distorted, and irrational’ (Haraway, 1988: 589, 587), and avoids the issue that different nations and classes — two terms which do not enter HDR 2020 — may voice very distinct programmatic agendas. Nor is the Report fully consistent in this approach, since certain ‘voices’, for example those of Indigenous peoples, do receive a circumscribed hearing.

Moreover, the Report does not understand ‘agency’ and ‘voices’ in relation to the contemporary North–South or core–periphery divide. Yet discussions about ecology, climate and development have always produced extremely sharp tensions between the North and South,<sup>14</sup> along with attempts to disperse South–South solidarity and common fronts, which prevent any possibility that such fronts could find support and solidarity in the North and declaw the most radical demands coming from such fronts. What happened to the New International Economic Order (NIEO) is emblematic

14. See the ‘Cocoyoc Declaration’, adopted by the participants in the UNEP/UNCTAD symposium ‘Patterns of Resource Use, Environment and Development Strategies’, held in Cocoyoc, Mexico, 8–12 October 1974. This was one of the first major Southern ecological declarations which put the politics of national development front and centre.

(McFarland, 2015). Economism has dominated Northern perspectives on development, the climate–development nexus included. Accordingly, perspectives which prioritized politics, including the politics of sovereign development, have frequently clashed sharply or have been and continue to be suppressed from the climate literature. Post-2015, Third World anti-imperialist or anti-systemic perspectives, particularly from radicalized Latin American states, are absent from the great majority of visible proposals. Meanwhile, Southern theory tends to enter the discussion only through theories of ‘extractivism’ which run against the grain of NIEO/UNCTAD/Cuban lineages of dissent linked to seeing the terms of trade and unequal exchange as fundamental battle grounds. They in part displace the ‘debate over politics and policy from North to South’ (Moyo et al., 2013: 99). In this case, the ‘green’ discussion does not wholly displace political debate from North to South but suppresses historical and present-day dimensions of value flows and worldwide accumulation to engineer a debate which precludes consideration of forces or programmes advocating for stopping and potentially securing reparations for the social and ecological consequences of those flows. This has clear programmatic relevance. If the normative horizon of HDR 2020 is nature-based human development, the Report must acknowledge rather than silence the obstacles faced by distinct groups in their efforts to reach that horizon. Yet the Report does not articulate mechanisms of empowerment based on resource transfers from the global North to the global South, within the North, or through recalibration of the pricing mechanism to remedy unequal exchange, a critical but not the sole contemporary vector of modern-day dependency and value transfer (Dussel, 1988). Nor, for that matter, does it mention that contemporary Southern commodity exporters will suffer uniquely if hydrocarbon production is shut down without special targeted support or reparations (Perry, 2020).

In this way, although the Report acknowledges colonialism, it does not dedicate much space to the demands of post-colonial states as they have related to the environment, or to the restorative programmes advanced by those states within the international arena and international environmental discussion. In contrast, many peripheral climate proposals invoke historical underdevelopment as having constituted the ‘starting point’ for contemporary efforts, and as a justification for North–South reparations. Furthermore, some Southern or colonized peoples and territories call for measures beyond or perpendicular to territorial-judicial decolonization (political sovereignty). Some, for example, call for plural sovereignties (Lightfoot, 2021) or ‘indigenization’ of the state (Linares, 2011: 122). Others build upon national liberation calls for national control and planning over productive resources (Cabral, 1979) towards ‘the decolonization of the atmosphere through the reduction and absorption of their emissions’ (PWCCC, 2010), including the repayment of climate debt in the amount of 6 per cent of OECD and ‘transition’ GNP, as part of the repayment of the colonial debt (ibid.). Yet without clarifying the nature of colonization and acknowledging

the demands of those injured by it, the most massive — and most politically explosive — remedies for colonial-capitalism can be ruled out a priori.

Indeed, the history of demands from the periphery for common but differentiated responsibility to include reparations is enfolded in the Report's rather vague phrase that at Copenhagen, 'disagreements on key issues and deep mistrust led to a flawed and weak deal' (p. 179). This refusal to take seriously the material impact of settler-colonialism and colonization writ large (Farrell et al., 2021) does not make HDR 2020 exceptional, but rather the norm across climate resolutions of types one, two and three (Mitropoulos, 2020). Gestures towards US settler-colonial history now appear in a number of arenas, from the climate plans of US Democrat Elizabeth Warren<sup>15</sup> and US Representative Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez<sup>16</sup> to Naomi Klein's (2019) case for a 'Green New Deal'. However, they appear devoid of commitment to struggles for decolonization within that specific arena, especially concerning land ownership, or even alongside dismissal of the Zimbabwean agrarian reform which redistributed land from wealthy white colonial settlers to poor Black people (Selwyn, 2021). Contemporary debate is even more striking in that when it comes to internationalism, it is a reversion: in 2009, Naomi Klein could call climate debt 'among the smartest and most promising' proposals for dealing with the climate crisis (Klein, 2009). Neither she nor other visible climate writers have seriously emphasized climate debt in recent discussions or national liberation, although it has been brought to their attention.

If the 'voices' of Third World states like Bolivia, Venezuela and Zimbabwe are excluded on non-transparent grounds from HDR 2020, one set of voices receives abundant attention: that of the Indigenous. The Report acknowledges the role of the Indigenous in biodiversity conservation and broader climate solutions, and 'indigenous peoples' right to self-determination while allowing the state to mediate and solve conflicts' (pp. 34, 93). Yet here, too, the HDR 2020 suppresses politics, largely reducing the Indigenous question to assimilation of their technics. Yet who counts as Indigenous, the scope of Indigenous rights, and how to implement those rights have all been severely politically contested. The Report simply ignores all these issues and refrains from defining Indigenous (see Sanders, 1999). Controlling 'who' is Indigenous has been a mechanism of state oppression and denial of self-determination: restricting its scope and preventing Indigenous communities from deciding who is a member of their collectivity (McMillan and McRae, 2015; Paradies, 2006) has been a mechanism of controls. And there are complexities involved in applying the term in countries which themselves suffered colonial invasion (Burman, 2003).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the HDR 2020's touchstone, the United

15. See: <https://elizabethwarren.com/plans/climate-change>

16. See: <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/legislation/climate>

17. Thanks to Sakshi for references and clarification.

Nations 2007 ‘Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People’ (OHCHR, 2007), was purged of enforcement mechanisms — a set of victories for the forces which sought to declaw Indigenous struggles.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the Report allows for Indigenous self-determination but not if Indigenous peoples do not want to be part of the state, sharply circumscribing self-determination and shearing it from more expansive claims. The HDR 2020’s position that the state should solve conflicts rules out decolonization even though, especially in settler states, colonialism is a central framework for conceptualizing oppression. Some radical nationalist Indigenous forces located in the geographical United States call for decolonization (The Red Nation, 2021) and for ‘states to return and restore lands, territories, waters, forests, oceans, sea ice and sacred sites that have been taken from Indigenous Peoples’.<sup>19</sup> Palestinian national liberation is a priori ruled out if self-determination must pass through the prism of the settler-colonial state which dispossessed them. Furthermore, there is no non-normative way to adjudicate which ‘Indigenous voices’ ought to gain a hearing. For example, as Whyte writes, ‘Voices in the Indigenous climate justice movement call attention to how colonialism and capitalist economics facilitate the role of rich, industrialized countries and transnational corporations in bringing about risky climate change impacts’ (Whyte, 2016: 96, italics added). Clearly, HDR 2020 is uninterested in the perspectives of Indigenous people who are critical of capitalism and colonialism, and therefore such ‘voices’ are not represented in the Report.

Additionally, the overall use of ‘Indigenous’ raises serious questions with respect to the implementation of nature-based solutions. ‘Indigenous’ is posited as a beneficent force in a way which recapitulates colonial mythologies of the ‘Noble savage’ living in comity with nature.<sup>20</sup> HDR 2020 effectively presents the Indigenous as outside history, including the history of class struggle. Elevating the Indigenous while sidestepping the power dynamics which shape their lives clears the way for continuing such dynamics (Curley, 2021). Such reports do not recognize that the category ‘Indigenous’ envelops, on the one hand, upper-class neo-colonial forces (Curley, 2018) and, on the other, working pastoralists, peasants, forest dwellers, or other semi-proletarianized forces who use nature to secure needed use-values, which means they can protect socially useful nature (Prasad, 2019). ‘Community-based’ conservancies across Africa, for example, have reinforced ‘local economic inequalities’ while talk about consultation with the Indigenous has not translated into policy (Kashwan et al., 2021: 7ff). On a larger scale, the labour of biodiversity conservation, if poorly compensated,

18. On this point, see Face (2013). I thank Chris George for this reference.

19. See ‘The Anchorage Declaration’, agreed by participants in the ‘Indigenous Peoples’ Global Summit on Climate Change’, Anchorage, Alaska, 24 April 2009. <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2009/smsn/ngo/168.pdf>

20. In fact, this traces back to a larger romanticization of undifferentiated Indigenous populations within some contemporary settler-colonial studies. For discussion, see Ajl (forthcoming).

could lead to a new international division of labour wherein the world's weakest are faced with the burden of poorly compensated preservation of nature, or simply the extraction of their knowledge ripped from its social and institutional soil (Klenk et al., 2017). Furthermore, through lack of access to sufficient land and the non-existence of peripheral national development projects, the Indigenous poor can serve accumulation on a world scale as a reserve army of labour. Finally, 'Indigenous' as a category, with an emphasis on the 'practices of indigenous peoples' (p. 200) paired with an emphasis on 'self-determination' (p. 202) for the Indigenous but not for Southern nations, can serve a balkanizing agenda, fracturing peripheral state sovereignty. The Report itself does not call for this, but proliferating claims of settler-colonialism within non-Western nation-states like China may be instrumentalized to serve this agenda.

In focusing on mechanisms or more broadly a 'type' of change shorn of 'who' is to do the changing, HDR 2020 is far from exceptional. Much Northern climate literature, including the progressive sort listed under 'type three', as mentioned above, refrains from theorizing, naming, or legitimizing the social subjects capable of forcing global just transition. They paint a landscape of change without subjects. The dominant IPCC, grey and radical academic literature focuses on movers of history delimited to the core states, with a limited recognition of the role of global Indigenous forces, in ways discussed above.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in mainstream or progressive climate criticism, it has literally been within the realm of fiction (Robinson, 2020) that forces like the Zero Budget Natural Farming Peasant Movement (Khadse et al., 2018) launch an India-wide agroecological revolution, or the Ansar Allah-inspired drones become agents driving systemic social-ecological change (see Upadhyay, 2020). And tellingly, they do so as mere background, local colour against which bleached figures of the North plan to save the future.

Finally, 'mechanisms' of change are delimited in the sense of presuming non-interaction of states in the international system, especially through violation of state sovereignty. However, the right to development articulated in the 1972 'Founex Report on Development and Environment' (de Almeida et al., 1972) is realized in non-ideal socio-political conditions, including the need for defence against external aggression. The right to (ecological) development requires recognition of an anterior political right: the right to pursue national liberation and national self-defence — implicitly erased in carbon accounting which draws empiricist equations between Western and Soviet or Chinese emissions. In a related vein, in addition to the flattening jargon of 'stakeholders', HDR 2020 uses a deliberative and consociational model to envision sustainability, a 'process of debate and inclusive deliberation'. Yet different 'stakeholders' may be part of a zero-sum game: countries applying versus those suffering under unilateral coercive sanctions, external warfare

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21. Thanks to Paris Yeros for bringing this point to my attention.



or colonization (p. 35). If groups face lack of political sovereignty, failing to name the lack eliminates groups seeking sovereignty from subjectivity and inclusion within green climate plans. They become a political externality, simply unable to have their 'voices' included, although it is difficult to imagine that a Southern state could carry out any form of popular ecological development programme when buffeted by Northern intervention. On the other side of the geopolitical coin, there is no suggestion of any positive 'agency' for Northern actors in defending peripheral national sovereignty.

## CONCLUSION

The iron core of the HDR 2020 is 'empowering people and giving them enhanced agency' (p. 41). The Report explicitly draws on Amartya Sen's understanding of an agent as one 'whose achievements can be judged in terms of his or her own values and goals' (p. 93). Yet to empower people implies that they have been disempowered. To understand disempowerment and how to challenge it, we need a theory which clarifies the structural relations which need to change to achieve a certain set of goals. And such a theory should clarify how agency, or collective human action, can achieve a set of goals which involve changing or eliminating the institutions which deny the realization of a certain set of values. It is inconsistent, not to say meaningless, to endorse the granting of agency while ignoring the fact that agency is only legible in relationship to specific agents' values and goals, which may involve eliminating corporations and exploitation. The HDR 2020 disdains the notion that insertion into global value relations is the major determinant of power and powerlessness in a world of uneven accumulation, and does not consider monopoly capitalism, imperialism and corporate power as institutions which themselves inherently disempower people and create injustice. Indeed, despite HDR 2020's recognition of unequal access to ownership over the productive apparatus, it does not call for changing that system. The word 'stakeholders', which emerged from business literature and means 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives' (Freeman, 1984/2010, cited in Eskerod, 2020: 1), appears 18 times without definition. Its use implies turning capitalism and monopoly firms into permanent features of the social-ecological landscape. In fact, the Report merely restricts itself to a concern with excessive monopoly. Accordingly, its calls for 'giving' people agency lack substance, because human agency occurs precisely against structures which limit such agency. HDR 2020 massages this tension by claiming to organize recommendations around 'mechanisms' rather than subjects or agents (p. 9). However, this explanation is insufficient and indeed inconsistent because voices and agents abound in HDR 2020 — but not all, and Southern states in particular are absent. It seems reasonable to interpret such irreconcilable contradictions as linked to the inherent impossibility of harnessing forces

with fundamentally antagonistic agendas, for example Indigenous peoples fighting for treaty rights and for their unceded land or nations struggling for climate debt reparations against settler-colonial nations and those which benefited from enclosing atmospheric space — often the same states. The HDR 2020 is far from unique in having this blind spot. Indeed, some of the proposals from the third, progressive type of climate proposals have been likewise loath to name specific agents and their concrete proposals. They have been almost uniformly disinterested in ecological decolonization or the possibilities of nature-based carbon dioxide drawdown based on self-managed agroecological farming and pasturing. They are simply silent on the national question, and national development planning through nationally or regionally interlinked and auto-centred development, especially through an ecological popular agrarianism (Ajl, 2021c; Basha, 2022). Indeed, position three, the social democratic solution, often lambasts any attempts to rupture with the status quo for not fulfilling a ‘democratic’ mandate (Amin, 2009; Moyo and Yeros, 2007), or for ecological ‘extraction’ (Svampa, 2012), or discusses ecological crisis as the result of pure internal mismanagement (Malm, 2017; see also Ajl, 2019).<sup>22</sup> Such thinking in effect delegitimizes any attempts to put domestic productive forces under national or popular control and lends itself to the summoning of hazy dreamscapes marked by development or eco-socialism as mere castles in the clouds. This is alignment by virtue of effect rather than affect. I am not sure how important is the difference.

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22. Claims of the relationship between drought and the events in Syria have also been seriously overplayed (Selby et al., 2017).

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