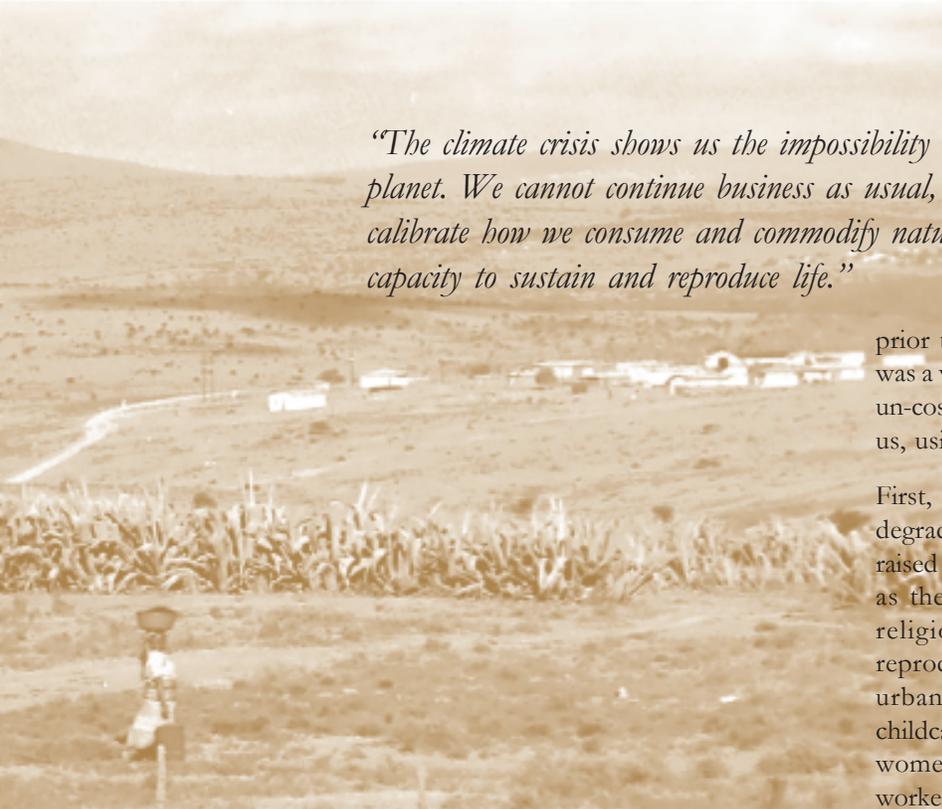


we've got male

# Reproducing Life as Guide to Climate Politics

By Patrick Bond



*“The climate crisis shows us the impossibility of infinite growth on a finite planet. We cannot continue business as usual, but we must radically recalibrate how we consume and commodify nature, given the limits to our capacity to sustain and reproduce life.”*

prior to Nelson Mandela’s election in 1994, was a woman. She provided three hidden and un-costed subsidies, as feminists quickly taught us, using the idea of the “care economy”.

First, in rural Bantustans - the ecologically-degraded apartheid “homelands” - women raised the migrant worker through childhood, as the state was non-existent or merely a religious mission station. Household reproduction was never subsidised, unlike urban residents who had access to state childcare and school systems. Second, rural women were compelled to look after sick workers who were tossed back home until they recovered due to the lack of health insurance as offered by states and companies in the West after workers battled long and hard. Finally, when the male worker was too old to work and returned to the Bantustans without adequate pension support, the women again took on the responsibility for care-giving.

Of course, it’s not just a matter of apartheid capitalism. The reproduction of global labour power has been universally subsidised by women’s unpaid work. But these days matters look more like the extreme South African system, with state and capital lowering the “social wage” and dismantling social policy gains that have been achieved through decades of struggle. This process extends as well into reproductive health and rights that

## Homeland within a Homeland?

The bantustans are territories where black communities were concentrated particularly during the Apartheid era. One of these bantustans is Ciskei that was integrated into South Africa in 1994, despite attempts of becoming independent.

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This is what Nicola Bullard of Focus on the Global South pointed out at a recent conference in Johannesburg, where the audience was reminded of the same approach that feminists brought to Southern African political economy many years ago. This approach suddenly made sense, when writ large, moving from our region to the planetary scale.

During the 1960s to 1970s, a series of South African male intellectuals argued that the apartheid system or the systematic discrimination against black people, was rooted in the corporations’ need for migrant labour, fusing race-class oppression. Behind the typical black male worker who laboured in the mines throughout the first century of gold mining,

feminist movements have consistently advocated.

Neoliberal policies and corporate power have resulted in labour outsourcing, casualisation and informalisation. With life more precarious as a result, women are the safety net for household reproduction, in addition to being the most vulnerable and disposable of all labour sectors.

But they have also been the driving force in resisting this process here, overcoming micropatriarchy within communities and leading most of our grassroots campaigns on issues such as water decommodification, access to AIDS medicines and other successful strategies to enlarge or defend the commons and sustain life.

As the world recession spreads, global capitalism is becoming much more like apartheid: predatory against women and the environment. Drawing on evidence from Southern Africa, Rosa Luxemburg demonstrated this tendency in her own analysis of imperialism back in 1913: “Accumulation of capital periodically bursts out in crises and spurs capital on to a continual extension of the market. Capital cannot accumulate without the aid of non-capitalist organisations.”

Increasingly, such non-capitalist life arrangements rely upon women and the communities that they guide. And yet on the other hand, Luxemburg continued, capitalism cannot “tolerate their continued existence side by side with itself. Only the continuous and progressive disintegration of non-capitalist organisations makes accumulation of capital possible.”

Luxemburg would not have been surprised at how the destructive force of capital drives men into migrancy, spreads HIV/AIDS and causes rising domestic violence. Such disintegration is always contested by women’s personal strengths and mutual aid systems as well as other anti-/non-capitalist reactions, plus campaigns – successful in South Africa (unique

on the continent) – to guarantee reproductive healthcare, including the right to a safe abortion.

Teresa Brennan made the link from the household scale to climate change, the biggest crisis women will face in the coming decades. She argued that, like the need to end Bantustan migrant labour systems, rearranging spatial and reproduction arrangements is crucial to ending the unfair role of women in subsidising capitalism’s destructive irrationality.

In her 2003 book, *Globalisation and Its Terrors: Daily Life in the West*, Brennan wrote, “The closer to home one’s energy and raw material sources are, the more one’s reproduction costs stay in line: paid and domestic labour will be less exploited, the environment less depleted.” The need now to limit the “distance over which natural resources can be obtained” is obvious given how shipping, trucking and air transport contribute to carbon emissions.

That is why Bullard’s arguments are critical if one believes (as a few neoliberals insist) that globalisation of industry has helped break up feudal-patriarchal relations, drawing women out of oppression into Mexican maquiladore or Bangkok sweatshops. Such export-led growth is now an increasingly untenable “development” strategy, and in any case always generated extreme uneven development, drawing on the women’s care economy for its hidden subsidies.

Bullard likened the climate negotiations to those of the World Trade Organisation (WTO): “By and large, countries are defending their narrow economic interests and the rich countries in particular are trying to grab the last slice of the atmospheric pie.”

Although the Kyoto Protocol is deeply flawed, especially the low targets and reliance on market mechanisms, Bullard asserted that attempts by the US to get rid of Kyoto are dangerous. “It is critical to retain the rich countries’ legally binding commitment in any future agreement and any alternative that could emerge at this stage would be much worse.”



She broke down the narrative at Copenhagen into three discourses: business as usual, catastrophism, and climate justice. The first comes from business and most Northern governments while the second is advanced by some smaller and vulnerable countries as well as many NGOs. Catastrophism also “leads to dangerous last-gasp strategies such as geo-engineering, nuclear and carbon markets.”

Third, climate justice is supported by a widespread civil society movement launched in 2007 at the Bali negotiations. It now includes the Latin American governments of Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador and Venezuela.

Bullard explained, “If you look at what’s on the table and the balance of forces, whatever comes out of Copenhagen will be bad. On the other hand, with Copenhagen’s failure, there are a lot of possibilities for shifting the discourse.” She reminded us of the demands of Climate Justice Now! for restoring planetary sanity:

- The North must repay its “ecological debt” to the South
- There is a need to subordinate climate strategies to human rights agreements, especially those that protect women and indigenous people
- A moratorium on fossil fuel
- A just transition for workers
- Unconditioned public finance under control of the “creditors”
- Open-source global commons on sharing climate-friendly technology and innovations

Feminists working on climate change are connecting the dots between these various

Sources:

*Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice. (2009). “Looking Both Ways: Women’s Lives at the Crossroads of Reproductive Justice and Climate Justice.” URL: [http://www.reproductivejustice.org/ACRJ\\_Looking\\_Both\\_Ways.pdf](http://www.reproductivejustice.org/ACRJ_Looking_Both_Ways.pdf)*

*Brennan, Teresa. (2003). Globalisation and Its Terrors: Daily Life in the West. New York: Routledge.*

*Bullard, Nicola. (2009). “The State of Climate Politics.” Speech delivered at a Rosa Luxemburg Foundation conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, 19 November.*

*Luxemburg, Rosa. (2003)[1913]. Accumulation of Capital. New York: Routledge.*

oppressions, to warn how in times of crisis, their opponents are emboldened. In a major new report, “Looking Both Ways”, the group, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, document Hurricane Katrina’s deeper political damage: “Following a disaster, women of colour – particularly African American women, low-income women and immigrant women - are routinely targeted as burdens of the state and the cause of over population, environmental degradation, poverty, crime and economic instability.”

It has never been more important to draw together eco-feminist and eco-socialist insights to link issues, analyses, challenges and alliance-building efforts. There is no more crucial period than the aftermath of a failed elite process in Copenhagen.

Bullard teased the NGO-driven “Tck tck tck” campaign because it asks plaintively for an ambitious, fair and binding deal in Copenhagen – without asking what that deal really means. “If you believe in the ticking of the clock, you’ll do anything. So stop listening to the ticking of the clock and start listening to the voices of the people, especially women!” ■

**Patrick Bond** has authored and coedited books. Among them are *Climate Change, Carbon Trading and Civil Society (2009)*, *Looting Africa (2006)*, *Talk Left, Walk Right (2006)* and *Elite Transition (2005)*. In service to the new South African government from 1994-2002, he produced more than a dozen policy papers, including the Reconstruction and Development Programme. He has also lectured at more than 50 universities across the world. Patrick earned his doctorate in economic geography under the supervision of David Harvey at Johns Hopkins in 1993.