

June 22, 2022

Colonial Roots of the Climate Crisis

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The climate crisis can only be understood by centring the role colonialism played in naturalising a violent ideology of modernity and progress.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Amitav Ghosh brings his literary talents once again to the topic of climate change. While his first book about climate change, *The Great Derangement*, starts to untangle the relationship between history, politics, colonialism, and the climate crisis, it is only in this new work that Ghosh's explication takes its full-throated form. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, he describes the continuities between the climate crisis and the long history of European colonialism in its various forms in Asia and North America (68). Indeed, the central thesis in this book is that the current climate crisis can only be understood fully by centring the role that colonialism played in naturalising the rapacious extraction of resources, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an elite few, and an ideology of modernity and progress grounded in violence against many human and non-human beings.

Unusually for a book about climate change, Ghosh begins the book in 1621; in Selamon, a tiny village in the Banda archipelago, a small cluster of islands in the Maluku region of the Indian Ocean. The Banda islands' unique ecology flourished as a result of the islands' volcanic activity and the marine environment. For several centuries, the archipelago was the only place in the world where the nutmeg tree grew. The tree's produce, the spices nutmeg and mace, travelled far and wide, reaching India, China, and Europe, as evidenced by archaeological findings and their mention in historical texts and local folklore. For over a thousand years, the spice trade, traversing Africa and Eurasia, created routes and networks across the oceans.

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Spices like nutmeg, mace, cloves, and pepper are ubiquitous in our kitchens and personal care products today, but this was not always the case since they only grew in a few select places in small volumes. Ghosh describes spices in the 1600s as one of the original, "primordial" global commodities, traded for their luxury value. They were valued for not only their culinary uses but also their medicinal properties. Doctors in Elizabethan England decreed that nutmeg cured the plague. At one point of time, nutmeg was so expensive that a handful of the spice could buy a house or a ship (9).

Commerce in these spices was tightly controlled by various powerful actors spread across the trade network. Eventually, tired of not having control over spice production, European monarchs sent navigators to sail over the world and find the source of the nutmeg. Called the "space race of its time" (10), the efforts to sail across the seas and gain control of the lands where nutmeg grew caused the colonisation of the Banda islands and the genocide of the Bandanese people, vividly described by Ghosh in the opening chapters of the book.

Ghosh draws a direct line from the 17th century global trade in spices to the contemporary global trade in fossil fuel energy sources like oil and gas, the combustion of which drives the climate crisis. He reminds us that fossil fuels, one of the key commodities that everyone is dependent on today, are nothing but buried botanical matter acted on by time. But more insightfully, Ghosh points out that the same maritime choke points that controlled the flow of spices also control the transportation of energy around the world today.

Herein lies one of the central ideas of the book: that we are as dependent on plants and botanical matter from the earth today as we were in the 17th century, despite the myth of modernity that we have transcended our need for natural products, instead depending on human-made things for our survival.

Ghosh exhorts the reader to understand global inaction on climate change as a direct consequence of the economic and political status quo protecting the current geopolitical order built upon the fossil-fuel energy system.

Drawing parallels with the way global wealth and power was consolidated in the previous centuries by controlling the trade of spices, Ghosh argues that US strategic dominance and role as a global hegemon is due to its role as "guarantor of global energy flows" (106).

The geopolitical might of the US navy, the largest oceanic force in the world, is used to secure global flows of energy, leading Ghosh to remind readers that historians have called the American military “a global oil protection service” (p 106). While none of the Indian Ocean choke points are directly governed by Western powers, the American “Empire of Bases” (109) that extends all over the world keeps an eye on crucial energy infrastructure. Furthermore, the petrodollar system that has been described as the “hidden hand of American hegemony” (106) ensures that oil is traded internationally in US dollars.

Arguing that the story of conquest, violence, and plunder — conveniently relegated to history — continues today in different guises, Ghosh exhorts the reader to understand global inaction on climate change as a direct consequence of the economic and political status quo protecting the current geopolitical order built upon the fossil-fuel energy system.

Ghosh points out that it is unsurprising that Western powers who benefit from upholding the current fossil fuel regime are reluctant to decarbonise the global energy system. In contrast, Ghosh argues, countries like China and India have more freely embraced renewable energy technologies like solar and wind as they do not gain from the current geopolitical setup shored up by fossil fuels, the American military, and the petrodollar. His arguments regarding fossil fuels being “the foundation on which the Anglosphere’s strategic hegemony rests” (110) are well taken. China and India have indeed well and truly embraced renewable energy. But the book provides only a limited discussion of what this means for decarbonising the global energy system amidst China and India’s continued reliance on coal and oil for their economic welfare.

The book is a timely and urgent call for taking action on climate change and transforming our energy systems to facilitate a switch from fossil fuels to renewable. However, Ghosh’s belief in the promise of renewable energy to upend contemporary power hierarchies in a geopolitical sense seems optimistic. He argues that since renewable energy can be generated everywhere, it is less susceptible to elite control and capture. However, while the renewable energy itself can be generated everywhere and does not need to be shipped around the world, the infrastructure to render renewable energy usable (like solar panels, batteries, lithium, and so on) can still be subject to similar forms of control.

Ways of seeing

Ghosh’s writing is beautiful; a vivid example is his description of the different ways to see a nutmeg. The modern gaze sees an object of science and commerce. For the Bandanese, while the nutmeg indeed was an object of trade and commerce, it was also a protagonist in stories and songs. For Ghosh, the nutmeg is like a tiny planet in the palm of his hand (98). He is able to think of it as a maker of history. It is only when he uses the name given by the Linnaean system, *Myristica fragrans*, “the nut becomes subdued and muted — reduced, as it was intended by the Linnaean system to the status of an inert resource” (98).

Elite environmentalism, which colluded with militarism and colonialism to legitimise the eviction of Indigenous people from their lands, is too easily co-opted by right-wing fundamentalists.

Divided into 19 distinct essays with connecting threads weaving through the whole book, *The Nutmeg’s Curse* lays out several intriguing ideas related to climate change. The first key idea that animates the book is the conceptualisation of various non-human characters as agents of history, and as having narrative power. At various points in the book Ghosh describes the way smallpox, nutmeg, volcanos, opium, clover, and the coronavirus have shown history-making powers.

For Malukans, for instance, “volcanos are makers of history as well as tellers of stories” (32). This kind of non-mechanistic and vitalist ways of seeing the world were frowned upon both by scientists and religious clerics (both Islamic and Christian) in the Banda islands (33). For the scientists and formal religious practitioners, seeing the world as vital was akin to superstition. As the book describes it, across the world whether in rural England, or North America, or Maluka, vitalistic views of the world were pushed to the margins and superseded by mechanistic views of the world. This is how the concept of inert Nature was created, which allowed for the extreme extractive logics that we today see rampant. In Ghosh’s view, this conceptual shift of seeing the world was “a basic tenet of what might be called “official modernity” (39).

Ghosh posits this shift from a vitalistic to mechanistic view of the world as intricately linked with European projects of colonialism and conquest. As Ghosh describes in the chapter *Monstrous Gaia*, scientists and soldiers in the late 19th century believed that vitalism and civilisation “were mutually exclusive.” This legitimated violence against Native Americans, leading to genocide and the erasure of native knowledge and practices, all in the name of civilisation.

This leads to the another key point that Ghosh describes, *terraforming*, the practice of renaming places and things to attempt to erase prior meanings of landscapes. The power of naming (and renaming) is key to severing old relationships to create new ones with landscapes.

It is interesting to note that contemporary Bandanese are not native to the islands. They were enslaved people brought to the islands after the Dutch massacred the Indigenous people of Banda. The new Bandanese people are a diverse group, but the spirits of Banda are autochthonous to the place. The Banda landscape retains its vitalistic qualities for its inhabitants until today, and present day Bandanese continue to be in relation to the place in non-mechanistic ways. The relationship of the Bandanese to the Banda islands refutes the eco-fascist ideas of blood and soil nationalists who believe that racial homogeneity and purity are essential to belonging. This leads to Ghosh's enchanting conclusion that the vitality of the place itself creates commonalities between the people who dwell in it, regardless of their origins (221).

Points of convergence

Ghosh concludes the book with a powerful call for a “politics of vitality” that bring together in solidarity the concerns of poor and Indigenous people all over the world. Elite environmentalism, which colluded with militarism and colonialism to legitimise the eviction of Indigenous people from their lands, is too easily co-opted by right-wing fundamentalists. Elite environmentalism originating in North America has left an imprint of anti-Indigenous orientation in many conservation organisations all over the world (225). Understandably, the poor and marginalised of the world view Western environmentalists with deep suspicion.

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In the case of India, the people with the closest ties to land, soils, forests, rivers, are Dalits and Adivasis, many of whom make their living in close relation to their environments. Drawing on environmental historian Mukul Sharma, Ghosh describes the way Dalits and Adivasis in India, like Indigenous peoples in other places in the world, see the Earth as alive and powerful, where the souls of ancestors live; in other words, in a vitalistic way. The logics of caste in India marginalise these ways of relating to the world, and substitute indigenous notions of vitalism with a concept of sacredness (grounded in upper-caste ideas of purity), which is dangerously co-opted by right-wing political projects. Under these logics, longstanding environmental protections are repealed for the benefit of corporations for energy, mining, and other infrastructure projects.

The Nutmeg's Curse warns us about the dangers of mysticism when mixed with exclusionary right-wing agendas. This follows the same pattern of logics as European colonialism. As Ghosh succinctly summarises it, whereas colonialism in India unfolded in different ways during the previous centuries, the contemporary policies enact logics of settler colonialism against Adivasis and Dalits who live in the most “resource-rich” parts of the country (231) mirroring the experience of Native people in North America.

In a departure from many other popular writers on climate change, Ghosh argues that fixing capitalism is simply not enough to solve the climate crisis. According to him, we need to get at the heart of inequality - racial, ethnic, national, economic, and the myriad ways in which these axes of inequality relate to each other. Furthermore, we need to find “points of convergence on Earth-related issues between people whose concerns, approaches, life experiences, and identities may otherwise be completely different” (228).

Ghosh's ideas on the politics of vitality are intriguing and compelling. I appreciate the extensive comparisons and connections made between the way colonialism impacted Indigenous societies in North America and Asia, and the consequences for the climate crisis we collectively face today. This book is well worth the read for anyone interested in more deeply understanding the causes of the contemporary climate crisis. *The Nutmeg's Curse* is to be applauded for evocatively describing the deep connections between colonialism and climate change.

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