Our old world, the one that we have inhabited for the last 12,000 years, has ended, even if no newspaper has yet printed its scientific obituary. — Mike Davis

There are a thousand distressing facts with which one might start an essay on climate and ecological breakdown. To take just a brief survey from the past month: in northern Afghanistan, massive flash flooding earlier this month claimed dozens of lives, while in Brazil some 540,000 have been displaced by unprecedented flooding that has left several cities under water. The world’s oceans have broken temperature records every single day this year, threatening critical foundations of life from biodiversity to weather-regulating currents. On the same day that figure was reported, a survey of the world’s climate scientists concluded that most believe the world is on track to “blast past” the 1.5°C limit within the next few years, setting us on a path towards a truly uncertain future. Indeed, figures from the Mauna Loa observatory released in early May show the highest-ever year-on-year increase in the concentration of atmospheric carbon. The last time carbon dioxide levels were so high was approximately 14 million years ago, when the Earth looked radically different. And all this in just the first few weeks of May.

I am often reluctant to rehearse facts like these, not least because they seem to flow these days in an unrelenting stream of suffering and fear. For many of us, decades of failure to act in a way that even begins to reflect the scale of the threat means that the steady flow of current and impending disasters, missed targets and advancing tipping points can be more paralysing than galvanising. Simply understanding the scale of the crisis we are facing provides us with few avenues or tools for confronting it and changing course.
Instead, to read coverage in much of the mainstream press is to get the impression that what we are up against is a purely scientific, technocratic problem whose resolution will be found in scientific and technological advancements that are always just a few years away: from an enormous parasol in the outer atmosphere to block the sun’s rays to “sustainable” jet fuel, and from electric SUVs to genetically engineered cows that pass low-emission gas. Admittedly, not all proposals are so outlandish, but whether it’s solar panels or EVs, technologies tend to be celebrated uncritically. All too often their links to harms of people and environment are ignored, and their place in the larger picture of a global economic transformation unconsidered.

Following this techno-optimistic discourse can feel like watching a bathtub about to overflow and brainstorming 100 ways to pull the plug while leaving the taps on full. Distinctly lacking is any effort to explain why the taps are flowing in the first place; who benefits from and controls their flow; and by extension, how to turn them off. Those with power often seem unwilling or unable to have a serious conversation about the systems, institutions and governing logics that both created and continue to drive the climate and ecological crisis in which we’re living. Increasingly, this refusal to engage with their innately political nature means we confront not only a breakdown of climatic and ecological stability, but a breakdown of faith in the power of collective action to grapple with it.

A climate without capitalism

It should be impossible to talk about climate and ecological crisis without talking about capitalism. The origins and evolution of capitalism can be followed from the enclosure of land and nature through the dawn of the fossil fuel age. Its explosive growth was fuelled by Britain’s factories, furnaces and engines of imperialism, and climate and ecological crisis along with it. Even modern democracy and its many limitations cannot be understood without the particularities of a fossil-fuelled capitalism. The parallel is striking between the explosive growth of the world economy under capitalism, the vast accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere, and the breathtaking pace of destruction of the biosphere. One only needs to look at a chart of rising emissions since the mid-century to understand that this period has been utterly unique, both in the nearly complete
global triumph of a single economic model and in the cultivation of the great ecological experiment in which we currently find ourselves.

Indeed, the so-called “Golden Age” of capitalism that followed two World Wars often goes by another name: the Great Acceleration. In the period between 1950 and 2010, roughly one billion cars were added to the roads; primary energy use more than quintupled; marine fishing rose from approximately 15 million tonnes to a high of over 70 million tonnes per year; and mankind became the single most important regulator of the chemical cycles governing and sustaining life, namely carbon, sulphur and nitrogen. Plastic production has risen from just two million tonnes in 1950 to over 450 million tonnes today, much of it discarded into waterways, where it will endure for hundreds of years. Humans and livestock now make up an astonishing 96 per cent of all mammalian life. Perhaps most striking: more than half of all manmade emissions have been produced in just the years since 1990, the year of the first IPCC assessment report.

It’s often pointed out (and usually in defence of capitalism) that this period also corresponded with major average advances in affluence and living standards, raising questions about whether these ecological-economic trade-offs are inescapable, or whether we can chart alternative means of creating shared abundance without threatening the life systems on which that abundance relies. Less often noted, however, is just how unequally these advances were, and remain, distributed. To just celebrate rising global average income, for instance, obscures the fact that a vastly disproportionate component of this increase accrued to the top one per cent of the global population, while close to half of humanity still lives in some degree of deprivation despite all we produce.[2] It also obscures the human toll of countless lives around the world on whose exploitation rising affluence, for some, has relied. As the authors who popularised the idea of the Great Acceleration themselves note in an update on their original paper: “[i]n 2010 the OECD countries accounted for 74 per cent of global GDP but only 18 per cent of the global population,” such that “most of the human imprint on the Earth System is coming from the OECD world.” As a result, profound global inequality enormously skews the distribution of the “benefits” so frequently cited.

Setting aside the debate over the meaning of these trendlines, however, it is important to acknowledge that correlation does not necessarily imply causation: in other words, the
weight of these relationships provides evidence, but not proof, that capitalism is to blame for climate and ecological crisis. Unfortunately for those of us who locate the root causes of these, as I do, in capitalism, the burden of proving this does not fall on defenders of the incumbent system, unjust as this may be. Because it is now the default, all that must happen for capitalism to remain in place is for us to do nothing. Instead, those of us fighting for a different, radically better future — whatever that may look like — must make our case and fight for it.

Open questions

Doing so requires clear answers to a host of difficult questions. Is the great and deadly ecological experiment in which we now reside the result of capitalism, something inherent to the mode of production itself — private ownership, accumulation, coordination via markets and the profit motive? The point is often made, for instance, that the USSR was a highly carbon-intensive economy. Is capitalism, then, merely incidental? Can it be disentangled from the era of unprecedented fossil fuel exploitation and ecological decline?

A related and perhaps even more urgent question is whether, regardless of the specific role capitalism has played in the origins of climate and ecological crisis, it is possible for capitalism to address these and secure a sustainable future — to become “green”? But this, too, raises its own set of questions. What does it mean, for instance, to “combat” or “address” or “tackle” (or any number of verbs deployed in this context) the climate crisis? To limit temperature rise to “well below” two degrees Celsius, the target of the Paris Agreement? As countless critics have argued, not least the residents and leaders of the most vulnerable nations, the two-degree target is hugely dangerous; so, too, is 1.5 degrees, at which the likelihood of several potentially catastrophic tipping points is considerably higher than now.

Moreover, to speak in terms of a global average temperature like two degrees, as though the climate crisis will unfurl in a manner remotely resembling a “global average”, is a gross misrepresentation. Two degrees means something very different to a middle-class resident of London than it does to a woman living in a coastal village in Bangladesh, or
a child living in poverty in Louisiana, or an Indigenous community in South America’s lithium triangle. Less clear still is who gets to decide what it means to have achieved our goals, how we do so, and who the “we” is. In a just world, it would be those most at risk of suffering the impacts or who have contributed least to creating them that would sit in the director’s chair. The overlap between these two groups is extensive, and neither has been given a real seat at the table.

Even if there were some unequivocal definition of what it means to have “tackled” this crisis in the form of a target, there are myriad ways that target could be met, many of which could be entirely abhorrent from the perspective of human rights, global justice, biodiversity loss or beyond. The adoption of green rhetoric and policies by leaders on the far right — from VOX in Spain to Marine le Pen’s National Rally — gives one window of insight into what such a future might look like. It is one defined by towering border walls, chain-link fences and the suppression of protest and dissent, in which the most vulnerable among the global population are left to face the ruin wrought by the world’s rich nations and powerful industries.

Nor is it even necessary to look as far as the far right. The Inflation Reduction Act, for example, is both an unprecedented leap in American political action on the climate crisis, as well as firmly oriented around undergirding profitable investments for the private sector and reasserting American economic dominance, irrespective of the impacts — human, ecological, economic and beyond — this may have at the global scale. To borrow the words of the late Mike Davis, at the end of the path currently being followed by the world’s liberal democracies is a future of “green and gated oases of permanent affluence on an otherwise stricken planet.”

No going back

Ultimately, that we are on track to fly past 1.5 degrees within a few short years suggests that that specific “resolution” is no longer within reach; indeed, to seek to “solve” the climate crisis is a misguided framing altogether. Even in the best-case scenario demanded by the mainstream, we will not simply arrive at 1.5 degrees and thereupon be able to declare success, ticking this task off the ledger. To cause any disruption to the fine-tuned
Welcome to The Break Down

balance of our planetary systems is to play, quite literally, with fire. We have long since departed a world whose conditions defined most of humankind’s time on this planet, and there is no going back. The train has left the station.

So we are left with the Herculean task of working out how best to slow the progress of this runaway train: to reverse rising emissions and ecological breakdown as swiftly and durably as we can while continuing the work towards a future that is radically more just and equal, in which everyone and all life has the freedom and the means to thrive. This is where questions about the relationship between capitalism and the climate crisis comes into sharp relief. There is little agreement on the answers.

Within mainstream politics and media, that capitalism is the system through which we will grapple with climate and ecological crisis is taken prima facie. Climate and environmental civil society — NGOs, think tanks and sundry non-profits — are largely oriented around a green capitalist agenda, with slogans demanding root and branch transformation of the economy often paired with timidly reformist proposals for better corporate disclosures of green targets or a rating system for carbon offsets. Within what is often considered the radical edge of climate activism, such as Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil or certain Green New Deal movements, there is agnosticism or, perhaps, confusion about the answer to this question, with groups sidestepping or rejecting clear diagnoses of capitalism’s role both in causing this crisis and in resolving it.

Even among staunch critics of capitalism, I have often heard it argued on the basis of pragmatism that with such little time before us, and with what is left of it vanishing at such a breath-taking pace, the only viable path forward is to harness the forces capitalism does have on offer and hope to minimise its excesses. And certainly, capitalism has proven to be both remarkably dynamic and durable. It may be that that dynamism is “running out of steam”, just as it may be that capitalism has driven the planet’s systems and its people to such an extreme and precarious state that it now threatens its own reproduction. Neither of these is guaranteed.

We therefore find ourselves in a fog: there is hardly agreement on what it might mean to meet the challenge of the climate crisis, and where there is some settlement, such as the binding targets of the Paris Agreement, there are serious questions about who has been
allowed to make these decisions, and why. And although it is a question so often ignored in mainstream circles that it can feel settled by default, whether our economic system has the capacity to pull the brakes on these accelerating crises — let alone without condemning large swathes of the planet as zones of sacrifice and immiserating millions — is entirely unclear.

There are currently far more questions than we have answers, and the time is short. What is certain is that the prevailing strategy — that of a slow-motion pivot towards a “greener” capitalism, and a future in which we have transformed the energetic foundations of our economies while leaving our social systems largely intact — is failing. We know that we are profoundly off track for meeting even the dangerous targets we have set ourselves in international agreements. Even where there are slivers of positive news, such as the deployment of renewable energy, the harsh economic realities and contradictions of capitalism mean we’re far from on an inevitable path to success. And we also know that most discussion of these crises is desperately limited by the boundaries of an incumbent capitalism that constrains our ability to imagine, prefigure and build alternatives.

The aim of The Break Down is to make some small contribution to addressing this gap. From the contemporary geopolitics of oil to the inner workings of energy markets, and from the legal codes that enable and encourage corporations’ environmental destruction to the inability of capitalism to value the natural world, The Break Down will provide a space to prise open the machinery of capitalism and examine its role in driving people and planet to their limits.

How did we get here? Why, in spite of everything we know and all the tools at our disposal, are we still here? What might the future look like? And perhaps most crucially of all, how can we build the power to change it? These are the questions motivating this programme. We hope that by examining them together, we can make better sense of this mess we are in and begin to chart a way out.
Notes

