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Working Paper

All You Need to Know About Climate Change

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Suggested Citation: Di Liberto, Yuri (2023) : All You Need to Know About Climate Change, Asimetria, s.l., <https://asimetria.org/2023/05/19/all-you-need-to-know-about-climate-change/> , <https://bnarchives.yorku.ca/785/>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/270982>

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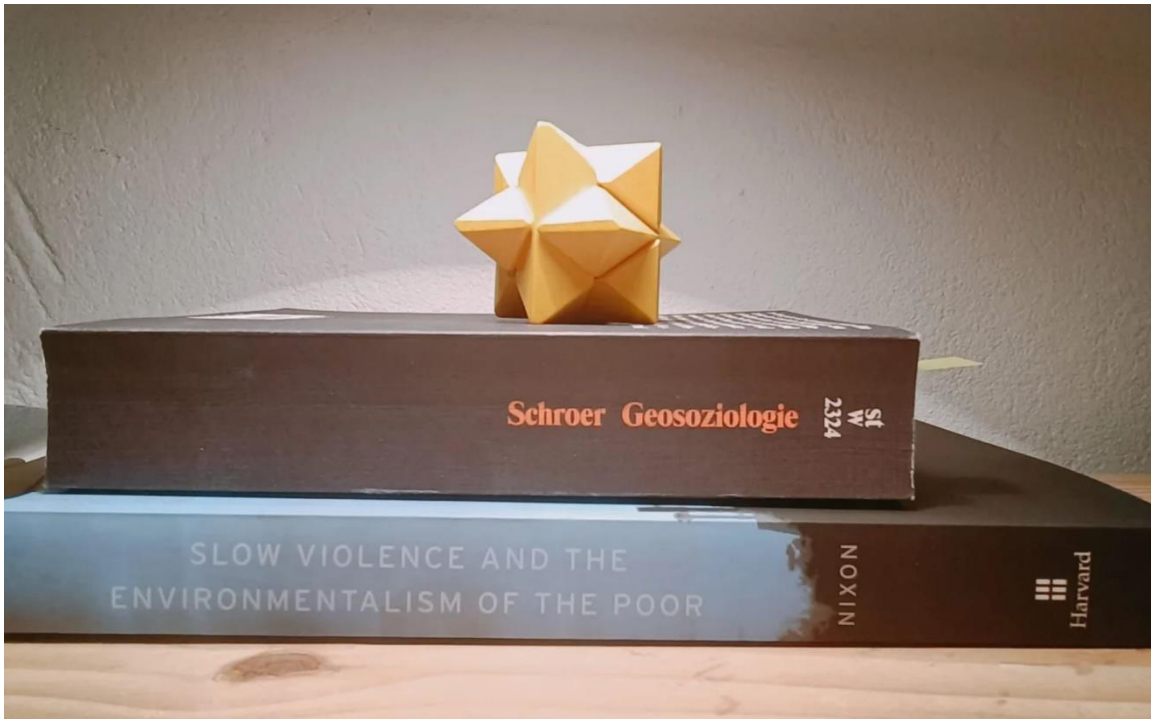
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(Image: *Still Nature in my Room*, 2023)

All you need to know about climate change

By Yuri Di Liberto

May 19, 2023

ASIMETRIA

What if I told you that they knew everything? And that they have known it for a very long time? On January 13 of this year, 2023, in the journal *Science*, perhaps the most important article to date on climate change was published. In political, social, and ethical terms, this article represents the equivalent of a nuclear bomb, despite the fact that (as is sadly obvious to expect) no one in mainstream news channels (and very few in academia) has mentioned it.

In the article (<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abk0063>), a team of investigative journalists sifted through internal documents from Exxon, one of the world's largest oil producers, covering the period 1977-2002, as well as several scientific publications produced by scientists who worked as researchers for Exxon itself. Well, the oil company has known since at least the 1970s that fossil fuel production would likely lead to global warming. Not only that, Exxon, thanks to its own research, can also boast that it has made perfectly accurate projections, matching those of other non-Exxon researchers (i.e., independent or public), and even predicted in which moment climate change would take place. When biased pundits and politicians sow doubt about scientific

research, you can simply cite those directly responsible: Exxon itself knew what it was doing, and got there on its own before everyone else. Yes, because you should know that the first to do research on the impact of fossil fuels on the planet and CO2 were the big petrochemical companies themselves. Exxon conducted its research on these phenomena prematurely, using different scientists and, most importantly, always coming to the same conclusions: in environmental terms there will be consequences. But then why not stop before it's too late? The most obvious answer is: because they were making money out of it. Certainly. But it is only one side of the explanation. This is also the preferred narrative of many orthodox Marxists who have in mind exclusively an explanation of the type: *après moi, le déluge*, after me, the flood, the celebrated phrase attributed to Louis XV. In other words, those who make money from fossil fuels don't care so much about the consequences, because they think only of the here and now of profit. Another variant of this explanation is the necessary evil: capitalists shrug and say, "well unfortunately these are the inevitable consequences of economic growth." This second explanation is a little closer to reality than the first, but it still misses a key element. The point, in fact, is that in Exxon & company, they knew not only when this would happen, but also approximately where. The *timing* of these destructive phenomena is as important as the *space*. At an Exxon meeting in July 1977, James F. Black, then a scientist working for the company, after confirming the key causal role of fossil fuels with respect to climate change, added, "rainfall could become heavier in some regions, and other places could become deserts. Some countries will benefit while others will see their agricultural production reduced or destroyed" (cited by Banerjee et al. 2015; follow them, by the way, if you care about reliable climate journalism <https://insideclimatenews.org/book/exxon-the-road-not-taken/>).

And this was in 1977. In another internal document, relating to 1981, Roger Cohen, then manager of Exxon, said it was "clearly possible" that trends on warming after 2030 "will in fact be catastrophic (for) at least a substantial portion of the world's population" (Ibid.). Again, this was only 1981. It is truly infuriating to read these words just as these days -May 17, 2023- we are seeing some Italian regions like Emilia Romagna mowed down by flooding. Examples of macroscopic destruction (including desertification of areas devoted to agriculture) these days are not lacking. And if I wanted to quote exactly these words and not others from among the paltry collection of materials now of public domain, it is because they clearly speak of an unequal geographic distribution of consequences. To quote again, "Some countries will benefit while others will see their agricultural production reduced or destroyed."

To be precise, those who are benefiting correspond to those who are able to capitalize on the misfortunes of others. For example, these are the words of Jane Mendillo, chief investment officer of a \$32 billion foundation at Harvard University, as she flew her turboprop plane over the hills of Brazil: "What I'm looking for are properties that will produce something that the world will be looking for more and more of and that is difficult to increase the supply of." In his recent *Price Wars* (Einaudi, Turin, 2022), Rupert Russell, who reports on the episode, explains the reasoning:

“as the world’s population grows and the Earth remains finite, the land that produces that something may indeed be ‘green gold’” (Russell, p. 110).

Another very simple consideration is that, if land X is desertified and its agricultural production destroyed or impossible to carry on, land Y more or less adjacent to it might in some cases benefit from this: now, because of the change in the climatic regime, what can no longer grow in X becomes instead growable in Y, where it would have been impossible before.

In other words, although these transformations are harmful to the vast majority, their consequences are not. Borrowing from Bichler and Nitzan, these are differential processes: harms are not equal for all, and not for all to the same degree. And what is detrimental to some may be beneficial to others (Bichler, Nitzan, 2018, p. 31). This differentiability of destruction can be capitalized, for example by pre-purchasing green lands in Brazil. And, as we have seen, they already grasped this idea at Exxon. Regarding other examples of accumulation facilitated by destructive phenomena and on the fact that we have entered a new phase of differential accumulation that most Marxist paradigms are simply unable to see, I refer to my *Asymmetry: Class Struggle at the End of a World* (Mimesis, 2022, language: Italian).

A logical consequence should follow from all this: climate change is not a calamity, but a real crime. And this is not an euphemism. If I know that one of my actions is likely to cause harm or even death to some people (or living beings) and I do it anyway, technically it is a crime, and in fact it is codified as such in the vast majority of legal codes. If I have knowledge that doing something will have the likely side effect of harming others, and I do it anyway, I am considered – rightly so – to be guilty of the harm perpetrated. Strictly speaking, this reasoning should therefore also apply to Exxon or many other economic-political actors, who knew what would happen if they kept doing what they did.

We are all already in it, and we should not underestimate the sibylline ease with which, as victims of climate change, a country or people can slip into that zone of political, social and cultural indifference that marks the expendables of the world. We can even imagine even an environmental racism (Bullard 1990) reproduced in a scalar fashion in the case of “the beautiful Italy”, which could symbolically become a new disaster-ridden and expendable “south,” where floods and temperatures over 50° make the country impossible to live in. And this is because the distinction “us” vs. “them,” “north” vs. “south,” “we who are doing well” vs. “poor them what they are going through” is simply a logical mental scheme that anyone can “copy and paste,” when historical conditions require it, under the most diverse circumstances.

– Russell R., (2022), *Guerre dei prezzi. Come i mercati delle materie prime creano un mondo caotico* (2022, Einaudi, Torino). Orig. Title: *Price Wars. How chaotic markets are creating a chaotic world*

-Bichler S., Nitzan J., (2018), 'The CasP Project: Past, Present, Future', Review of Capital as Power, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 1-39, available at <https://bnarchives.yorku.ca/536/>.

– Bullard R. (1990) *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.