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Climate disaster

Australia's dark age of climate catastrophe

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It is impossible to find words appropriate to the immensity and horror of Australia's bushfire catastrophe. Day in day out for months on end we've been bombarded with harrowing images and accounts of death and destruction – of roaring walls of flame over 100 metres high; of deadly “fire tornadoes” powerful enough to flip fire trucks; of bushfires creating their own super-cell thunderstorms with lightning strikes sparking new blazes ahead of existing fronts; of giant plumes of smoke turning day into eerie, pitch-dark night; of thousands forced to huddle on beaches and cower on boats as ash and embers rain down on them and their communities burn before their eyes; of convoys of evacuees stuck on roads blocked by flames, while others await evacuation by sea; of whole towns burnt to ashes by fires so intense that no fire fighting force on Earth could stop them.

Millions not directly affected by the fires have endured choking clouds of smoke that have smothered vast areas of the country for weeks at a time. Experiencing a landscape shrouded in fog, or hushed by the soft fall of snowflakes, can evoke a sense of the beauty and wonder of nature. The smoke, and the falls of ash that have at times accompanied it, bring something very different. A silence that is stultifying rather than peaceful. A dulling of the landscape that suspends the mind in anxious awareness of the disasters unfolding across the horizon. Can we look at a sunset now without that feeling of muffled dread seeping quietly into our bones – a feeling of being menaced by an alien and malign force, the extremes of which may threaten our very existence on earth?

Disasters of this scale have frequently proved to be turning points in politics and society. The horror they bring shakes society to the core – unsettling our sense of self and our understanding of our place in the world.

The 1755 Lisbon earthquake is perhaps the most dramatic example. The earthquake struck on All Saints' Day, at a time when many thousands of Lisbon's majority Catholic population were packed into the city's churches and cathedrals. Many of the earthquake's estimated 60,000 victims were killed when the roofs of these buildings collapsed. Others were killed in fires that raged through the city in the following days, most caused by candles burning in the churches. Still more were drowned by the tsunami that struck the harbour where survivors of the earthquake had sought refuge.

The earthquake provoked a crisis of belief that helped spur on the Enlightenment. If death and destruction on this scale could be unleashed on the pious Catholics of Lisbon, then what faith could be maintained in a benevolent God? Over subsequent decades, the authority of the Catholic church and associated institutions of feudalism were increasingly called into question by a new generation of thinkers seeking to shift society and culture onto a more rational, scientific foundation. The French Revolution, beginning in 1789, ushered in a new age of optimism about the capacity of humanity, utilising the insights of philosophers and scientists, to build a just and sustainable social order.

Those hopes, however, were betrayed by a rising bourgeois class committed to replacing the religious despotism of feudalism with the despotism of the capitalist market. Over the subsequent two centuries, capitalism spread to every corner of the world. A minority gained untold wealth – more than any feudal king or queen could ever have dreamed of – through their exploitation of the world's workers and the poor. And as their system has grown and spread, so too has the scale of its destructiveness. The science and technology that to enlightenment thinkers promised a society of genuine “liberty, equality and fraternity” are, in the hands of the capitalist class of today, increasingly just the tools for the plundering of earth's natural and human resources in the name of profit.

Nowhere is the basic destructiveness of capitalism more apparent than in the case of climate change. And nowhere

is the intellectual bankruptcy and moral depravity of our rulers more apparent than in their response to it. Australia's current conflagration is far from being an unexpected "natural" event like the Lisbon earthquake. Scientists have been sounding the alarm about the increasing risk of bushfires driven by hotter and drier summers for decades. The equation is simple: the more carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases we pump into the atmosphere, the more we'll face disasters like the one we're currently experiencing. The fires that have laid waste to so much of south-eastern Australia over the past weeks and months are but a portent of the horrors that await us if we fail to make drastic cuts to emissions starting now.

How can we explain the fact that, with the country burning around them, our political leaders continue to act as if we can go on with the "business as usual" of Australia's fossil fuel economy? At every turn in this disaster our Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has attempted to downplay the scale of destruction, and to deflect any attempt to link it to the need for more serious action on climate change. At the height of the disaster, with homes and lives under immediate threat across a vast area of the country, he observed that the fires were happening "against the backdrop of" a test cricket match between Australia and New Zealand and claimed people suffering through the disaster might "be inspired by the great feats of our cricketers from both sides of the Tasman".

It's as if the clock of the Enlightenment is being wound-back. Instead of listening to scientists, Morrison channels the talking points of the "high priests" of conservatism in the Murdoch Press. Instead of anything resembling a rational, scientific assessment of what caused the fires, and what we might do to prevent future fire disasters, we get fairytales – that the whole thing is the fault of the Greens, or that the fires are just a normal part of Australia's "natural cycle".

Morrison's coalition colleague and former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce went furthest down this path in a rambling video message he recorded on Christmas eve. In it, he says he recognises the climate is changing, but denies the government can, or should, do anything about it. Rather, he says, "we've got to acknowledge... there's a higher authority that's beyond our comprehension – right up there in the sky – and unless we understand that it's got to be respected, then we're just fools, we're going to get nailed." This, incidentally, is essentially the same argument made by the Catholic authorities of Europe in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake in an attempt to defend their power against the progress of Enlightenment thought.

Some have suggested that Morrison's apparent lack of concern about the bushfires is related to his evangelical Pentecostal faith. If your world-view includes a belief in the coming "end of days" in which the whole world and all its sinners will perish while the faithful few ascend to heaven, why would you worry too much about some bushfires? This, however, can't be sustained. Morrison's actual religion isn't so much Pentecostalism as it is the fundamentalism of free market capitalism. His true lord isn't Joyce's "higher authority in the sky" but the all-too-worldly, tangible and grubby authority of the "almighty dollar". The guiding light in Morrison's world is the light of capitalist profit – and it's on the altar of profit, not religion, that Australia's future is currently being sacrificed.

The unfolding bushfire catastrophe, like the Lisbon earthquake, should help spur a movement to finally rid ourselves of the capitalist despotism that is driving us to our doom. Signs, so far, are hopeful. The anger felt by millions of Australians against Morrison and his fellow coal-fondling conservatives is palpable. We have to recognise, though, that we're in for a long and hard fight. We may, perhaps, force Morrison to step down. This would be an important victory. Waiting in the wings, however, is a long line of fellow "believers" ready to take over the reins. Unfortunately for us, this also includes the opposition Labor Party, who in the aftermath of the 2019 federal election have striven to prove themselves to be just as faithful servants of the fossil fuel barons as the Liberals.

We can harbour no illusions. Our current rulers, in Australia and around the world, will be more than prepared to watch us burn if they can just reserve for themselves a "heavenly realm" in which their profits and power are maintained. This is the new dark age towards which we're headed, one in which ordinary people are forced to fend for themselves amid mounting environmental and social catastrophe, while the rich turn a blind eye to the problem,

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retreat into fortified enclaves or threaten violence against anyone daring to challenge their rule.

If we want to avoid that fate, nothing short of revolution will suffice. Against the power of the fossil fuel addicted capitalist class and their political servants, we need to mobilise the power of workers, students and the oppressed. Against a society run in the interests of the profits of the wealthy few, we need a society that serves all its people. To do this we need masses on the streets. We need to protest, occupy and strike until the entire system cracks and crumbles around us, and out of the rubble we can build something better in its place.

This is the one hope emerging from the catastrophe we are living through today: that when historians look back on the events of the coming decade, they will record that “let them watch cricket” became, for the Australian revolution, what “let them eat cake” was for the French.

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