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From Nero to Net Zero

Gareth Dale_ 13th November 2021

Boris Johnson's calculated error: Climate migration and civilisation collapse, from Ancient Rome to COP26.

As head of government, a traditional role is to reassure citizens that the winds are fair and the ship of state is sound. One does not look ahead to its sinking.

How unusual, then, to hear Boris Johnson, immediately prior to the COP26 summit of which he was host, speak of civilisational collapse. There is a politics to any [rhetorical strategy](#) that invokes catastrophe. In Johnson's case, what is it?

In an immediate sense, he was seeking to focus the minds of COP delegates. Britain's PM, who enjoyed a classical education and likes to [flaunt it](#), summoned the sacking of Rome.

"Civilization can go backwards as well as forwards, and when things start to go wrong they can go wrong at extraordinary speed," [he warned](#). "You saw that with the decline and fall of the Roman empire, and unless we get this right in tackling climate change, we could see our civilisation, our world, also go backwards."

Teasing out the parallels, he went on to consider [why Rome fell](#). The principal cause was, he said, "uncontrolled immigration. The empire could no longer control its borders, people came in from the east, and Europe went into a dark ages that lasted a very long time. The point is, it can happen again."

On one rudimentary point this analogy is accurate enough: empires and 'civilisations' can implode. Historically, this has [typically involved](#) a rapid loss of population and socio-economic complexity, with a crumbling of public services and a phase of disorder as the state haemorrhages authority and loses its monopoly of the means of violence.

On all other points, however, Johnson's account is historically illiterate. Its errors, I'll suggest, give insight into how modernity's emperors would approach a civilisational crisis.

Barbarians and plutocrats

Let's begin by noting that Johnson assumes a specific vantage point: the empire's western half. Some regions, notably Britain, did experience a withering of urban life and sharp population decline. But only here did the empire collapse. The other half, Byzantium, carried on—and further east, new civilisations were dawning. Far from a dark age, the seventh to fourteenth centuries saw economic and cultural efflorescence, notably the Islamic Golden Age, and T'ang and Song China. Their omission in Johnson's account is symptomatic.

In explaining Rome's imperial implosion, Johnson points the finger at uncontrolled immigration. Inrushing barbarians from the east stormed the borders and sacked the Eternal City. Climate change, we might add, was [a likely factor](#) in some of these population

movements. However, where previous migrations had become [incursions](#), the imperial armies had [beaten them back](#).

And when in 376-476 CE the Franks, Vandals, and Goths arrived (themselves refugees from the Huns), they amounted to a tiny proportion of the empire's population. Their ingress took fully a century and they [settled](#) across vast territories. By the time they reached Rome, the Goths were no longer meaningfully an [external group](#).

The real reasons behind the fall of Rome carry very different lessons. Its imperial mode of production, geared to the accumulation of slaves and territory, generated intense political antagonisms and steep hierarchies of wealth and power. During the Republic these could be contained, as military victories supplied streams of new slaves and tribute.

Even then, the wars slashed through plebeian ranks: peasant farmers were conscripted to the army and then spat out, indebted, in a process of social polarisation that further empowered the landed magnates and fed their hunger for new slaves, and so onward in a self-perpetuating cycle—until the martial juggernaut eventually stalled under Hadrian and his successors.

Accumulation hitting limits, and the yawning wealth gap, were central factors in Rome's eventual collapse. Its institutional structures permitted a peculiarly rapacious aristocracy and endemic civil war. Driven by [blind patrician egoism](#), the senatorial plutocracy began to feed on, run down and fragment the institutions of state, sapping society's resilience when confronted with pandemics and famines.

In some of the latter, climate change [played a part](#), and some scholars have noted a decline in the 'energy return on investment' (EROI) of the key energy sources, [wheat and alfalfa](#). The empire grew brittle [and fractious](#). The Goths and Vandals did sack Rome, but these were minor chapters in the Empire's involution. They only became possible after long-term decay and political fragmentation.

The collapse of western civilisation

If our civilisation collapses it won't replicate Rome's. Planetary in scale, the stakes are incomparably higher. A democratically [managed degrowth](#) is conceivable, but so too is systemic disintegration, after which survivors, unlike medieval peasants, would be up against the terrifying environmental legacy of capitalist modernity.

A contemporary collapse would take decades, if not centuries, with the scythe falling first on specific regions, overwhelmingly in the South. For a glimpse, look no further than [Afghanistan and Yemen](#), or Madagascar, in what some are calling the [world's first climate change famine](#), as those with no culpability for global heating suffer its harshest effects. Thousands are eking out survival on locusts and cactus leaves, yet, so severe is the drought, even the cacti are dying.

[The collapse of Western civilization](#), as imagined by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, is far from imminent. Yet we note that the key moment in the scenario they paint is the sudden temperature rebound when a [climate engineering](#) project based on sulfate injections into the atmosphere has to be terminated due to disastrous side-effects. Sulfates were involved in a milestone in Rome's terminus, namely the reversal of its sixth-century reconquest by Byzantium. In this case, [volcanic eruptions of 535-540 CE](#) precipitated a sharp cooling followed by famine, crop failures, and the Justinian pandemic, which sapped Byzantine power.

Oil, power, geopolitics

On some counts our civilisation differs sharply from Rome's. Today's capitalist economy is geared to economic - more than military - accumulation, and places a greater premium on technological change. Its energy sources are less reliant on clement weather. Its citizens are educated, and democracy is a [universal value](#).

Other parallels, however, leap out. The accumulation motor is sputtering, with long-run [profitability decline](#) manifesting in low growth and deep slumps. Soaring inequality has bred social discontent and legitimation crisis, and it suppresses aggregate consumer demand - 'underconsumption,' in Marxian or Hobson's/Keynes' terms.

The plundering of nature is proving less effective for [cheapening the inputs](#) of capital than was the case [in centuries past](#). The EROI of fossil-fuel extraction is [plummeting](#): in plain English, ever more energy is consumed in squeezing each drop of oil from the bowels of the earth. Likewise, for many metals the quantity of rock removed per tonne of output is much higher than a century ago. Last, and far from least, the ransacking of nature is reaping blowback in the form of climate chaos and pandemics. Whereas in Roman times, climate change was external to the socioeconomic system, nowadays it, and the generation of new diseases, are endogenous to the system, so thoroughly has the natural world become subsumed by capital.

In combination, these trends are snaring the planet in intractable knots. In the next two decades global GDP growth will be sufficiently low that most states, mired in post-Covid debt, [will be reluctant](#) to take transformative measures on the scale required, yet sufficiently high to ensure robust demand for fossil fuels, unless the major consuming sectors [decarbonise urgently](#).

The latter is looking unlikely, and, if pursued within existing systems, with the wants of the rich taken as immovable, it risks sending food prices soaring, with farmland annexed for biofuels, and it could unleash further ecological ruin, for example through [seabed mining](#) when mineral lodes vital to the green economy run out on dry land. The effects of climate change itself will tend to lower growth, particularly in poor countries, and will create kindling for resource wars and other scarcity-exacerbated conflicts—such as those currently flaring in parts of the Sahel where desertification has bred poverty and despair.

A further tightening of the knot stems from the geopolitical conjuncture. To consolidate its hegemony in the 1940s, cash-rich America funnelled Marshall Aid to Europe, but now, in its bitter dotage, it shows no willingness to bring climate assistance to the global South. In different ways, the reigning superpower and the Asian aspirant are the [most capitalist](#) of states, and their levels of social inequality are staggering: the top one percent own 31 percent of wealth in China, and 35 percent in the USA.

The competition between Washington and Beijing affirms each in their ultra-capitalism. It applies topspin to the accumulation drive and ensures the climate blinkers are worn tight. For all their enmity, both states implemented a profligate development model based on similar material foundations: [concrete](#), coal, and cars.

In its climate diplomacy, Washington points to China's position as by far the greatest polluter of the last [fifteen years](#), with its overall emissions currently twice those of the US, while Beijing points to the US' position as by far the greatest polluter [in world history](#), its per capita emissions currently [twice those of China](#). The charges are as unimpeachable as their motivations are squalid. Neither state regards climate action as a serious 'global leadership'

issue, which explains why President Xi declined to attend COP26 and why President Biden, although present, is all talk and [no walk](#).

Denial, disinformation, delay

To cut this Gordian tangle would require confronting the system's fossil-fuel addiction, for which a tiny minority is overwhelmingly responsible. Climate change, remarked the *Financial Times* in response to the UN's report that revealed the world's wealthiest one percent account for nearly one-sixth of emissions, "[is less a battle of nations than rich versus poor](#)." A major chimney of pollution could be sealed off by relieving the rich of their superyachts and private jets, ending their [frequent flying](#), and revoking their license to drill. Beyond that, it would necessitate suppressing some sectors - aviation, cattle, [the military](#) - and investing in others - afforestation, agroecology, buildings insulation, public transport, renewables.

To avoid this course of action, corporations and governments deploy a variety of tactics. Each parallels an evasion technique familiar to alcoholics. The first, outright denial, has weakened in recent times. Although the crosspollination of [climate and Covid conspiracies](#) is a troubling new development, the basic reality of anthropogenic climate change is widely acknowledged even in such backward nations as Saudi Arabia and the US.

The second, disinformation and [misdirection](#) over climate solutions, is in the ascendancy. It includes [corporate greenwash](#), and receives amplification from social media and from a fawning mainstream media that packages corporate press releases as if they're news items.

The third, [delay](#), dominates the thinking of the major powers at COP26. The aim is to distract from the need to shut down fossil-fuel systems, to pin hopes on [technology-fetishist](#) fantasies, to direct attention to future promises rather than imminent action and to that masterpiece of creative accounting known as '[net zero](#)' rather than [actual zero](#).

Climate displacement: *Divide et impera*

The fourth I call 'displacement.' Its motto: 'someone else is to blame.' Fossil fuel companies redirect responsibility from their industry [to individual consumers](#). Politicians of the North point the finger at China—while ignoring the emissions embedded in Chinese wares bound for their shores, and the European and US banks that [fund Asian coal](#).

An increasingly potent form of displacement is likely to be 'climate xenophobia'. This forms the background to Johnson's dark warning with which we began. Just as Rome consolidated its empire through 'divide and rule' tactics, such as engaging one group at the frontier to attack others, so, in our times, politicians of the North pit racialised immigrants against 'the nation.'

In view of the right's traditional neglect of global heating, climate migration was discussed in years gone by in [left-wing terms](#): a necessary adaptation strategy, primarily by vulnerable communities in rural parts of the global South who bear no responsibility for global heating and who relocate principally within their country, not internationally.

This is changing. The issue is being securitised, with climate migration whipped up as a threat to national security, such that extraordinary measures become justified.

Johnson's own paper, the *Daily Telegraph*, reports on climate refugees in shrill, catastrophic terms: a danger, bracketed alongside [terrorism](#) and accompanied by quotations from military

officers. “An influx of refugees fleeing global warming,” [it warned](#) earlier this autumn, “could trigger ‘racial tensions’ in Britain,” and the security forces should gird up.

The current militarisation of borders and the increasingly shameless ‘push back’ of refugees by Western governments represent [dress rehearsals](#) for engagement with climate migrants. Indeed, some of those being pushed back by British and European border guards, particularly from regions seared by global heating such as Afghanistan, Syria or Sudan, already belong to that category.

Money tells its own story: in the five years from 2013, Britain spent twice as much on sealing its borders as on climate finance; for the US the ratio was 11 times. The rich nations, writes [George Monbiot](#), “are surrounding themselves with a climate wall, to exclude the victims of their own waste products.”

Never trust a COP

Climate migrants from small island states, demanded [a South Sudanese diplomat](#) at COP26, should be given immigration rights in rich countries. Coming from a ‘barbarian,’ the recommendation was ignored. The COP, after all, is an institution of empire. Much as IMF or World Bank summits, COP gatherings are dominated by rich-world states. Greta Thunberg dubbed the latest one “a Global North greenwash festival.” Of twenty-six gatherings, over half have taken place in Europe, against eight in the South. Apart from one in Japan, Europe has monopolised the major ones.

At one COP, in Copenhagen, the rich countries pledged US\$100 billion per year for poorer countries by 2020. The promise was reiterated in 2015 at the Paris COP, but, although a [trivial sum](#) compared to fossil fuel subsidies in the trillions, the promised sum [never arrived](#). The most vulnerable countries received barely a dime.

Of all climate summits, COP26 was by some accounts the [most exclusive](#). The Covid pandemic provided the backdrop. The crass lack of vaccine solidarity, noted the [New York Times](#), sent an “ominous signal for fighting climate change.” Next, the British hosts of COP26, Johnson’s government, made swingeing cuts to its foreign aid budget. If this was climate diplomacy, it was the two-fingered kind—and recipient countries understood it as such.

The [racist ‘red list’](#) pandemic rules combined with Britain’s hostile immigration regime to [deter civil-society delegates](#) from the global South, in particular [indigenous communities](#) - precisely they who are least responsible for global heating and most able to steward the forests. More delegates linked to the fossil-fuel industry were present than all indigenous delegates put together.

Where COP gatherings differ from many global summits, however, is in the hive of activism that surrounds them. Delegates feel the heat: from scientists, NGOs and civil-society groups. A democratic movement takes place: the summit attracts the media spotlight, some of which falls on protests and helps to sway public opinion.

Seneca vs. Spartacus

We may be tempted therefore to place our faith in an institution the Roman Empire lacked: democracy.

Yet climate denial, delay, disinformation and displacement, taken together, provide capitalist classes and their friends [and clients](#) in government with powerful means to recruit majorities to their agenda, whilst portraying environmentalists as an out-of-touch liberal elite. Against this, moral appeals have little traction—and here we find our final lesson from antiquity.

In Ancient Rome there were voices who protested against avarice and relentless imperial expansion, and who were troubled by the transgression of natural limits and by ecological harms such as woodland clear-cutting and soil exhaustion. Poets inveighed against *auri sacra fames* (the idolatrous greed for gold) and extolled *parsimonia* (frugality). But the conclusions were merely ethical: aristocrats should temper their desire for luxury.

The best known of these voices was Seneca, the philosopher. He advocated parsimony and bewailed private property as humanity's greatest affliction - and yet this was the same Seneca who, a major slave-owner, amassed fabulous riches and received, on top, a small fortune from Emperor Nero - an honorarium for flattery. Small wonder that, despite his distaste for technology, Seneca has a fanbase among Silicon Valley's [self-help gurus](#) today.

An ethics of temperance, in short, is self-defeating if the preacher backs the institutions of accumulation and exploitation: slavery and the legions back then, the market system and the Pentagon today. In Rome the counter to aristocratic greed was class struggle. If we need to put a face on the concept, let it be one who inspired solidarity among the oppressed: Spartacus.

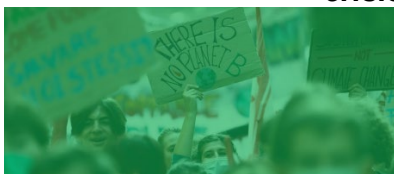
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<https://ipripak.org/ipcc-vs-cop26-how-not-to-address-the-climate-emergency/>

IPCC vs COP26: How Not to Address the Climate Emergency

At the typical COP gathering, the hosts promise that a turning point has been reached. They talk of the need for action but do nothing that comes close to matching the scale and urgency of the challenge. The climate crisis reveals a crisis of diplomacy and global politics.



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The climate-political calendar has blessed 2021 with two major events, and the discrepancy between them could not be more striking. The first, in the summer, saw the publication of the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). IPCC reports are essentially the product of scientists, albeit with some interference from politicians.

The picture painted by the climate scientists could hardly be more alarming. Due to anthropogenic climate change, as well as habitat destruction, [many species of plant and animal](#) are joining the dodo every single week. Even if greenhouse gas emissions were to halt tomorrow, substantial future heating is baked in for around four decades, due to [oceanic thermal inertia](#)—and this is even before we get to the dangers of positive feedback mechanisms (albedo decline, oceanic methane release, and suchlike). At current projections, the best guess is that the planet is heading, by the end of the century, for a rise of three degrees (Celsius) above the pre-industrial norm, which even sober and sceptical publications such as the *Economist* magazine warn would be [truly disastrous](#). And the longer the emissions continue, the greater the risk of triggering [tipping points](#) in Earth systems that could include ice sheet disintegration, a stalling of thermohaline circulation, and conceivably even the destabilisation of seafloor methane hydrates that would propel the planet toward a [hothouse state](#).

'Climate emergency,' then, is the appropriate term, and even an understatement. We are presently mourning the death of the Holocene, never to be resurrected. The Holocene isn't simply an arcane category of interest only to geologists. It's the stable and benign climatological era that cradled human civilisation for 11,000 years—its entire recorded history. Aside from a few cave paintings, every known human document, from Ancient Mesopotamia and the Indus Civilisation onward to the twentieth century, was produced during the Holocene, but it is no more. Ahead lie much stormier climes.

Some locations are right in the path of the storm, Pakistan being a case in point. The recently published assessment by the USA's security agencies ranks it in the group of eleven countries [most vulnerable](#) to climate change. By some accounts it is the world's [fifth most vulnerable nation](#). Global heating was a major contributing factor to the plagues of locusts that devastated eastern Pakistan last year, as unusually warm and wet conditions in the Arabian Peninsula had created [their ideal breeding conditions](#). The better-known threats to the region include heatwaves, intensifying monsoons, and glacial melting that is set to exacerbate flooding and landslides in the short term, and drought in the long term. By 2050, if the IPCC's predictions are accurate, Pakistan will be [running dry](#).

What, then, of the other major climate-political event taking place this year? I'm referring to the twenty-sixth annual meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP26), to which Glasgow plays host in early November. The COP meetings are chiefly for lawmakers and diplomats, with some input from scientists and NGOs. At the typical COP gathering, the hosts promise that a turning point has been reached. But the words are empty. Some governments brandish graphs that purport to demonstrate that their nation has reduced its emissions, but they generally exclude the emissions embodied in imported goods, as well as those from international aviation and shipping. If a single graph can sum up our plight, without deceit, it's one in which the measured quantity of atmospheric carbon dioxide is plotted against the annual meetings of the COP. This graph shows the lawmakers and diplomats meeting, and meeting again, while the carbon dioxide line rises, and continues its remorseless rise. It reminds us that policymakers and business leaders have known of climate change for decades, they've convened and reconvened, they've talked of the need for action but have done nothing that comes close to matching the scale and urgency of the challenge.

In Britain, host to this year's COP, the lack of vision among policymakers has been highlighted by recent events. Earlier this month, the campaign group [Insulate Britain](#) blocked ports and motorways to draw attention to its demand that by 2025 the government should fund the insulation of all social housing and plan for the low-carbon

retrofit of all homes by 2030. The plan offered a clear ‘win win’: a jobs programme that would underpin employment levels and upgrade the skills of a large segment of the workforce; the insulation of the draughty homes of poorer citizens that would end the problem of fuel poverty and save [thousands](#) of lives each year; and the insulation of all homes to enable a rapid replacement of gas heating by electric heat pumps, thereby switching off one of the biggest emissions spigots. Any government committed to lowering carbon emissions, or to a social agenda of [levelling up](#), would at least have considered the proposal, and should have embraced it. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, with a clear interest in burnishing his green credentials in the run-up to the COP26 talks, could have waved to the protestors and taken their proposal on board. Instead, his government took action to put the Insulate Britain activists [behind bars](#), while his Home Secretary, Priti Patel, turned on them, labelling them “[selfish](#).” (A peculiar dictionary is required if ‘selfish’ refers to those who risk their lives by sitting down on a motorway in order to press for policies that will improve their own lives barely at all, but instead the fate of poor people in chilly homes and people and animals who face climate terrors.) One month after Patel’s outburst, her government [announced a raft of policies](#) to cut greenhouse gas emissions. It contained practically [no new money](#) for homes insulation. Instead, the focus was on encouraging consumers to buy new gadgets (heat pumps, electric vehicles), helping the nuclear industry reinvent itself after the Fukushima disaster, buying into the myth that the aviation industry can by 2050 meaningfully [go green](#), and granting a new lease of life to fossil fuel giants by supporting investment in a [dubious](#) solution known as ‘blue’ hydrogen. Above all, the plan gambles on carbon capture and storage, a speculative technology that, although proven at small scale, will be impossible to upscale in time to meet Britain’s legally determined decarbonisation targets.

What this tells us is that Britain’s leaders remain in the thrall of [technology fetishism](#), a syndrome that, we should recall, in recent memory proved the undoing of what had been a seemingly successful COP gathering. I am referring to COP21 in Paris, which yielded the celebrated Paris Agreement. That diplomatic concord of 2015 was based heavily on the COP delegates’ magical belief in a particular technology: Bio Energy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS).

Since then, however, [BECCS has been discredited](#) and the Paris Agreement on which it was built has necessarily fallen apart. The hosts of COP26 appear determined to learn no lessons from that debacle.

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