

**JOHN VAN DER VELDEN
ROB WHITE**

**THE
EXTINCTION
CURVE**

**GROWTH AND
GLOBALISATION IN THE
CLIMATE ENDGAME**

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Growth and Globalisation in the
Climate Endgame

BY

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ROB WHITE



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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This book is dedicated to our grandchildren: Riley, Blake, Paige and Clayton (John) and Luca and Lola (Rob). We wish they were inheriting a better world than the one we stumbled into. Hopefully, they will find the wisdom and resolve to make a positive difference for their families and communities.

AT DANTE'S GATE

Plague is upon us. The global economy is in lockdown as yet another crisis in collective wellbeing unfolds. It is the second global economic crisis in as many decades. While this has started as a health crisis, it is following a familiar storyline. Governments are bailing out private companies by socialising their losses, while the social and economic losses of the global majority are being privatised.

The pandemic imagery of our class-divided lives is stark. In the advanced economies, those workers and shopkeepers more fortunate than frontline health workers are cocooned in relatively affluent bubbles of home delivery and debt quarantined enterprise. The super-rich are waiting it out on their yachts and holiday islands, bottom feeding on collapsing stock prices. Meanwhile minorities of colour are dying at more than double the national averages. In the emerging areas of the global economy the story is even more confronting. Workers leading day-to-day work-life are dropping dead in the streets. Social distancing and tips on health hygiene are gratuitous advice for those trapped in crowded slums without clean water.

In time, the health crisis will mostly pass. Survivors may have some degree of 'herd immunity' and a combination of treatment and immunisation will likely be put together for those less robust. Most importantly, in this most capitalist of storylines, the economy will come out of debt-fuelled Keynesian hibernation so that growth and accumulation can resume. Just don't mention the climate and ecological emergency. That replay button on further global catastrophes to come is a story sequel that our overseer capitalist editors won't publish. It remains an inconvenient truth.

This book addresses the capitalist growth and accumulation pandemic that lies at the core of our globalised crises. It is what has brought us to this calamitous historical point. Even with an immediate fundamental change in course, the next global catastrophe is already in the pipeline. But that fundamental change in course has yet to eventuate. Ominously, the climate and ecological *extinction curve* continues along its steep trajectory.

In this sense, given present upward directions, we are not offering a book of hope. But nor is it a requiem about our species and paradise lost. It is a sober assessment of the reasons we have entered a period of escalating crises in economic and ecological wellbeing on a global scale. These crises foreshadow a crossroads in the historical expansion and progress of our human civilisation. They reflect the consequences of an economic system grounded in maximum social exploitation of a finite natural world. The era of unsustainable growth has to come to an end. This book aims to explain why and how.

OUR HISTORICAL MOMENT

Historically, capitalism has been a source of breath-taking prosperity for some and a beacon of material aspiration for the global majority. This capitalist mode of production (CMP) is also a system of irreconcilable structural contradictions and crisis dynamics. These dynamics, and the swirling political vortexes they engender, increasingly constitute a sword of Damocles that imperils the continued social and political legitimacy of our national and international ruling elites. But it is also a sword that hangs over working people globally.

Economic and ecological conditions are destined to become more precarious for those outside the affluent zones of the global economy. Within the more buffered advanced economies, political and ideological consent is fracturing around what the future may hold with regard to structural shocks and dislocations, and how best to respond. Certainly, the consequences of capitalist crises of accumulation, globalisation and the climate/ecological emergency are weighing heavily on national and global political culture, even if the contours are not fully understood or accepted. On the longer-term horizon, the future welfare of vast sections of the global community is in question.

Catastrophic global heating, initiated by the capitalist industrial revolution, has tipped the earth outside the 12,000-year stable Holocene climate conditions within which civilisations have flourished. Projections for greenhouse gas and temperature accelerations are foreboding in their consequences for extensive habitable zones of the planet. Concurrently, capitalist globalisation has created staggering inequality, widespread species and ecosystem collapse, unfettered institutions of entrenched class power and interests, and an interdependent web of subordination to market forces beyond democratic control. It adds up to a perfect storm of biblical proportions.

Human civilisation inherited Holocene natural world conditions and blossomed materially and numerically. But, since the advent of the Capitalist Industrial Revolution in 1750, and subsequent globalisation of capitalism in particular, the inherited gifts of our natural world are on the brink of being trashed beyond recovery within any geological time frame that will matter to us and our descendants. Significant transformations are locked in and irreversible, though the pace and scale of impending catastrophe are not yet settled. Much is still able to be contested, politically and technologically. But adaptation, mitigation and survival imperatives will exponentially loom larger in the years ahead and stark choices will become more sharply defined. 'Business as usual' can no longer be accommodated. Neither can 'politics as usual'.

The future is still only uncertain for that hollow characterisation 'us as a species' – an expression which puts humans-in-general at the centre of problem, consequence and solution. This imprecise terminology is partly why we decline to use the latest 'Anthropocene Epoch' designation now commonly used in contemporary environmental discourse. The broad scientific intent is to describe the accelerated measurable technological impact of human activity on planetary eco-systems. The original intent was to particularly identify the human-driven trajectory of the Earth System out of the Holocene, of which climate science is an important part. However, it obscures if not misses entirely the capitalist origins, divergent class interests, and unequal consequences of that activity in generating climate and ecological catastrophe.

A principal intent of the use of the term Anthropocene by the climate action movement is to contest the politically motivated, self-interested denial of climate science. However, escalating ecological crises risk the ideological morphing of 'Anthropocene' from focusing on 'culpable human responsibility' and the absence of care for planetary eco-systems to the assertion of geo-engineered human ownership and control of nature. This shift is already

evident. Geo-engineering ‘solutions’ to the climate crisis should be vigorously resisted, just for the cataclysmic risk levels alone. Moreover, they fail to address the physical causes of global heating, the need to restore eco-systems, and divert attention from the underlying political economy driving climate change.

The future is grim if not dire for vast numbers of us. The per capita carbon emissions in major developing countries are miniscule compared to that generated by the 1.5 billion people in the advanced economies. Just for the three billion in China and India alone, rudimentary expansion to ‘first world’ living standards is already swamping the remnant capacity of planetary carbon sinks to cope. Plus, there are still some three billion left in the remaining developing countries of the global economy whose fate is not being factored into this consideration.

Globalisation of capitalist growth has become a cascading set of wicked dilemmas that no government dares to fully confront. Entrenched economic power and dominant class interests are threatened by the questioning of capitalist growth. It likewise threatens the very institutional fabric of any existing individual nation state apparatus and elected government that are fundamentally compelled to serve those interests. Even many dedicated climate action advocates are reluctant to fully question or challenge capitalist growth for fear of where it might lead politically.

But confront these dilemmas we must. We urgently need to develop a clear navigational chart or there will be no political direction toward a future world any of us would care to embrace. The character of the contradictory forces and material self-interests driving this perilous climate endgame have never been more transparent or understood. Yet, paradoxically, despite this collective self-awareness, the widespread acceptance of paralysing obfuscations, diversions and inactions swirling around core climate problems have also never been more complete. Picking through this structural and political conundrum is an essential and urgent task.

US, HERE, NOW

There are confronting and stark political choices unfolding for our diverse green and broad left movements seeking to address this historical convergence. Despite decades of environmental and social action against the consequences of neo-liberal globalisation we still only have a nascent and fragmented movement for

genuine climate action. The year 2020 marks 50 years of Earth Day. Yet in that time a consolidated and united challenge to escalating ecological catastrophe has failed to materialise. It follows from the faded political challenge stemming from the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) exposure of both the systemic fragilities of global capitalism, and the political bankruptcy and self-interest of transnational global elites. Ultra-Right conservatism is on the rise.

Now, as this current economic crisis assumes dimensions of depression to rival the 'Great One' of the 1930s, we still find ourselves politically behind rather than ahead of the extinction curve. Most progressive demands, actions and options still revolve around the question of whether a form of green capitalism is either possible or desirable. It is past time to find a common broad left course to settle this question.

This book hopes to contribute to that outcome. It has been in gestation for several years, framed by our acute self-awareness of generational time. Rob had just become a grandparent for the first time. Meanwhile, having flown into the brown haze covering continental Europe with partner, daughter and grandson, John found himself in the sculpture garden of the Rodin Museum. He had just read Jim Hansen's *Storms of My Grandchildren*. In the suffocating heat of a particularly hot Parisian July, standing in front of Dante's Gates of Hell gave pause to reflect. As we hurtle past the Holocene edge will our grandchildren bear witness to the end of our beginnings or the beginnings of our end? Whether with reflective hope or despair, our generations of the past 70 years have brought them to this gate. They are being shoved through regardless ... into the dark unknown. The political is very personal, and so is this book.

Collectively our progressive movement, like our class-divided global community as a whole, has arrived at a unique historical conjuncture. In generational terms we are at Dante's Gate and out of time to avoid passing through. What we do, or fail to do, in the next couple of decades will shape the immediate future for billions unlike any previous historical period. The stakes really are that high.

Our personal histories and collaboration parallel this historically unique generational convergence. We are part of the tail end of the post-World War II baby boom. Our parents' generation lived through the grim social and economic austerity of the European war experience, its preceding great economic depression of the 1930s, and then the explosion in capitalist production and consumption that followed post-war. Like so many working-class families of this era, our parents' experiences of depression and war

framed their feelings of fortune and relief at the peace and prosperity which followed. But it was us Baby Boomer children that were the actual main beneficiaries.

Our working-class generation had historically unique affluence without the parental filter of genuine austerity. We benefitted from publicly funded infrastructure, education, health and social services, and high wages compared to the global norm. The productivity and competitive advantage of the advanced economies, which flowed through to the relative affluence of our generation and that of our children, is only now set to being reversed in the following generations.

Over the next few decades our generation of Boomer elders will be extinct, whether we rebel or not. For our grandchildren, like Greta Thunberg and the School Strikers for Climate, everything we have taken for granted is at stake. What we do, or fail to do, collectively will be decisive in shaping the roadmap for their lives.

In the midst of historically startling affluence within the advanced economies, three major additional forces have shaped our personal experiences and that of our generation.

Firstly, some 70 years of largely unfettered capitalist growth in the advanced economies coincided with a dramatic surge in ecological degradation and population expansion globally. Our parents grew up and established families in a pre-war world of 2 billion, up from 1 billion at the time of the capitalist industrial revolution in Europe in 1750. By 1960, this had jumped to 3 billion. During our personal life histories, this has exploded to 7 billion. The children and grandchildren in our families will share the planet with more than 9 billion on current projections. It could also be substantially less if the grim scenarios in this book are realised. Either way, the challenge of this integrated exponential impact of seemingly endless economic growth, ecological degradation, and population increase is epoch shaping.

Secondly, we have witnessed dramatic geo-political reconfigurations flowing from this rampant capitalist globalisation. Our personal social and political awareness was fashioned in the triangulated shadow of the reinvigorated capitalist imperialism of the American post-war hegemony versus the degenerated Stalinised 'Communism' of the Soviet Union (USSR) and Peoples Republic of China, which framed the decolonisation and 'national liberation' movements ending the 500-year European imperialist empire capitalist period. This international triangulation dominated our formative

years until the demise of the USSR in the period 1989–1991. Post-1990, capitalist globalisation has embarked on a qualitatively new phase. Likewise, ecological degradation has been transformed qualitatively.

The seeds of contemporary capitalist globalisation were fashioned in the context of post-war American capitalism as the dominant and only capitalist superpower in relation to its war allies as well as the vanquished. The consolidation of the USSR, its Eastern European satellites, and the 1949 revolution in China established the post-war territorial limit of capitalist expansion under American capital domination. However, by virtue of their politically antagonistic relationship with 'Western' capitalism per se, the existence of 'communist' States also facilitated the increasingly borderless expansion, interpenetration and competitive integration of American finance capital across the balance of the capitalist world: Western Europe, Australia and Japan of course, but also the Americas generally, South Korea, Taiwan and other newly developing sectors of the capitalist world economy.

The result was expansion in depth and breadth of more globalised financing of commodity production, distribution, exchange and consumption. It also became the foundation for globalising transnational corporations and competitively integrated national and international economic elites.

While the relative post-war domination of American global capital has continued throughout this transnational globalisation it (ironically) started eroding at an enhanced pace with the demise and full restoration of capitalism in the USSR and its Stalinised Eastern European satellites (circa post-1989). Equally, if not more profoundly, the parallel restoration and global integration of Chinese capitalism consolidated and has now elevated contemporary forms of globalisation to a new highest expression of the capitalist mode of production (CMP).

The initial principal dominance of American capital has now been further diminished by multi-polar centres and largely unfettered corporate internationalisation of global capitalist economic power. The largest transnational corporations dwarf the financial resources and power of most countries and render 'national sovereignty' a misnomer for all but the largest nation-states. This explosion of capitalist growth has been accompanied by consequent growth of ecologically untenable, materially enhanced population levels, the explosion of greenhouse gas emissions, and widespread ecological degradation.

Thirdly, we have lived through and been active players in the shortcomings and failures to build effective fightbacks and alternatives to our present

conjuncture of dilemmas. It's difficult to write off 50 years of collective (and personal) campaigning, marching, organising and writing as failure. Yes, there have been successes, even substantial ones. Strikes have been won, greater civil and women's rights achieved, dams have been stopped and wars have been ended. Still, we on 'The Left' as a whole have not achieved our transformational objectives – whether that objective has been fundamental reform to make global capitalism fairer and more equal, a revolution to overthrow capitalist power and exploitation altogether or stopping ecological destruction. If anything, the achievements of hard-won struggles are under robust challenge and the political risk levels threatening a century of progressive social reforms are escalating. 'The Left' remains in a long-term state of crisis and decline.

THE CLIMB

Over the past 40 years, there has been widespread social democratic centrist government capitulation (if not support) to expand capitalist neo-liberalism, globalisation and geo-politically strategic war. This has generated a crisis of 'progressive' political legitimacy for 'reformist' social democracy across the advanced economies. For example, it was a British Labour government which followed America into a disastrous military quagmire in Iraq. An Australian Labor government floated the Australian dollar, sold off public assets, lowered tariffs and internationalised the economy with subsequent re-location/demise of domestic manufacturing.

The capitalist managerialism of social democracy has been consistent and persistent across the liberal democracies. The confusion and corrosion of traditional support within the working class has followed. The Left inside many traditional social democratic parties has been largely marginalised, eroded or departed altogether. It reflects a wider pattern of disgust and mistrust of self-serving 'business as usual' globalised elites and their 'political class' across subordinate classes. The prospect of a successful left social democratic reform agenda succeeding in coalition with centrist social democracy is thereby a challenging leap of faith. It is beyond serious credibility unless the ultimate aim is to simply resign ourselves to greenwashing the economic system and structure of power that got us to this climate endgame.