



Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor
By Rob Nixon
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In the 1980s, the Brundtland Commission's report on sustainable development radically stated that the environment was important for the poor. Damage to the environment was caused by the poor, but only where they had no choice. The rich were careless, and relentlessly continued their ways of living without particular concern for either environment or the poor. At the time, prominent economists and politicians were convinced that the economy had nothing to do with the environment. The latter was a cause only for those with the luxury of time or money. Now we are beginning to see something new – the growing convergence of environment and economy. But it is taking time.

In this literary analysis, Rob Nixon addresses calamities that are slow and long-lasting; environmental problems that remain on the outside of our

attention space. He focuses on individual writers and activists who themselves have brought environmental issues that affect the poor from the edge to centre stage. The issues are accidents at Bhopal and Chernobyl, oil fields in the Niger Delta, mega-dams on the Narmada River in India, Agent Orange in South East Asia. The writers are a mix of the well known and lesser known, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, Wangari Maathai, Rebecca Solnit, George Monbiot, Edward Said, Ramachandra Guha, Arundhati Roy, Abdelrahman Munif, Edward Abbey and Njabulu Ndebele.

Nixon has a big idea: slow violence. This works well, up to a point. Many of the problem situations are indeed slow to reveal themselves. And the impacts, particularly on the poor, are often shattering. But there remain two concerns with his argument. First, many of the issues are not slow: accidents may be the result of lax practices and poor management, but their impacts are immediate. Second, the theme of violence seems to imply deliberate acts. This is too simple a view of human actions. Decision-makers may be casual, and capable of ignoring the concerns of the disenfranchised, but most of the examples here are not deliberate acts of intentional violence. It is more complex.

Many of these authors write about the ultimately destructive force of the type of consumerism currently driving most of the global economy. The US currently has 80 cars for every 100 people, Europe 27 and China 0.8. Two billion people worldwide have no access to clean drinking water; in Europe each of us consumes 157 litres daily, in the US 400 litres, and in Las Vegas, the pinnacle of consumption, 1,600 litres per person per day. The average American emits 20 tonnes of carbon annually, but the average resident of developing countries just 0.2 tonnes. From where, then, does this environmental destruction arise? Guha distinguishes between “full-stomach” and “empty-belly” environmentalism. There is a very great difference between having no fuel and cutting down the last tree, and having plenty but wanting more, and cutting down the last tree to create ranches to feed the fast-food industry.

Nixon rightly points to these contradictions of the North, and the issue of who is given legitimacy. The late Michael Crichton did himself enormous discredit by arguing, in the introduction to his conspiracy-driven 2004 novel *State of Fear*, that the issue of climate change required at least 20 more years of data gathering before any policy decisions should be agreed. George W. Bush described Crichton as an “expert scientist”.

In this analysis of slow violence, it appears hard to map any kind of greyness between the hard positions of good and bad, wherever you sit. At times, there are complexities that should be recognised. These are often revealed by being in places, talking to the people themselves, observing conditions in person – whereas at times this book gives the impression of being written from within the Beltway, as they say of Washington DC and its space-station-like properties.

If Nixon had been in [to?] Chernobyl, he would have seen that it is not as it has been popularly described. If he had visited Indian villages, he would have seen the need for electricity. In the acknowledgements, he thanks audiences for their encouragement and stimulation: those audiences are in 21 universities in Australia, the US and the UK. I once met a Romanian woman, before the country joined the EU, scything a hay meadow under a steeply sloping orchard in a natural and cultural landscape of dramatic beauty. She said with feeling, “I hate this job; I want to go to Paris to see the shops.” Unless we find ways to give people different aspirations, both the rich and the not-rich, then the planet is indeed walking into disaster.

This is a fine book, disturbing and revealing in content, and worthy of lengthy study. Nixon makes a very good point about some of the writers he discusses: many were the first in their families to attend university. They found new and imaginative ways to convert the invisible to the visible, even if the “resource-omnivores” of the industrialised world ignore them still.

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