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THE MONTHLY REVIEW

The era of 'climate apartheid' is upon us

● SA is warming at twice the global average. Our economic inequalities, and the problems that come with it, are set to get even worse



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Climate Change: Briefings from Southern Africa, Bob Scholes, Mary Scholes & Mike Lucas (Wits University Press)

Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change, Nathaniel Rich (Picador)

On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal, Naomi Klein (Allen Lane)

South Africa's Survival Guide to Climate Change, Sipho Kings & Sarah Wild (Macmillan)

The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future, David Wallace-Wells (Allen Lane)

This is not a Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook, Douglas Rushkoff (Penguin)



The end is dry: A view of the floor of the Theewaterskloof Dam near Villiersdorp, Western Cape, in the midst of the severe drought of 2018.



Ayakha Melithafa

agreeing wholeheartedly. We have no choice but to move, with haste, towards renewable energy.

Even though the *Survival Guide* – in line with the Green New Dealers abroad – paints a picture of how this shift will actually stimulate an economy, other serious commentators doubt it is possible, given the economic needs and political aspirations of the planet's booming population. They put their faith instead in technology, from geo-engineering – reshaping the Earth's systems and climates – to solar-powered transportation.

All this takes time and money – and in the case of geo-engineering, carries huge risks. In the interim, what is to be done, beyond taxing carbon emissions, plant-based diets, cutting back on travel and planting trees? A planet-wide one-child policy? A global travel ban? Factory shutdowns? Even getting governments and industry (especially fossil fuel corporations) to stick to the commitments they have already made is proving to be difficult.

We South Africans might know a thing or two about adaptation thanks to load-shedding, but we haven't seen anything yet. I am beginning to reckon with how much my life, and that of the children in it, will change dramatically in the decades to come. But I know, too, that I am privileged and mobile and can pay to get off the grid, or to go somewhere cooler, leaving behind those dependent on fossil fuels for their livelihoods or for their energy to fend for themselves, as we move to renewables. Or to boil from inside if we don't.

In a taut report published late in 2019 and available online, the UN rapporteur on poverty, Philip Alston, coined a phrase to describe this, out of our very own country's lexicon of inequality: "Climate Apartheid". He cautions against a scenario where "the wealthy pay to escape overheating, hunger and conflict, while the rest of the world is left to suffer".

Douglas Rushkoff illustrates this brilliantly in *This is Not a Drill*. A tech forecaster, he describes a talk he gave to some of the world's richest men. They were most concerned about how they would survive "the event", as one called the climate apocalypse. Would New Zealand be OK? Greenland? And what about their security? "For them, the future of technology was really just about one thing: escape" – even to Mars. But, he concludes, "being

human is not about individual survival or escape. It's a team sport. Whatever future humans have, it will be together."

For Klein, we have become the agents of our own destruction precisely because we have embraced an economic system that requires us to forget this. Klein exemplifies the new eco-socialism that insists on weaning the planet off "addiction" to fossil-fuelled economic growth. She calls it the "gig and dig" economy, and sees the climate crisis as the result of "an extractive mindset" that views "both the natural world and the majority of its inhabitants as resources to use and then discard".

In *Losing Earth*, Rich gives several reasons why we were not able to act on what the science was telling us in the 1980s, despite a seeming consensus. He fingers, in particular, denialists in the US White House and the energy industry lobbies. Klein has a more systemic explanation: the very moment at which a consensus developed on the need to curtail carbon emissions was also "the blast-off point for the crusade to spread deregulated capitalism around the world", and the "rapid acceleration of climate breakdown has occurred simultaneously, and as a direct result, of the successful globalisation of the high consumer lifestyle ..."



This "has created barriers within our very selves, making it harder for us to look at this most pressing of humanitarian crises with anything more than furtive, terrified glances. Because of the way our daily lives have been altered by both market and technological triumphalism, we lack many of the observational tools necessary to convince ourselves that climate change is indeed an emergency – let alone the confidence to believe that a different way of living is possible."

Even if one doesn't agree with Klein's politics it is hard to fault her analysis of the roots of our denial. We – or let's be specific here, the readers of Business Day – are the direct beneficiaries of the fossil-fuelled growth that has created the climate emergency. In this way, our inability (or unwillingness) to do anything about it is not unlike another denialism I have known in my lifetime: that of white South Africans about apartheid.

I will explore this further next week.

The summer of 1988 was the worst of my life. It was not yet 23, I had just been misdiagnosed with Aids (more on that in the second part of this essay, published next week) and New York City was melting around me. It was the hottest summer yet in US history, Nathaniel Rich reports in *Losing Earth*, his book about how "we could have stopped climate change" in the 1980s. While I was having panic attacks under a wheezing fan in steamy Brooklyn, the world's leading climate scientist, Jim Hansen, testified before Congress that global warming had begun.

Twenty-eight years later, in 2016, Hansen was an author of a study concluding that, at our current carbon emissions rate, we could expect "the loss of all coastal cities, most of the world's large cities, and all their history" – possibly by the end of this century. This is reported in *On Fire*, a collection of Naomi Klein's fierce and fluent writings on the subject.

Now, as I read Rich's and Klein's books and others in the genre, I am trying to make sense of our species' suicidal inability to change its behaviour in the face of evidence that has been around since 1979. Klein reports how Time put a tattered Earth on its cover as "Planet of the Year" in 1988. I remember it vaguely. I had other things on my mind. As did we all.

This is how the science journalist David Wallace-Wells puts it in *The Uninhabitable Earth*: "The story of the industrial world's kamikaze mission is the story of a single lifetime – the planet brought from seeming stability to the brink of catastrophe in the years between a baptism or bar mitzvah and a funeral." My bar mitzvah, my funeral: this is a problem of our generation.

"If the planet was brought to the brink of climate catastrophe within the lifetime of a single

generation," writes Wallace-Wells, "the responsibility to avoid it belongs with a single generation too. It is ours."

Wallace-Wells's book makes for difficult and compulsive reading. He deliberately explores the worst-case scenarios because, he says, "high-end estimates establish the boundaries of what's possible" and the climate optimists are continually being proven wrong anyway. But even the best-case scenarios are devastating.

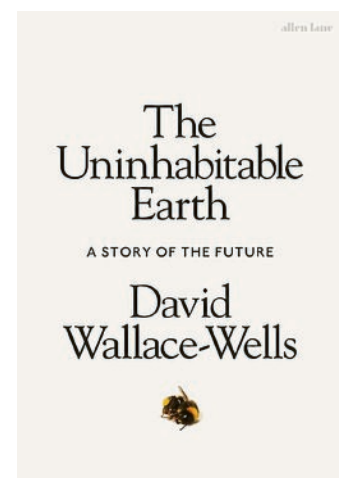
The Paris Agreement commits its signatories (which no longer include the US) to keeping Earth's temperature at 1.5 C higher than preindustrial levels. But even the most optimistic scenarios now acknowledge that 2 C is the best we can hope for.

The 2018 report of the UN's International Panel on Climate Change spells out the difference between 1.5 C and 2 C: that is to say 400-million more people will suffer from water scarcity, major cities in the equatorial band will become uninhabitable, and even in northern latitudes, heatwaves will kill thousands each summer. If we hit 8 C, which is where we are heading by the end of the century at the current rate of emissions, the game will be pretty much over.

Climate-change sceptics and even big-picture scientists note that there have been other great extinctions, that Earth's system changes and that not even the hubristic Homo Deus, as Yuval Noah Harari terms our species, can last forever.

This ignores a vital fact. We may well be moving out of what is known as the Holocene, a cosily warm period that has sustained life since the Ice Age, but the name that climate scientists have given the era we are approaching, the Anthropocene, speaks for itself: it is one "where the main influence on Earth's systems is human activity", as the authors of *Climate Change: Briefings from Southern Africa* put it.

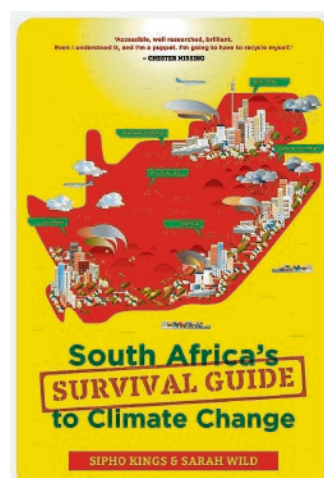
If you want to understand



the science behind climate change and its impact on this part of the world, you can do no better than read this book, first published in 2015 by three eminent SA scientists and just reissued. The most important takeaway: SA is warming at twice the global average. We are particularly vulnerable due to our already dry climate, our economic inequality (making adaptation difficult for the poor) and the way our economy depends on energy-intensive mining, not least coal itself.

According to one projection, the average annual temperature in Gauteng will be more than 40 C by the end of the century. Johannesburg will be a ghost town, returned to the highveld dust in only two centuries – the tiniest blip in world history – after it powered itself into being on the lucre of gold and the grimy dust of coal needed to extract it and burnish it. Cape Town will be an island for the rich; God knows who will serve them (us?), given that all of the Cape Flats will be under water.

One of the iniquities of global warming is that there is no correlation between who emits the greenhouse gases and who suffers their consequences: the wealthiest 10% on this planet are responsible for more than half its carbon emissions. Africa, responsible for only 4% of these, will suffer the most – along with small island states and



low-lying areas of Asia and Latin America. But while the foreign minister of the Marshall Islands has described the rising sea level as the equivalent of an imminent "genocide", you could argue that we South Africans are getting our just deserts.

GAUTENG COULD BE MORE THAN 40°C BY 2100. JOBURG MIGHT BE A GHOST TOWN, RETURNED TO THE HIGHVELD DUST IN TWO CENTURIES

We emit more than 7 tonnes of carbon dioxide per capita a year, making us one of the top-20 contributors to the climate crisis on the planet, on par with the major industrialised countries of Europe. Our reliance on coal, and the declining quality of it (so more needs to be burnt), means that our power sector is also, by far, the worst polluter of any in the Group of 20 (G-20) countries, producing more than double the amount of carbon per unit of energy than the G-20 average.

And yet there is almost no climate activism here. At a recent news briefing on Africa convened by Greta Thunberg, the youth activist Ayakha Melithafa offered the obvious reasons: "We are facing xenophobia, we're facing gender-based violence, we're



facing poverty and unemployment."

But Melithafa, a matric pupil from the Cape Flats, has set out a way of countering this, from her own lived experience.

"Drought made me a climate activist", she says, describing her mother's Eastern Cape farm: "When there is no water, animals and crops don't survive ... [and] during the most recent drought, our income also suffered."

In *This Is Not a Drill*, a bracing collection of essays, Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim describes how her pastoralist community in Chad is already living in an era of climate change. "This change brings poverty; it also brings conflicts ... Men start to fight for water or fertile lands and weapons are never far away," she writes.

There is increasing evidence that the recent influx of refugees into Europe has been triggered by drought as much as by conflict. According to the Red Cross, more refugees flee environmental crises than violent conflict. The UN projects that there will be 200-million climate refugees by 2050. And in SA's *Survival Guide to Climate Crisis*, the authors write that, already in our country, "the high temperatures and weather extremes have forced small-scale farmers to urbanise".

Perhaps this helps to explain, more than we have bothered to notice, the intense recent urbanisation of SA society,

contributing to the global phenomenon that Klein describes as a swelling of "the ranks of the rootless every day". Following this logic, all the problems Melithafa describes as distracting us from the climate crisis are actually worsened by it: xenophobia, gender-based violence, poverty, unemployment.

SA now, finally, has a carbon tax in place, and the government will introduce a Climate Change Bill later in 2020. Aware of its vulnerability, SA has played a very active role in the global climate negotiations. In 2009, we promised to grow our emissions until 2025, keep them steady for a decade, and then drop them as we move to renewables. It might have seemed like a good plan in 2009, but a decade later it seems it will be too little, too late – and the Eskom crisis has scrambled both our needs and this timeline dramatically.

"Coal no longer makes sense," wrote The Mail & Guardian at the end of 2019, drawing on the exemplary reporting of Sipho Kings, one of the authors of SA's *Survival Guide to Climate Change*. Now, as I struggle to reach my deadline on this very essay because of load-shedding (I haven't yet paid for the privilege to go off the grid) I find myself

