

## Decoloniality must be at the core of all climate justice debates

Movie review of Gibbs, J. (dir.). 2020. *Planet of the Humans*. 100 minute documentary film. USA. Available at <https://planetofthehumans.com/>

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Since its release on 21 April 2020, on the eve of the fiftieth Earth Day, the documentary *Planet of the Humans* (*POTH*) has been mired with controversies and it has incited heated debates and discussions (Bradshaw 2020; Milman 2020; Van Hecken and Kolinjivadi 2020). A big aspect of the reviews of the movie point (correctly) to the factual errors it makes about the state of the art of renewable energy technologies (Monbiot 2020; Stokes 2020).

We would like to supplement that much-needed view with our insights as researchers focusing on environmental and energy conflicts in the Global South, while questioning the current growth (and development) model. Although the documentary raises valid points in questioning that the world is not undergoing a smooth energy transition, it does so with an approach that remains limited. An analysis of climate justice without including a feminist decolonial perspective remains superficial, allows the film to remain in a bubble of comfort.

At some level, many of the conflicts over renewable energy and its infrastructures resemble what we have found while doing fieldwork in India and Chile. We have seen the deployment of a simplistic discourse of transition, that dismisses the negative impacts of renewable energy infrastructure. There is still a lack of critical attention given to development projects based on renewable energies, despite the socio-ecological conflicts they have generated. Recent studies have shown how renewable energy projects result in displacement of Indigenous communities, destruction of delicate ecosystems, and the disenfranchisement of affected communities. They exacerbate pre-existing power hierarchies and structural inequalities (Avila-Calero 2017; Yenneti and Day 2015).

At the very least, we welcome the discomfort *POTH* may have brought to those still unaware of the multiple conflicts and problems with renewable energy technologies and the economic and political interest of conservation NGOs, who are not neutral actors in these debates. If the documentary is useful for instigating research and asking questions beyond the headlines that say we are successfully undertaking a world-wide "energy transition", then *POTH* has justified its existence. However, certain serious issues in its narrative need to be pointed out.

The documentary might be pointing towards the right answers, but it is asking the wrong questions. When the narrator states "Green energy is not going to save us" there is too much hidden in that term "us." Not only is it narcissistic in referring to a small part of the world, but it assumes that the only thing worth "saving" in the context of climate breakdown is a certain way of life, the midday of fossil capitalism that we have lived in for the last 70 years, which in itself is an exceptional historical period (Love and Isenhour 2016).

Rather than stepping back and acknowledging that our current world configuration relies on excessive and wasteful use of energy, which often does not contribute to enhancing human wellbeing, *POTH* takes American civilizational arrangements —with all the extractive colonial relations they involve— as the sole desirable horizon for "humanity" as an undifferentiated whole. It assumes that the only possible way to "go forward" on decarbonization is reproducing the logic of extraction that global capitalism has developed in tandem with the age of oil supremacy. This is the continuation of the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2012), fundamentally incompatible with any degree of respect for planetary cycles of regeneration.

The film does a poor job of highlighting the massive destruction of biodiversity, communities and cultures in different parts of the world as a result of resources being extracted for the renewable energy sector. It does so through a two-minute fast-forwarded collage of clips of extraction of different minerals, with a

significant colonial gaze at faces of young African children working in mines. It neither explains where the minerals come from, nor explains how communities and cultures are affected by them.

Another underlying issue is the barely disguised overpopulation argument, that comes together with an understanding of humans as being "at the mercy of their own desires", incapable of controlling themselves and inevitably leading any place they inhabit into disaster. Besides reproducing a Malthusian logic (Kallis 2019) which states that the only solutions to the problem at hand is either population control, or endless expansion of resource use, the claim is simply untrue. As anthropologists have argued (Sahlins *et al.* 1996) this model of economic rationality, and of Man (as in, male), relates to a cosmology of scarcity and suffering that is not universal to all cultures. The erasure of other cosmologies and other ways of understanding human existence is a deep flaw in such Malthusian arguments, that only perpetuates epistemic violence from imperial centers like the United States.

The film spends a significant amount of time criticizing Bill McKibben and Al Gore, to the extent that the movie feels like a personal vendetta. There is no mention of any American climate justice activist of color. There are numerous examples of mobilizations and activists for an anti-colonial, intersectional climate justice movement. One doesn't have to search too far, since even at McKibben's organization [350.org](http://350.org) (and the film gives the impression that it did adequate research on [350.org](http://350.org)) the North American director, Tamara Toles O'Laughlin<sup>1</sup>, is working to build a multi-racial and multi-generational climate justice movement. And yet, the documentary remains uncomfortably white.

Ultimately, this documentary is an example of what happens when environmental issues are examined without regard to wider social and political contexts and histories. Our outlook is flattened, and we are left with a sense of despair and hopelessness.

Not understanding the historical roots of our fossil civilization risks overlooking the colonial and neocolonial relations that brought us here. The lack of questioning those relations is precisely what has taken us to the problem *POTH* seeks to unveil: going "green" is not a silver bullet that will quickly and easily take us out of our trouble.

All nourishing, insightful conversations about the urgent need for renewable energy technologies should put considerations of environmental justice at their center. By doing this, we can unlock possible futures where life can truly flourish for all. This is where we find the film to be lacking.

Decoloniality must be at the core of any and all environmental and climate change debates.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://tolesolaughlin.com/bio>

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