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The Carbon Rush: The Truth Behind the Carbon Market Smokescreen edited by Amy Miller

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The Enigmatic Compound: Carbon and the (Re)Production of Global Inequality

The Carbon Rush: The Truth Behind the Carbon Market Smokescreen edited by

AMY MILLER

Red Deer, 2014 \$24.95.

Reviewed by **MICHAEL CLASSENS**

Amy Miller's *The Carbon Rush* can be added to the growing body of work elegizing the lost decades of climate change mitigation. It also stands as further indictment of the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol, a promising international initiative which, almost two decades on, stands as a derisory failure. Inspired by an eponymous film, the book is a collection of essays written by local activists, expounding on the misery wrought by carbon offset trading projects from around the world—Panama to Scotland, India to Brazil. Likely owing to its cinematic origins, *The Carbon Rush* attends to its subject in a highly visual manner. The glossy, large format pages are adorned with high quality images and graphics, making this an esthetically fetching collection.

In the introductory essay, Miller carefully recounts how she came to be sufficiently animated by the subject of carbon trading to make a feature length documentary, interactive website, and edited book. A tireless environmental activist and media maker, Miller explains that it was while she was touring her previous film, *Myths, for Profit: Canada's Role in Industries of War and Peace*, that global carbon markets first piqued her intellectual and creative interest. "From various discussions it became clear," she writes, "that people were very unfamiliar with the concept of offsets" (11).

Little wonder this is the case. The mechanics of carbon offset trading are tedious and seemingly deliberately opaque. As political economist Patrick Bond gamely explains in the collection's concluding chapter, carbon trading is a market-based approach to reducing total global carbon emissions, the parameters of which were established by the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. The short version goes something like this: Kyoto established limits on the metric tonnage of carbon countries and industries are permitted to emit. In some instances, staying within these limits is governed through penalization and fining, and in other cases, compliance is voluntary. In either case, markets have emerged through which offending companies can buy credits to offset their emission levels from companies / projects / countries which have surplus credits as a result of not polluting or for providing some net environmental benefit (such as a wind farm, for example). This structure is colloquially referred to as a "cap and trade" system, and stands in contrast to "command and control" approaches in which governments make and enforce firm rules. The latter strategy has been employed to great effect to mitigate other environmental catastrophes—as an example, the removal of sulfur dioxide from industry smoke stacks in the 1990s. Jurisdictions using the cap and trade system saw a 31 percent reduction in sulfur dioxide, while places employing the command and control approach saw levels drop by 87 percent (Bond, "Emissions Trading" 689). However, in the current socio-economic context of advanced capitalism, the more capital-friendly cap and trade systems are far more common.

To be fair, not all cap and trade systems are created equal, and while this venue does not afford the space to expound

on the subtleties of various carbon offset emission trading schemes, suffice it to say that many venerable environmental organizations are in support of specific carbon trading systems, including Greenpeace International, WWF International, and the David Suzuki Foundation (Carbon Offsets).

The collected essays in *The Carbon Rush*, however, attend specifically to carbon trading schemes propelled by Clean Development Mechanisms (CDMs). CDMs, also created as part of Kyoto, were designed to allow wealthier countries (and corporations) to offset their emissions by supporting emission reduction projects in middle-income and poor countries, under the auspices of “clean development.” The problem, unsurprisingly, is that the CDM-driven carbon market has tended to extend and deepen the colonial predilection of capital, perpetuating poverty and environmental injustice.

The true strength of the collection comes from baring witness to the violent geography of carbon trading. Seven chapters, penned by those on the frontline of resistance to coercive offset projects, provide brutal texture to the official feel-good narrative of international carbon markets. Their accounts lay bare the perverse lie to the logic of leaning on capitalism to alleviate poverty and mitigate climate change.

Tahiane Paráiso Silva writes about the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, in which the generation of offset credits has led to the creation of the largest contiguous eucalyptus plantation in the world. Small holders have been kicked off their land, animal habitat has been destroyed, and livelihoods have been irrecoverably altered. Ecological diversity and meaningful livings have been replaced by a 1.4 million acre

monocrop behemoth and a handful of low paying, low skill jobs.

In Panama, meanwhile, indigenous populations are being displaced and dispossessed of land they battled decades to wrest from the hands of imperial colonialism. In 2012, the Ngöbe and Buglé people organized peaceful demonstrations against CDM projects and were met with stunning state-sponsored violence. In this case, “The protestors, in great part women, children and youth, were indiscriminately massacred and attacked with tear gas, chemicals, brutal and lethal force by police” (MacIntyre 105).

Displacement, the loss of livelihoods, theft of land, and state/corporate violence are themes common to many of the revealing case studies in the collection. And though particularistic in their details, each story is unified through the broader coercive structure of global capital. Miller rightly points out the shell game in CDM-driven carbon markets: We’re drawn to focus on that enigmatic compound, carbon, “instead of the flows of capital responsible for its emission” (9).

A meaty concluding chapter by Bond notwithstanding, readers looking for an academic, theoretical engagement with the intersection of carbon trading and global flows of capital would do well to look elsewhere. It is not that the collection is absent of academic merit—indeed it can be considered a welcome example of situated ethnography and activist scholarship—but rather that it is not designed explicitly as an academic intervention. With its large format pages, colourful pictures, and extraordinary stories, the collection is meant to be an enticing introduction into the complex issue of carbon markets and CDM carbon trading schemes. For those wishing to pursue the

issue further from an academic perspective, the footnotes that accompany Bond's concluding chapter provide a fertile place to start. Those wanting to move beyond an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness after encountering the unimaginable violence of this mainstream, ostensible solution to climate change will find solace (and opportunity) in the final section (Miller, "Five Things").

However, as with many books of this description, the call to action section seems inadequate to the task at hand. But perhaps the point of such books is aspirational, not prescriptive—to inspire new ideas and yet-to-be discovered solutions in its readers. Perhaps this is the ultimate roll for emotive, creative, and activist-led books in resisting the reproduction of global inequality

through carbon trading. To this end, *The Carbon Rush* stands as a welcome addition.

Works cited

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