Will the People with Guns Allow Our Planet to Breathe: The Forty-Fourth Newsletter (2021)



Chris Jordan (USA), *Crushed Cars #2 Tacoma*, 2004.

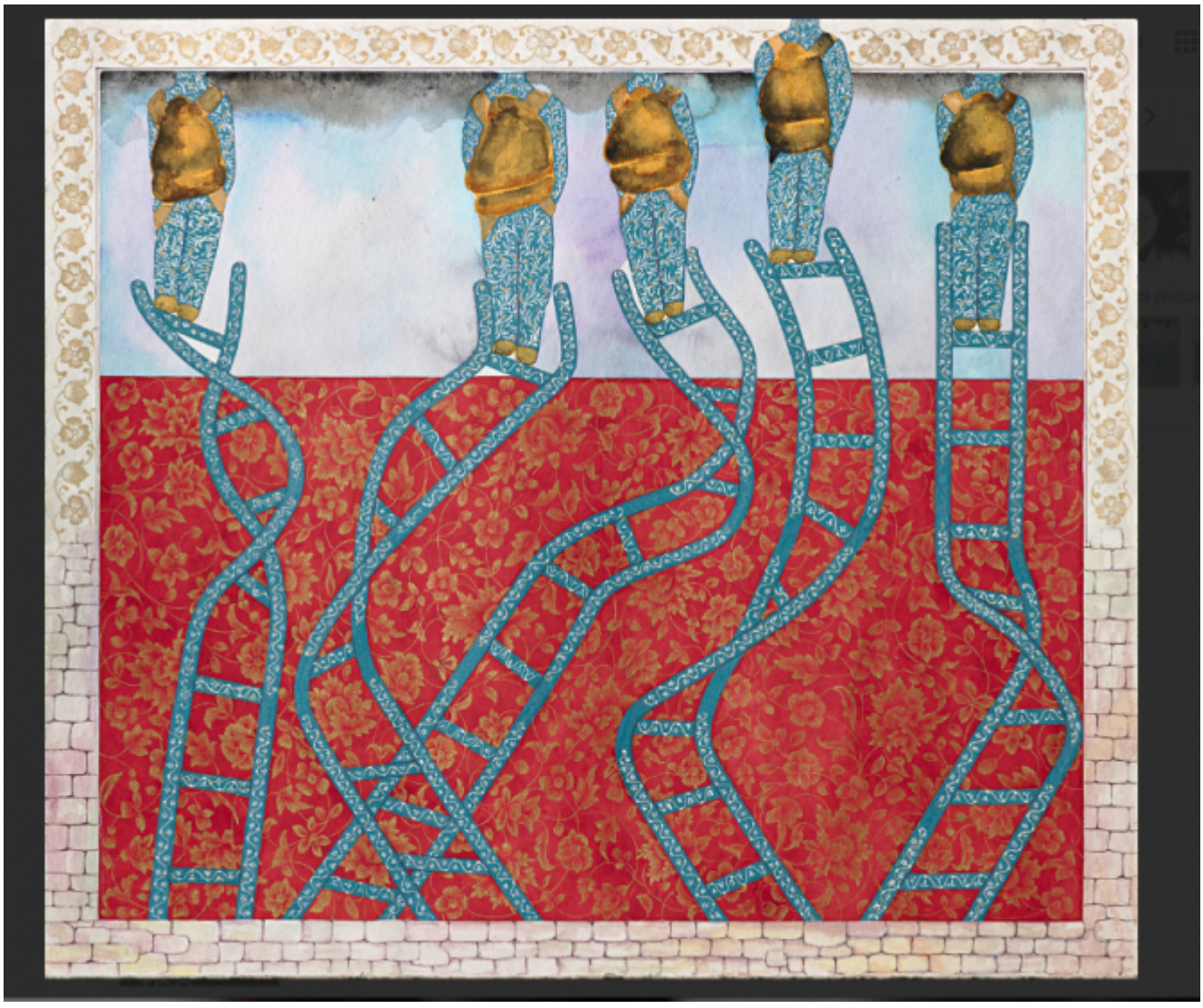
Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

It is perhaps fitting that United States President Joe Biden arrived in Glasgow for the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) on the climate catastrophe with eighty-five cars in tow months after **declaring** 'I'm a car guy' (for details on the climate catastrophe, see our **Red Alert no. 11**, 'Only One Earth'). Only three countries

in the world have **more** cars per person than the US, and these countries (Finland, Andorra, and Italy) have a much smaller population than the United States.

Just before Biden left for the G20 summit, his meeting with Pope Francis, and COP26, he had his administration **pressure** the oil-producing states (OPEC+) to 'do the needful when it comes to supply' – namely to increase oil production. While the US pressured OPEC+ to boost oil production, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) released its key **report** on global emissions. UNEP pointed out that the G20 countries account for close to 80% of global greenhouse gases and that the three highest per capita major carbon **emitters** are Saudi Arabia, Australia, and the United States. Since the populations of Saudi Arabia (34 million) and Australia (26 million) are so much smaller than that of the United States (330 million), it is clear that the US emits much greater volumes of CO2 than these other two countries: Australia accounts for 1.2% of global carbon emissions, while Saudi Arabia accounts for 1.8%, and the United States 14.8%.



Francesco Clemente (Italy), *Sixteen Amulets for the Road (XII)*, 2012-2013.

Before the Glasgow meeting, the G20 leaders convened in Rome to firm up their own approach towards the climate catastrophe. The communiqué that emerged from this meeting, '**G20 Rome Leaders' Declaration**', was tepid, using terms like 'make progress', 'strengthen actions', and 'scale up'. According to the **report** by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), unless carbon emissions are reduced, it is unlikely that the key goal of having no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming compared to pre-industrial levels will be met. The IPCC notes that there is an 83% chance of reaching that target if carbon emissions are reduced to 300 gigatons from now to the time that we achieve net-zero carbon emissions (there are currently **35 gigatons** of annual CO2 emissions from fossil fuels). There is only a 17% chance of reaching a global temperature increase of no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius if we can only reduce emissions to 900 gigatons. The IPCC suggests that the faster the world moves to net-zero emissions, the better the chance of preventing catastrophic levels of warming.

At the 2015 COP21 meeting in Paris, none of the powerful countries would even utter the phrase 'net-zero emissions'. Now, thanks to the work of the IPCC reports and to the mass campaigns around the world on the climate emergency, the phrase is forced into the mouths of leaders who would prefer to be 'car guys'. Though the need to move to zero carbon emissions by 2050 has been on the table for some years, the G20 statement ignored this and chose the vague formulation that net emissions must end 'by or around mid-century'. There was also little appetite to talk about global methane emissions, which are the second most abundant anthropogenic greenhouse gas after CO2.

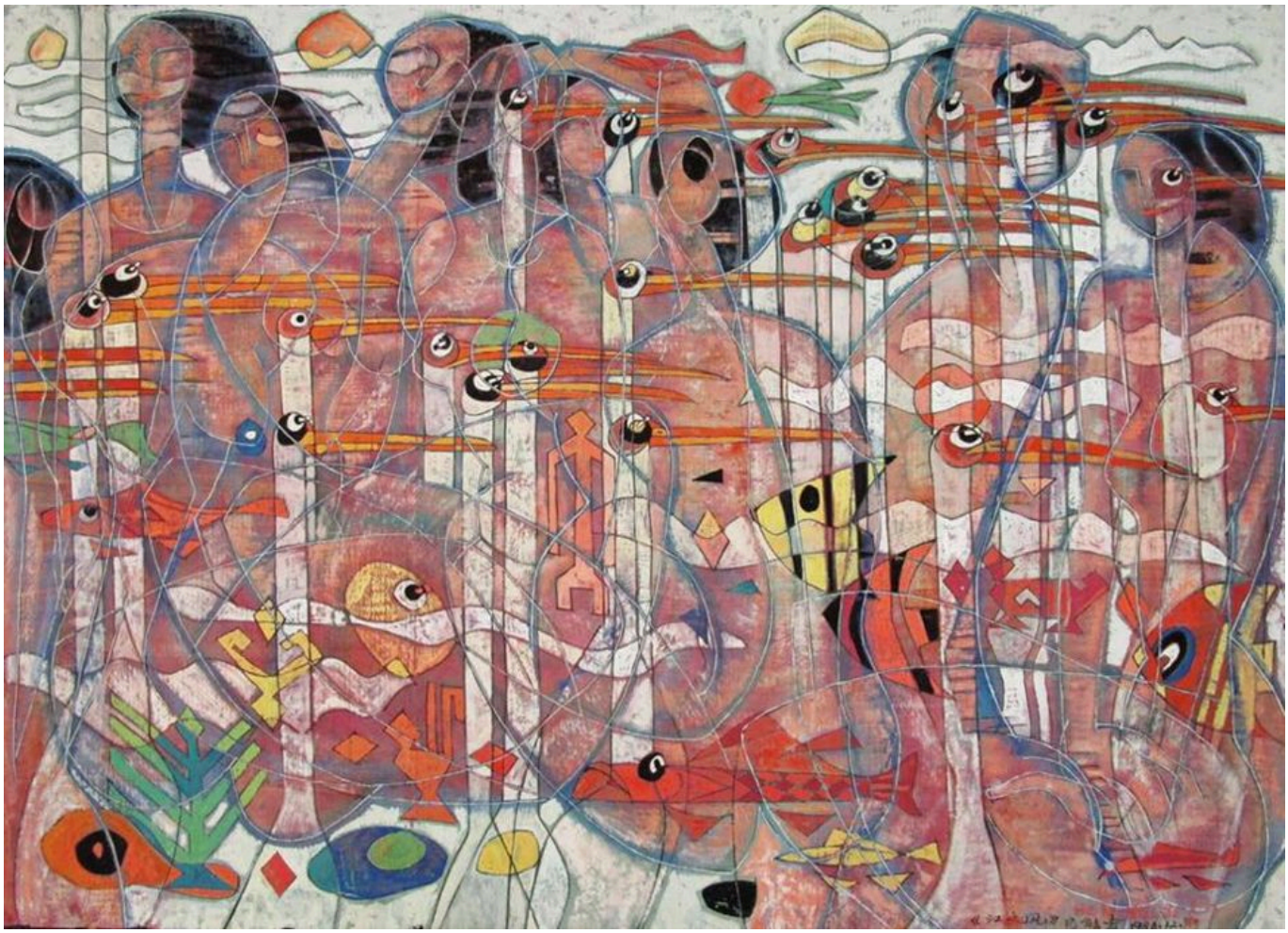


Iwan Suastika (Indonesia), *The Beauty and the Fragile Ones (Planet Earth)*, 2020.

In the days before the COP26 meeting, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet **said**, 'It is time to put empty speeches, broken promises, and unfulfilled pledges behind us. We need laws to be passed, programmes to be implemented, and investments to be swiftly and properly funded, without further delay'. However, there has been a delay since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. Picking up on the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm (1972), the countries of the world **pledged** to do two things: reverse the degradation of the environment and recognise the 'common but differentiated responsibilities' of developed and developing countries. It was clear that developed countries – mainly the West, the old colonial powers – had used up far more than their share of the 'carbon budget', while developing countries had not contributed nearly as much to the climate catastrophe and struggled to fulfil their basic obligations to their populations.

The Rio formula – common and differentiated responsibilities – hung over the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Accords (2015). Promises were made but not met. Developed countries promised what began to be called 'climate finance' both to mitigate the disastrous outcomes of the climate catastrophe and to shift

reliance upon carbon-based energy to other forms of energy. **The Green Climate Fund** has remained far smaller than the annual $100 billion commitment pledged in 2009. The Rome G20 meeting did not come to any consensus on the empty bucket; meanwhile, it is important to recognise the stark contrast that, during the pandemic, a total of $16 trillion in fiscal stimulus was **disbursed** between March 2020 and March 2021, mainly in the developed countries. Given the improbability of a serious discussion about climate finance taking place, it is likely that COP26 will be a failure.



He Neng (China), *Waterfront*, 1986.

Tragically, the COP26 process has been swept into the matrix of dangerous geopolitical tensions, driven largely by the United States in its **quest** to prevent China's scientific and technological advancement. Coal is at the centre of the debate, with the argument being made that unless China and India cut back on their coal-fired power plants, no carbon reduction will be possible. At the United Nations in September, China's President Xi Jinping **said**, 'China will strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060'; he also stated that China would 'not build new coal-fired plants overseas'. This was a monumental statement, far ahead of any of the pledges made by the other major global powers. Rather than

build on this commitment, the debate driven by the West has largely been to malign developing countries, including China, and blame them for the climate catastrophe.

Looking at the IPCC evidence, economist John Ross recently **showed** that, according to the United States' own proposal to reduce current emissions by 50-52% from 2005 levels, the country's level of per capita CO2 emissions would still make up 220% of the global average in 2030. If the US were to reach its goal, the country's per capita carbon emissions in 2030 would be 42% higher than China's are today. The US has suggested that it would like to see a 50% reduction of emissions by 2030; since it would take the baseline at the uneven present levels of emissions, it would be allowed to emit 8.0 tonnes of CO2, China would be entitled to 3.7 tonnes, Brazil to 1.2 tonnes, India to 1.0 tonnes, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to 0.02 tonnes. As it stands, Ross shows, China's per capita CO2 emissions are only 46% of US emissions, while other developing countries emit far less (Indonesia, 15%; Brazil, 14%; India, 12%). For further details, please follow the **Climate Equity Monitor** developed by the **MS Swaminathan Research Foundation** and the **National Institute of Advanced Studies** (Bengaluru, India).

Rather than focus on the necessary energy transition, developed countries have taken to crude propaganda against a handful of developing states such as China and India. The Energy Transition Commission's *Making Mission Possible: Delivering a Net-Zero Economy* **report** estimates that the cost of a transition will be 0.5% of global GDP by 2050, an insignificant amount compared to the catastrophic alternatives such as the disappearance of several small island nations and increasing wildly erratic weather patterns.

The cost of the transition has decreased because of the decline in the costs of key technologies (onshore wind farms, solar photovoltaic cells, batteries, etc.). However, it is important to recognise that these costs are kept artificially low because of the very low wages paid to miners of key minerals and metals that power these technologies (such as cobalt miners in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and because of the paltry royalty payments collected by countries of the South for these raw materials. If the real costs were paid, the transition would be more expensive, and the countries of the South would have resources to pay for the shift without reliance upon the climate fund.



Victor Ehikhamenor (Nigeria), Child of the Sky VII, 2015.

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research will be in Glasgow along with delegates from the **International Peoples' Assembly**. We will be at various events to gauge the sentiment of people's movements. At the conference, Nnimmo Bassey of the **Health of Mother Earth Foundation** (Benin City, Nigeria) and I spoke about the catastrophe together. Bassey wrote a powerful **poem**, 'Return to Being', extracted here:

> The battle rages
> Who must gobble up the carbon budget,
> Wrap Mother Earth in endless bales of smog?
> Whose task is to pile the climate debt
> And whose lot to be the carbon slave?
> Colonise the biosphere
> Obliterate the ethnosphere
> Hopes mapped in colonial geographies of death
> Scarified for sport, booby-trapped, and floating on blood
>
> …
>
> The dream is gone, the cock has crowed,

The betrayer seeks a branch to ape a pendulum swing
And one or two shed a tear for the press
As the hawk glides softly on the winds of the dirge seeking a hapless prey
Funeral drums burst by pulsating biceps of pain
Flutes whisper a dirge long forgotten suddenly emerging from the depths of years of erased histories
As daughters and sons of the soil pick up pieces of sacred hills, rivers, forests
Mother Earth awakes, embraces her visible and invisible children
And finally humans return to being.

Warmly,

Vijay