In the Climate Change Race, Who Wins and Who Loses?

By Catherine A. Craig

Editors’ Note: Our Beyond Apocalypse Series focuses on creative, constructive human responses in the face of urgent climate and environmental challenges. In this second installment, student activist Catherine Craig unpacks the metaphor of the race against time. When we allow ourselves and our politics to be swept along in a headlong rush, the people most often excluded from solutions or scapegoated for blame are those already living within marginalized communities. Craig reminds us to stop racing, and learn from our complex histories in order to reframe climate change as a social justice issue.

— Co-editors Katie McKay Bryson and Betsy Hartmann

Climate change is an urgent issue. Clearly, if we don’t act to alter the industrial and consumption practices that cause it soon, the global impact of climate change will expand exponentially. Some environmentalists have characterized this political and social challenge as a race to be won or lost. Lester Brown, American author and environmentalist, writes:

“We are in a race between political tipping points and natural ones. Can we cut carbon emissions fast enough to keep the melting of the Greenland ice sheet from becoming irreversible? Can we close coal-fired power plants in time to save at least the larger glaciers in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan plateau? Can we head off ever more intense crop-withering heat waves before they create chaos in world grain markets?”

Brown asks whether we can act quickly enough to stop climate change, or if it will beat us to the finish line. And what is at stake in the “finish line” of climate change? Brown and others, like historian Jared Diamond, suggest it’s no less than the possibility of avoiding societal collapse.
Winning an urgent race against the clock is a metaphor the United States has embraced many times before, and protecting civilization from imminent collapse is often imagined as the victor’s prize. The nuclear arms race, for instance, pitted US capitalist values against the perceived threat of the Soviet Union in a widely-felt “race” to develop powerful nuclear weapons. The loser of this race, it was understood, would be vulnerable to domination, or even annihilation.

In a race, someone always loses — but there are also those who don’t even make it across the finish line, who are pushed to the sidelines and dismissed, regardless of who wins or loses. During the Cold War arms race, nuclear testing was considered justifiable, even desirable, in pursuit of ever-advancing atomic weaponry. The dangers posed by radioactive waste in wheat, milk, groundwater, and the bloodstreams of those who lived near testing sites were considered reasonable collateral damage when they were considered at all. The legacy of that race is that it continues: in 1996 the U.S. Senate rejected a United Nations ban on all forms of nuclear testing, and nuclear power is now touted as a viable source of green energy by legislators and lobbyists across the political spectrum. The effects of radiation are well understood, especially in light of devastating health effects seen in downwinder and uranium mining communities from Utah, Nevada, Washington, Alaska, and other US testing sites. Yet, when the nation is caught up in the urgency and competition of a race, the consuming goal of victory makes those left behind invisible.²

This was also true in the race to reduce population growth. Beginning in the late 1960s, population control advocates began blaming the fertility of poor people for everything from environmental degradation and poverty to political instability in the global South. If we didn’t race to reduce population growth, the conventional wisdom ran, the planet’s resources would run out, leading to scarcity and famine. Racist rhetoric about who deserved the freedom to create families and access to resources and land was used to justify coercive population control programs, such as forced sterilization campaigns. The people pushed to the sidelines were mainly poor women whose reproductive autonomy and human rights were sacrificed to win another so-called race against time. In the process, the provision of basic health care, including voluntary family planning, was undermined.³

In the contemporary race against climate change, poor communities and people of color are being targeted once again. While they are likely to be the main victims of climate change, they are instead being portrayed as the perpetrators by groups such as Apply the Brakes and the Optimum Population Trust (OPT) who blame climate change primarily on population growth in poorer countries, and immigration to wealthier countries.

Lester Brown has been called “the guru of the environmental movement” by the Calcutta Telegraph, and “one of the great pioneer environmentalists,” by BBC commentator Peter Day.⁴ In 1986, the Library of Congress requested his personal papers, in order to memorialize his impact on modern environmental thinking. He has founded influential environmental organizations, such as the Earth Policy Institute and the Worldwatch Institute. More recently, he’s become a leading figure in the Apply the Brakes network, which works to curb immigration and population within the United States by lobbying Congress to change immigration policies.⁵

On the Apply the Brakes website, you can click a Take Action button and send this statement to Congress: “We live in a beautiful country with a natural environment that must be saved and passed to future generations. Regrettably, we have put ourselves on an unsustainable course of high consumption and rapid population growth — 100 million people in just thirty-six years since the first Earth Day. The U.S. Congress is largely responsible for causing this growth. Please join a leading group of conservation leaders and urge your representatives to ‘Apply The Brakes.’”

Apply the Brakes lobbies in Washington, D.C. for global population reduction programs, but when the organization blames Congress for US population growth, what they’re referencing is immigration policy. The
Apply the Brakes website attempts to link immigration and environmental degradation, complaining that Congress created a modern “…immigration boom. The progress of the American people towards a stable and sustainable population and the sacrifices we made in voluntarily adopting replacement level reproduction have been undone by our government.”

Another group lobbying to restrict worldwide population is Optimum Population Trust (OPT), which, though not directly related to Lester Brown, regularly cites his work. OPT is a British organization that claims curbing population is the solution to curbing emissions. The OPT website’s homepage features an animation on replay, showing a rapid, exponential growth of black silhouettes of human bodies. Text flashes across the screen, reading, “9.1 billion. Help Reverse Population Growth. Stop at Two. Here’s the Pledge.” During summer 2010, OPT released a publication called Over-population Index. This document ranks countries by what the organization deems over-population, with Singapore, Israel and Kuwait coming in at the top. Using an ecological footprint methodology, the index claims that the world as a whole is home to 2 billion too many people. While the index does acknowledge the role of over-consumption in resource scarcity, it points out that the population of the entire African continent, while not exceeding its biocapacity share, has both higher levels of fertility and poverty than any other continent. OPT chair Roger Martin describes this as “a stark illustration of the unfortunate trade-offs between growing populations and sustainable livelihoods which we are currently seeing.” Yet Martin ignores the sociopolitical forces of oppression that generate said trade-offs: to dismiss entirely the role of colonialism in Africa in creating the unstable and impoverished conditions that have historically benefited industrialized and colonizing countries is a gross oversight.

The top of OPT’s homepage reads, “Concerned about the speed of global warming?” immediately above a rapidly running digital clock representing current world population. Climate change is represented as a time bomb: if we don’t stop growing, it’s sure to blow! OPT has established a new project, PopOffsets, to curb carbon emissions through combined carbon offset and family planning programs. PopOffsets has a program in the UK and one in Madagascar. In Madagascar, PopOffsets acknowledges that the per capita emissions and rates of consumption are very low, while explaining, “One cannot assume, however, that people will continue to live in relative poverty and these growing economies will, inevitably, lead to greater emissions per capita.” Again, the race does not leave time for questions about why anyone would feel reassured by the idea that people would continue to live in poverty, using far less than their global fair share of energy resources, while global elites consume several times over the global fair share. Instead, Optimum Population Trust draws a direct link between carbon and population, targeting the wrong people and sources for blame. The truth is, the climate change link lies between carbon and consumption, not carbon and babies.

The threat of climate change should not be underestimated. The global community — especially those governments that have historically benefitted most from the carbon-intensive industrial processes responsible for climate change — should be acting swiftly to address both its causes and effects. People should devote thought and energy to leaving a light impact on the earth, and we should be organizing for effective, progressive climate legislation. But we should not be racing. History has shown us that it’s dangerous to move so fast that governments are able to hide or lose sight of which people are being shoved to the sidelines, or left out entirely.

One of the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative’s (EJCC) Principles for Just Climate Policies in... to dismiss entirely the role of colonialism in Africa in creating the unstable and impoverished conditions that have historically benefited industrialized and colonizing countries is a gross oversight.
the U.S. is caution in the face of uncertainty. The initiative focuses on reframing climate change as an issue that disproportionately affects people of color, impoverished communities and indigenous communities. EJCC’s work seeks to remind us that, in facing climate change, we should take the time to make policies that are socially just as well as environmentally responsible. Population control and anti-immigrant policies are just two examples of injustice among the many ways that more vulnerable social groups are left behind to bear disproportionate burdens, or even scapegoated for blame, by some environmental strategies.

As we work to curb carbon emissions and address our global environmental crisis, we should not allow our urgency to limit our vision of justice. We know that climate change will disproportionately affect the world’s poorest people; our responsibility is to create socially responsible environmental policies.

Let’s stop the race and look around us. It’s time to reframe climate change as a social justice issue.

About the Author
Catherine Craig is a third year student at Hampshire College, studying environmental science. This spring she will be on field study as a legislative intern for Rural Vermont, a farmer advocacy group working to promote sustainable farms and economic justice in Vermont.

Notes
2. Jared Diamond is the author of Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed. Diamond has a problematic population discourse, as demonstrated by his chapter, “Malthus in Africa: Rwanda’s Genocide.” Here he suggests that the genocide was a product of resource scarcity and overpopulation, ignoring the role of colonialism and oppression in resource scarcity and poverty.
7. Ibid. (http://www.applythebrakes.com/learnmore.asp)
9. The ecological footprint model offers a way of estimating how much of the Earth’s resources a person or a community uses by asking how much cropland, grazing land, forest land, fishing ground and fossil fuel is required to support that person or group’s consumption of food, housing, transportation, and consumer goods and services. It is embraced by many researchers as more complex and less problematic than the concept of “carrying capacity,” though some critics point out that the footprint can still cloak the relatively minor contributions of poor people by averaging consumption across an entire community or country.
11. Ibid.