

# TROPIC OF CHAOS

affects 300 million people per year, killing 300,000 of them. By 2030, floods, droughts, forest fires, and new diseases grow worse—as many as 500,000 people per year could be killed by climate change, and the economic cost of these disruptions could reach \$600 billion annually.<sup>5</sup>

Rising sea levels will be one of the greatest stresses. In 2007, the UN projected that sea levels could rise by an average of 7 to 23 inches during this century. These numbers were soon amended, and scientists now believe sea levels will rise by an average of 5 feet over the next 90 years.<sup>6</sup> Sea-level rises will lead to massive dislocations. One recent study from Columbia University's Center for International Earth Science Information Network projects that 700 million climate refugees will be on the move by 2050.<sup>7</sup>

## *Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*

Perhaps the modern era's first climate refugees were the five hundred thousand Bangladeshis left homeless when half of Bhola Island flooded in 2005. In Bangladesh 22 million people will be forced from their homes by 2050 because of climate change. India is already building a militant border fence along its 2,500-mile frontier with Bangladesh, and the right wing activists of India's Hindu Right are pushing vigorously for the deportation of (Muslim) Bangladeshi immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, twenty-two Pacific Island nations, home to 7 million people, are planning for relocation as rising seas threaten them with near annihilation. What will happen when China's cities begin to flood? The eastern seaboard of the United States starts to flood, how will the institutions respond?

All eyes,  
I have you for setting up  
that event. I will make  
this better up for  
you. Thank you.

## *The Catastrophic Convergence*

Climate change arrives in a world primed for crisis. The current already-existing pending dislocations of climate change intersect with the already-existing crises of poverty and violence. I call this collision of political, economic, and environmental disasters *the catastrophic convergence*. By catastrophic convergence, I do not merely mean that several disasters happen simultaneously, one problem atop another. Rather, I argue that problems compound and amplify each other, one expressing itself through another.

Societies, like people, deal with new challenges in ways that are conditioned by the traumas of their past. Thus, damaged societies, like damaged people, often respond to new crises in ways that are irrational, shortsighted, and self-destructive. In the case of climate change, the prior traumas that set the stage for bad adaptation, the destructive social response, are Cold War-era militarism and the economic pathologies of neoliberal capitalism. Over the last forty years, both these forces have distorted the state's relationship to society—removing and undermining the state's collectivist, regulatory, and redistributive functions, while overdeveloping its repressive and military capacities. This, I argue, inhibits society's ability to avoid violent dislocations as climate change kicks in.

In this book I examine the prehistories of the climate disaster in order to explain how the world came to be such a mess and, thus, so prone to respond to climate change in ways that exacerbate the social fallout of the new extreme weather. In much of the world, it seems that the only solidarity forthcoming in response to climate change is an exclusionary tribalism, and the only state policy available is police repression. This is not "natural" and inevitable but rather the result of a history—particularly the history of the Global North's use and abuse of the Global South—that has destroyed the institutions and social practices that would allow a different, more productive response.

The Cold War sowed instability throughout the Third World; its myriad proxy wars left a legacy of armed groups, cheap weapons, smuggling networks, and corrupted officialdoms in developing countries. Neoliberal economic policies—radical privatization and economic deregulation enforced by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank—have pushed many economies in the Third World—or, if you prefer, the Global South—into permanent crisis and extreme inequality. In these societies, the state has often been reduced to a hollow shell, devoid of the institutional capacity it needs to guide economic development or address social crises.

Sometimes these forces have worked together simultaneously; at other times they have been quite distinct. For example, Somalia was destroyed by Cold War military interventions. It became a classic proxy battleground.

## Solidarity

Though it underwent some limited economic liberalization, its uspawn on the chessboard of global political struggle caused its collapse. The same holds true for Afghanistan, which was, and still is, a failed state that never underwent structural adjustment but was a proxy battleground. On the other hand, Mexico, the north of which is now experiencing a found violent crisis, was not a frontline state during the Cold War, was subject to radical economic liberalization.

Climate change now joins these crises, acting as an accelerant. The tagon calls it a "threat multiplier." All across the planet, extreme weather and water scarcity now inflame and escalate existing social conflicts. Columbia University's Earth Institute and the International Crisis Group, combining databases on civil wars and water availability, found that "rainfall is significantly below normal, the risk of a low-level conflict relating to a full-scale civil war approximately doubles the following year." The project cites the example of Nepal, where the Maoist insurgents most severe after droughts and almost nonexistent in areas with no rainfall. In some cases, when the rains were late or light, or came once, or at the wrong time, "semiretired" armed groups often reemerged to start fighting again.

Between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Tropic of Cancer lies what I call the *Tropic of Chaos*, a belt of economically and politically battered colonial states girding the planet's mid-latitudes. In this band, around the tropics, climate change is beginning to hit hard. The societies in this region are also heavily dependent on agriculture and fishing, thus very vulnerable to shifts in weather patterns. This region was also on the front lines of the Cold War and of neoliberal economic restructuring. As a result, in this region we find clustered most of the failed and semifailed states of the developing world.

According to a Swedish government study, "There are 46 countries home to 2.7 billion people—in which the effects of climate change will act with economic, social, and political problems will create a high risk of violent conflict."<sup>10</sup> The study's list covers that same terrain—those latitudes that are now being most affected by the onset of anthropogenic climate change.

Read

Western military planners, if not political leaders, recognize the dangers in the convergence of political disorder and climate change. Instead of worrying about conventional wars over food and water, they see an emerging geography of climatologically driven civil war, refugee flows, pogroms, and social breakdown. In response, they envision a project of open-ended counterinsurgency on a global scale.<sup>11</sup>

### *Mitigation and Adaptation*

The watchwords of the climate discussion are *mitigation* and *adaptation*—that is, we must mitigate the causes of climate change while adapting to its effects. Mitigation means drastically cutting our production of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases, like methane and chlorofluorocarbons, that prevent the sun's heat from radiating back out to space. Mitigation means moving toward clean energy sources, such as wind, solar, geothermal, and tidal kinetic power. It means closing coal-fired power plants, weaning our economy off oil, building a smart electrical grid, and making massive investments in carbon-capture and -sequestration technologies.

Adaptation, on the other hand, means preparing to live with the effects of climatic changes, some of which are already underway and some of which are inevitable—in the pipeline. Adaptation is both a technical and a political challenge.

*Technical adaptation* means transforming our relationship to nature as nature transforms: learning to live with the damage we have wrought by building seawalls around vulnerable coastal cities, giving land back to mangroves and everglades so they can act to break tidal surges during giant storms, opening wildlife migration corridors so species can move north as the climate warms, and developing sustainable forms of agriculture that can function on an industrial scale even as weather patterns gyrate wildly.

*Political adaptation*, on the other hand, means transforming humanity's relationship to itself, transforming social relations among people. Successful political adaptation to climate change will mean developing new ways of containing, avoiding, and deescalating the violence that climate change

fuels. That will require economic redistribution and development. It also require a new diplomacy of peace building.

However, another type of political adaptation is already under way that might be called the *politics of the armed lifeboat*: responding to climate change by arming, excluding, forgetting, repressing, policing, and killing. One can imagine a green authoritarianism emerging in rich countries, the climate crisis pushes the Third World into chaos. Already, as climate

change fuels violence in the form of crime, repression, civil unrest, war, even state collapse in the Global South, the North is responding with a authoritarianism. The Pentagon and its European allies are actively planning a militarized adaptation, which emphasizes the long-term, open-ended containment of failed or failing states—counterinsurgency forever.

This sort of “climate fascism,” a politics based on exclusion, segregation, and repression, is horrific and bound to fail. There must be an path. The struggling states of the Global South cannot collapse without eventually taking wealthy economies down with them. If climate change allowed to destroy whole economies and nations, no amount of walls, barbed wire, armed aerial drones, or permanently deployed mercenary forces will be able to save one half of the planet from the other.

### *The Argument*

The chapters that follow tour the Tropic of Chaos, that violent and impoverished swath of terrain around the mid-latitudes of the planet. As I explore places, I explore history and use a historical analysis. If at glance you expected a book about the future, in fact you are holding a history. From understanding the past, we can better analyze both present and the dangerous future ahead. I begin by laying out how the security forces of the Global North are moving toward an embrace of militarized adaptation. I then look at the history of counterinsurgency as one of the historical streams leading into the catastrophic convergence as a central feature of militarized adaptation.

Next I return to the question of who killed Ekaru Loruman in a

The story then moves to Central Asia to explore the climatic elements of the Afghanistan war and the Pakistan-India conflict. While in the region, we take a side trip to Kyrgyzstan, because it is an extreme case of climatically driven social breakdown. Moving east, we visit Andhra Pradesh to explore the links between neoliberalism, climate change, and the spread of Maoist guerillas in eastern India. Jumping across the Pacific, we resume the story in Brazil, where I link climate change in the *Nordeste* to extreme violence in Rio de Janeiro's favelas. In that section, Cold War-era repression and neoliberalism are seen working in concert. Then we move north to the border between Mexico and the United States, delving more deeply into the legacy of neoliberal capitalism, which—far more than Cold War violence—is the main root of instability in Mexico. We return to the United States and look at how border militarization and xenophobia are increasingly shaped by the meltdown in northern Mexico.

Finally, I consider what is to be done. I argue that the best way to address the effects of climate change is to tackle the political and economic crises that have rendered us so vulnerable to climate-induced chaos in the first place. But ultimately, mitigation remains the most important strategy. The physical impacts of climate change—rising sea levels, desertification, freak storms, and flooding—are certainly frightening, but so are the emerging social and political aspects of adaptation, which too often take destructive and repressive forms. We must change that.

Ultimately, the most important thing is mitigation: we must decarbonize our economy.

## CHAPTER 2

### Military Soothsayers

Dealing with such fractured or failing states is, in many ways, the main security challenge of our time.

—ROBERT GATES, *secretary of defense, 2010*

THE PENTAGON IS planning for a world remade by climate change. You could even say that the Pentagon is planning for Armageddon. In the summer of 2008, Dr. Thomas Fingar, deputy director of national intelligence for analysis, gave the US Congress a classified briefing on the military implications of climate change: “Food insecurity for reasons both of shortages and affordability, will be a growing concern in Africa as well as other parts of the world. Without food aid, the region will likely face higher levels of instability—particularly violent ethnic clashes over land ownership.”

“Closer to home,” continued Fingar, “the United States will need to participate and plan for growing immigration pressures. . . . Extreme weather events and growing evidence of inundation will motivate many to move sooner rather than later. . . . As climate changes spur more humanitarian emergencies, the international community’s capacity to respond will be increasingly strained.”<sup>1</sup>

Military planning, conceived of as a response to events, also shapes them. Planning too diligently for war can preclude peace. America overdeveloped military capacity, its military-industrial complex, has created