Beyond patzers and clients – Strategic reflections on climate change and the 'Green Economy'

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Patzer: an amateurish blunderer, probably from the German *patzen*, to bungle.

Chess freaks have a word for it. In the insulting, machista idiom of the traditional chess world, it's called 'being a patzer'. One mark of the patzer is to fall into avoidable traps: to walk into fool's mate, grab the poisoned pawn, neglect strategic development in favour of quick gains.

In the chess game on the left, White (the master) surprises Black (the patzer) by giving away a piece. The white bishop takes the black pawn at the upper right of the board, giving check but leaving itself open to capture by the black king.

Black thinks for a moment, then decides to take the offered bishop. What's not to like about the deal? Black gets the equivalent of two pawns for free. It may not be a won game yet, Black knows, but the capture is surely a step in the right direction: a material foundation for an eventual victory. A bishop is a bishop: how can you turn it down?

Then, with a barely-concealed, evil grin, White brings down the chopper, moving her knight to the fifth square from the bottom in the second column from the right. Black may not know it yet, but the game is over. No matter what Black does, White will now triumph in six or seven moves. The temporary advantage in material that Black has gained means nothing because Black has lost.

Climate politics

In the United Nations and other international forums, environmental politics has long been a chess game full of masters preying on patzers, setting up situations in which they seem to be giving something away when they are actually manoeuvring their way into a long-term positional advantage.

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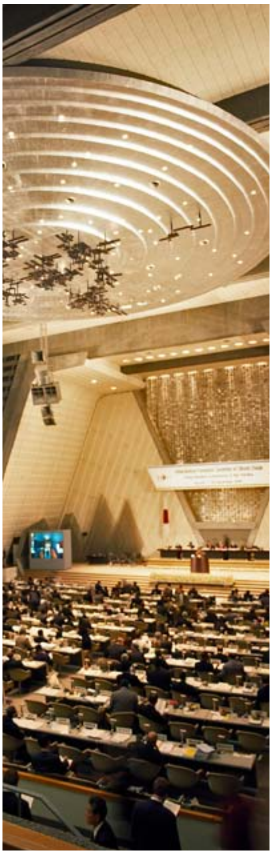

UN Photo/Frank Leather

Turn the clock back to 1997, for example. When United Nations delegations assembled in Kyoto for their annual meeting on climate change, it seemed international politics might be entering an interesting new phase. Alarmed at global warming, Southern countries had been insisting that the industrialised North take responsibility for a global crisis of which it had been the main cause. The United States, preoccupied with maintaining what geographer Mazen Labben calls a global 'militarized market' dependent on fossil fuels and the massive, climate-changing carbon emissions they produce, found itself particularly on the defensive.

But an instinctively astute strategic move worthy of any chess master succeeded in turning the tables. In Kyoto, the US dangled the offer of signing up to emissions cuts in return for an international commitment to carbon trading. Exhausted by the marathon negotiations, Southern countries accepted the gambit, facilitating, largely unwittingly, a technopolitical process that led to the multiple defeats that are the subject of this article.

Of course, nobody had been under the illusion that getting the US or any other country to sign up to Kyoto's relatively trivial emissions cuts was much of a prize, any more than your average patzer believes that a two-pawn advantage guarantees victory in chess.

But like all good patzers, the UN negotiators on the receiving end of the US stratagem – as well as the politicians who stood behind them and the journalists and NGOs who accompanied them – tended to be linear thinkers. They told each other that this was maybe at least a 'small first step', 'a step in the right direction', 'better than nothing', a 'foundation for something bigger'. Surely, they insisted, having the US, the world's worst polluter, on board even an inadequate agreement was better than not having them participate at all. The condition for US participation – carbon trading – might be morally or aesthetically distasteful, but should not, they reasoned, be a deal-breaker. Let's not be 'fundamentalist', they urged. Let's not allow the best to be the enemy of the good. Politics is the art of the possible. Step by step.

In the process, the long-term significance of the carbon trading quid pro quo was missed – to say nothing of the need to look beyond mere emissions cuts towards the imperative of keeping remaining fossil fuels in the ground permanently. Asked why the Philippines went along, for example, Tony La Viña – a negotiator who, ironically, prided himself on his 'realism' – confessed that, at that point, all he cared about was that the US took on 'binding targets', no matter how that goal was achieved (La Viña, 1997). Like countless others, La Viña – perhaps conditioned by an earlier stint at Washington's World Resources Institute, a bastion of neoliberal thinking about the environment – had fallen for the idea that the real political stakes were CO_2 targets and carbon trading was a mere technical tool – an efficient 'instrument' for achieving them. 'Carbon trading is just a wave,' as one North American climate activist later explained. 'Targets are the water.'

Indeed, even many of the US's own climate policy-makers may well at first have underestimated the importance of the trading aspect of the Kyoto deal. The most far-sighted undoubtedly understood that a carbon trading proposal would, if approved, help protect fossil fuel use as well as provide speculative new business opportunities – and that, even if rejected, it would still help to put the Clinton regime on record as having made some effort on global warming. Yet others held a different view. The faction of US climate thinking represented by ExxonMobil and George W. Bush, for example, was famously unresponsive to the pleas of speculators such as ENRON that Kyoto's carbon market be ratified, believing that the constraints represented by emissions targets would outweigh the benefits of trading to the fossil fuel economy; it was only much later that some industrial interests realised how effective the carbon markets could be in entrenching coal, oil and gas. On the other side of the narrow US political spectrum, some green policy advocates may also have genuinely thought that Kyoto's emissions targets represented an environmental advance unaffected by the trading component of the deal, which was perhaps viewed as a mere sop to business and a hostile and largely climate-denialist US Senate. In any case, like a chess player pretending to be overcome with nervous second thoughts after sacrificing her bishop, the US was able to put on a convincing performance – feigned or not – of attaching greater importance to Kyoto's nominal emissions cuts than to the carbon market that was the other component of the deal.

Small wonder that the players on the other side of the chessboard could hardly keep their eyes off the bishop either. If so many in the US corporate world were worried about being assigned 'legally-binding targets' – so went the patzer logic – surely setting targets and caps must be the key to everything. And surely if targets could be set, then means would be found to meet them, and then new, stricter targets could be imposed, in an inevitable ratcheting process (MacKenzie, 2007), until the ultimate goal – 350 parts per million, 2 degrees centigrade of warming, or whatever – would be reached.

Only years afterwards did the deeper game loom into view. With the sinking feeling of marks who come to realise they've fallen for a 'long con', many of the patzers eventually saw that while they had been preoccupied with getting the US and other industrialised nations to sign up to so-called 'legally-binding emissions cuts', on the other side of the chessboard their opponents had used carbon trading to arrange their pieces in a position that made it increasingly difficult to address climate change at all. Like the chess master's offer of the 'poisoned bishop', the US's offer to accept emissions targets can be seen in retrospect as having been a sacrifice performed in order to open up the position for bigger operations.

What the effects of these operations were emerged only gradually. First, Kyoto's minimal cuts did not turn out, as the number-fetishising patzers had presumed, to be a prelude to sharper reductions, which were never agreed, but at most to lead to national-level legislative processes of inducing the nominal scarcity required for a pollution market. Nor were even the preliminary 'binding cuts' of Kyoto actually binding when it counted – first the US, then Canada, then Japan and other countries made it clear that they were free at any time to withdraw from any agreement that actually threatened fossil fuel use. The 'binding cuts' were further undermined through the widespread use of the offsets that carbon trading made possible, as well as the growing 'offshoring' of emissions (see, for example, Peters et al., 2011). Still later the US spearheaded an agitation to abolish the idea of targets altogether. By 2012, with not just fossil fuel use, but the rate of fossil fuel use, increasing, the struggle was on to keep any industrialised country on course to make any reductions at all. The 'ratchet' that the patzers had envisaged turned out to be a greased cylinder devoid of teeth.

Yet all the while, most patzers kept thinking like patzers, continuing quasi-autistically to count molecules and formulate targets, while waiting and hoping for more free bishops – with which they were amply supplied from early on in the game. Employing a classic manoeuvre, growing carbon trading establishments in the EU, international development institutions, Washington NGO circuits, and assorted research and lobbying bodies were soon doing everything they could to entice patzers into thinking that they could exercise progressive 'policy influence' by pouring effort into carbon market design and carbon market reform. 'We know carbon trading has problems,' market proponents put on a great show of conceding. 'Help us make it better!' On the whole, the patzers were only too happy to take up the poisoned offer. Some dutifully produced a stream of ineffectual 'standards', 'safeguards' and 'principles', or demanded that more attention be paid to 'governance' and 'participation', telling themselves that in doing so they were providing 'damage control'. Others expended their energies, with paltry or nonexistent results, on urging that stricter caps be set, that allowances be auctioned instead of being given away free, that the role of offsets be reduced, or that 'carbon cowboys' be curbed (see for example Coelho, 2012). Still others allowed themselves to be seduced into thinking that carbon trading could be 'leveraged' or 'subverted' to secure land rights, human rights, technical support or hard cash for worthy grassroots initiatives. ('No rights, no REDD!' went one slogan, referring to programmes to generate carbon pollution rights by Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation.) The result was that for 15 years, patzers tended to neglect the real task of climate action: making common cause with the social movements that actually had practical, concrete stakes in countering the interests of fossil-fuelled productivism. In many cases, the patzers wound up unwittingly conspiring against the interests of grassroots networks to which some imagined they were still loyal and accountable.

That constituted an obvious triumph for many US, EU and other fossil-dependent elites, whose overall power advantage over the global majority in climate politics tended to grow every year. Yet to understand the subtler (and no doubt partly inadvertent) genius of the original US gambit, it will be useful to go a bit deeper, by sketching three key processes of positional consolidation that it made possible: the institutionalised defossilisation of the global warming problem; the institutionalised deresponsibilisation of industrialised countries; and the financialisation of climate change action.

How it was done, part I – Entrenching goal change in institutions

By inducing the international community to accept carbon markets, US and other industrialised-country leaders were able to promote a 'fossil forever' agenda while avoiding the mistake of openly advocating it.

Suppose US or other industrialised-country leaders had stated publicly that, in their view, fossil fuels remained so central to the productive exploitation of labour and other aspects of 'nature' that there was no choice but to extract and burn the last drop of oil and the last lump of coal no matter what the global warming cost. They would thereby have put themselves in a weak debating position. No one comes out and says such things at the UN or anywhere else, even if many think it. But by inducing the international community to accept carbon markets instead, they were able to promote a 'fossil forever' agenda while avoiding the mistake of openly advocating it.

Carbon trading made this feat possible because it changed the goal of climate action from keeping remaining fossil fuels in the ground to meeting targets for the emission of CO_2-equivalent molecules. This change was made all the smoother in that, for the technocratic sensibility widespread at the UN and in the world of middle-class climate activism, it did not appear to be a change at all. Technopolitically unsophisticated patzers tended to accept at face value the neoliberal commonsense that assigning a price to CO_2 molecules would automatically incentivise the phase-out of fossil fuels.

Under cover of this ideology, carbon trading was then able to make its contribution towards accomplishing the opposite – protecting, perpetuating and promoting fossil fuel use for a decade and a half, during which time greenhouse gas emissions continued to increase. For example, under cover of 'efficiency' claims, a variety of institutions were set up that made it possible for polluters to meet their emissions targets by substituting cuts in other gases for CO_2 cuts, substituting photosynthesis for fossil emissions cuts, or substituting hypothetical cuts for actual cuts (see for example ICIS, 2012; Szabo, 2012). Competition to find the cheapest substitutes contributed to a decline in pollution permit prices to a level far below what would be environmentally meaningful – a trend amply reinforced by the way carbon markets were designed as the 'only commodity market in the world where demand varies in real time but supply is fixed years in advance', to quote Mark Lewis at Deutsche Bank.

Carbon markets interfere with more effective tools for cutting emissions and tackling fossil fuel dependence

Carbon trading, like other pollution trading schemes in the past, also selected for low-cost substitutes for green innovation, disincentivising research and development investment in clean technologies (Taylor, 2012; Taylor et al., 2005) and militating against the long-term investment planning needed to address structural transition under conditions of uncertainty. As Jerome Whitington notes, 'carbon markets, while promising to tie climate objectives to risk-taking entrepreneurialism, are perhaps more closely aligned with moving around and forestalling investment and innovation' (Whitington, 2012). The delays in transition for which carbon markets select, in turn, multiply the ultimate costs of moving to a non-fossil society, further obstructing climate solutions; the International Energy Agency, for example, estimates climate investment postponed beyond 2020 will cost 4.3 times investment now (IEA, 2011). Because carbon markets were artificial constructs created by the state, they also introduced unlimited opportunities for rent-seeking and gaming, resulting in market gluts and, again, low prices, as well as windfall profits for heavy greenhouse-gas polluters (see for example Sandbag, 2010) – profits that were then often ploughed into additional fossil-fuel development. At the same time, carbon markets interfered with more effective tools for cutting emissions and tackling fossil fuel dependence (see, for example, Helm and Doward, 2012; Wynn and Chestney, 2011). What the patzers had been persuaded to believe was a 'neutral instrument' for global warming mitigation, in other words, was actually a game-changer furthering fossil fuel interests. The misidentification of nominal molecule trading with global warming action meanwhile made it easy for trading proponents to gauge environmental success, falsely, by the size of the carbon market.

How it was done, part II – Deresponsibilisation through institution-building

Over the years, the US has repeatedly insisted that it will never take any special responsibility for climate change. In 2010, for example, US negotiator Todd Stern declared that while the US recognises its 'historic role in putting emissions in the atmosphere,' it 'categorically rejects… culpability or reparations', echoing the first George Bush's insistence in 1992 that 'the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation'.

Other counties, particularly in the global South, have always expressed outrage at the US stance, which flies in the face not only of its own legal torts tradition but also of the principle of 'differentiated responsibilities' for climate change that the US signed up to in 1992. Yet in their day-to-day practice and policy, almost all nations, South and North, now in practice support the US disavowal of responsibility. As Herbert Docena and others show, the US accomplished this feat not by making abstract speeches at UN plenary sessions but by quietly helping to embed a far-reaching regime of concrete, specific deresponsibilising practices in the climate change mitigation institutions in which all signatories to the Kyoto Protocol participate (Docena, 2010). Again, this was almost entirely the achievement of the carbon trading gambit.

For example, as part of its market architecture, the Kyoto Protocol bestowed tradable rights in the Earth's carbon-cycling capacity exclusively on Northern countries, proportional to how much of it they were already using; later, the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS) also unilaterally granted to European countries rights in this global good. The result was a system based on the principle of 'the polluter earns' or 'the polluter is bribed' rather than that of 'the polluter pays' (which, of course, would have had its own problems). At the same time, instead of being fined for failing to meet Kyoto's targets (which, as Docena points out, 'implied the commission of an offense'), industrialised countries were encouraged to buy extra pollution permits to compensate for their failure (which, again in the words of Docena, 'connoted the acquisition of an entitlement') (Docena, 2010: 42). In Nigeria, the Philippines, South Africa, Guyana and many other Southern countries, meanwhile, governments were incentivised by carbon markets not to promulgate or enforce environmental laws (which attribute responsibility for harm to their subjects) but instead to allow their societies to remain dirty in order to collect fees for cleaning up later; or to encourage deforestation so that they could later claim that they had 'reduced' it. Such forms of gaming further undermined juridical approaches to the environment.

The increasing institutionalisation of opportunity-cost estimates in the design of biotic offset schemes similarly favoured the relatively wealthy – those with the means to destroy forests wholesale rather than poorer, communities who followed a more environmentally benign approach – and thereby further reduced the space for practices that worked to recognise and gauge responsibility for either destruction or preservation (McAfee, 2012). Carbon markets worked best by taking advantage of pre-existing inequalities, which entailed giving short shrift to the rich's responsibility to right them.

Throughout the new carbon market system, participants were forced to track, manage and price the movements of commodity molecules of greenhouse gases without regard for their status as 'survival' or 'luxury' emissions. This constituted a further blow against a 'commons' view of environmental activism (see, for example, Thompson, 1990), according to which the right to subsistence takes precedence over the price system and private property, and capital accumulation is not allowed to dominate survival considerations. It also tended to undermine the juridical view according to which the rights and interests of private corporations must be balanced against those of the public. Tens of thousands of experts, traders, bankers, lawyers, accountants, consultants and bureaucrats went to work setting fuel emission proxy factors, commenting on carbon project design documents, formulating schedules and criteria for payments for forest conservation certificates, making submissions to the Clean Development Mechanism Executive Board, hedging investments, buying land, tallying molecules, balancing accounts, establishing ownership and discovering prices, each day producing a bit more deresponsibilisation in each of the offices and other arenas they worked in.

The bulk of the work of building a moral and political economy of carbon trading was carried out by institutions that positioned themselves as 'apolitical' or 'not taking a stance'. Behind their 'technical' façade, however, organisations such as the World Bank, UNCTAD and UNEP acted as de facto legislators, normalising the carbon market's moral theory by rolling out various kinds of trading infrastructure before obtaining any mandate to do so under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – one example being programmes to prepare REDD projects for the carbon market before the UNFCCC has approved REDD credits. The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) has played a similar game. Given that 100 researchers associated with CIFOR have been working on REDD in Indonesia alone, to infer that the organisation has had no stake in seeing REDD and carbon trading normalised globally would be naïve in the extreme. Yet according to its outgoing director, Frances Seymour, CIFOR 'doesn't take positions on anything,' merely suggesting means for addressing goals which remain hypothetical until given official approval (Lang, 2012). Such disavowals are familiar features of the would-be 'anti-politics machine' that James Ferguson described in his book of the same name (Ferguson, 1990). In the carbon markets as elsewhere, their function has been to help promote a false dichotomy between political 'ends' and technical 'means' that, by reducing politics to the intermittent presentation of abstract 'position statements', allows the extensive political, neoliberally biased work of agencies such as CIFOR and the World Bank to be shunted safely into the 'nonpolitical' bin.

A non-political turtle?

An illustrative literary example of the 'non-political' deresponsibilisation made possible by carbon market mechanics – as well as the incremental bamboozlement of widening circles of patzers – is a 44-page booklet, 'Nuestra Casa en el Universo', produced under a cooperative programme linking Yale and McGill Universities, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Coordinadora Nacional de Pueblos Indigenas de Panama, with finance from the Blue Moon Fund (see Potvin and Ventocilla, 2011.[1] Said to be designed as an 'educational tool on climate change and the REDD+ proposal for indigenous communities in the Latin American tropics',[2] the booklet announces on its first page that it is 'neither for nor against REDD+' (Potvin and Ventocilla, 2011: 5).

A friendly talking turtle guides the reader through the text, giving the narrative the appearance of neutrality.

1 The booklet's editors are Catherine Potvin of McGill University's Neotropical Ecology Lab and Jorge Ventocilla of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute..

2 See http://biology.mcgill.ca/faculty/potvin/NEL/index.html. 'REDD+ is a method for "reducing emissions" [sic] that involves not just combating deforestation and forest degradation, but also conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.'

This abstract disclaimer conceals the concrete pro-REDD+ gambits throughout the rest of the text, whose function is to give readers less and less space to think clearly about the central contradictions of both REDD+ and carbon trading.

In the central gambit, the booklet's narrator, a friendly talking turtle, invites readers to accept the assumption that biotic and fossil carbon are climatically equivalent.[3] A further equivalence is then introduced: 'avoiding forest burning', the turtle implies, can combat climate change just as effectively as cutting industrial emissions, meaning that, molecule for molecule, the one can be substituted for the other.[4]

Elsewhere, the text does mention that critical questions have been raised about the effects of REDD+ on indigenous rights. REDD+ managers must be induced, the turtle suggests, to 'respect our territories', allow for 'free prior informed consent', respect 'indigenous styles of life and spiritual values', ensure 'real participation of the communities' and 'respect our right to produce food'. But all this is too late. The turtle has already endorsed, probably unnoticed by many readers, what amounts to the decisive step in the violation of indigenous rights: the equation stating that biotic-origin CO_2 = fossil-origin CO_2. This equation implies that, per molecule emitted, forest dwellers and industrial users of fossil fuels are equally responsible for climate change, and that indigenous peoples, in addition to dealing with all the other pressures incumbent upon them and affecting their lands, must now take on the task of providing carbon savings to the industrialised world.

A deliberate plot on the part of the authors to further policies that violate indigenous rights? Hardly likely. The institutional momentum at the stage of the game at which the booklet was written makes such attributions of individual intentions, good or bad, pretty much beside the point. The document's moves are merely a further playing-out of a position whose relevant features were determined long ago by the acceptance of carbon trading's larger gambits.

3 This is an obvious mistake, climatologically speaking, since biotic carbon belongs to an'active', above-ground carbon pool in constant relationship with the atmosphere, whereas fossil carbon belongs to a vast below-ground pool cut off from the atmosphere for millions of years. On p. 10, an 'equivalence' between carbon dioxide and methane is also posited.

4 The equation of hypothetical 'reductions' with actual reductions is the (again, unscientific) premise underlying carbon offsets. See, for example, Lohmann (2011.

As the inappropriateness, irrelevance or marginality of attributing responsibility for global warming gradually became established in international behaviour in this way, Southern delegates to the UN and other climate forums, as well as many climate activists, found themselves situated in the old game of neocolonialist development, sometimes without quite knowing what had been done to them. De facto, rich nations were now cast as 'climate leaders' rather than 'climate offenders', climate benefactors rather than climate debtors. The old colonialist ideology, temporarily challenged by the global debate on climate change, had been rehegemonised less through the relatively inefficient and superficial means of propaganda, moral reasoning, bad science, or outright threats and bribes than through the repetition and accretion of thousands of quotidian technical practices surrounding market construction and operation.[5] Southern outrage survived only in an attenuated, conflicted, rhetorical form.

At the climate negotiations in Bangkok in 2009, for instance, two Caribbean nation delegates were overheard in the corridor, expressing repugnance at, and discussing tactics for challenging, the continued reluctance of Northern countries to acknowledge the extent of their responsibility to undertake meaningful emissions reductions. The conversation quickly shifted, however, to ways of gaining revenue through sale of CDM carbon credits to those same countries. The senior delegate enthusiastically enjoined his colleague to explore jatropha-planting agrofuel projects in his country. 'But,' the junior colleague demurred, 'what about land conflicts?' Not a problem, his elder counselled. 'You can easily hire experts to give economic legitimacy to biofuel conversions.' Between the senior delegate's firebrand rhetorical denunciations of excessive Northern emissions and his eager participation in the Northern exploitation of Southern carbon resources in order to continue or increase those emissions, there could be little question as to which would have the greater long-term practical effect.[6]

5 It is not simply that payments for environmental services, say, can 'crowd out' normative or collective obligations to conserve (Vatn, 2010) and thus can be counterproductive environmentally. The institutions required for such a market to work also embed a huge range of distinctive new calculating and moral practices in everyday work life: questions, surveys, forms, science, and so on. These procedures create improvised new values that tend to confuse juridical or commons decision-making processes for deciding compensation, reparations, and the relevance of numbers thereto.

6 Noting the way conflicting moral or aesthetic languages interact in another context, musicologist Susan McClary writes that, although at one level no one wants to see Carmen die at the end of the eponymous opera, 'Bizet's musical strategies set up almost unbearable tensions that cause the listener not only to accept Carmen's death as inevitable but actually to desire it' (McClary, 1991: 62).

How it was done, part III – Financialisation

Nick Benjaminsz

In its quest to regain profitability, business has been forced into a desperate hunt for new commodities.

Accepting the US's carbon-trading gambit had a third long-term consequence of which many patzers, with a mental architecture built partly from neoliberal nostrums and memories of the short-lived 'golden age' of capitalist development between the end of the second world war and the 1970s, also failed to take full account. By taking various poisoned bishops, the patzers had also, often unwittingly, thrown in their lot with an ongoing movement towards increased financialisation and 'supercommodification' of nature, which was inherently and structurally damaging to their own climate action cause.

Beginning in the 1970s, business has been confronted with a deep profitability crisis and a deterioration of the US-centred cycle of accumulation that has been dominant for about the last 100 years (Arrighi, 1994).[7] In search of better returns and greater security, mobility and liquidity, capital has turned increasingly from ordinary production, services and trade to finance, which today accounts for the bulk of private sector profits in the US and other rich countries. As the financial sector and its demands and criteria have become more and more influential (unchecked by the 2008 financial crash), a strategy of 'take, don't make' has increasingly taken precedence over the protection and development of common goods, as well as investment in creativity and technology. The result has been to concentrate different kinds of power over land, water and air in financial institutions. Assets have been stripped, labour and rural communities have been robbed, and much of the generative and resilience-fostering capacity of society cannibalised. At the same time, finance has attempted, quixotically, to control contingency by mathematising and commodifying the radical uncertainty that previously had been critical for entrepreneurial activity (Ourousoff, 2010). In its quest to regain profitability, business has simultaneously been forced into a desperate hunt for new commodities – commodities that, not surprisingly, must, as soon as they are born, satisfy the imperatives laid down by the newly dominant financial sector.

It was precisely during this period that pollution trading came to prominence, nursed by such figures as Richard Sandor, a Chicago trader and economist who had earlier pioneered the interest rate derivatives that played a significant part in the financial boom. Since then, a continually revamped and expanded banking and 'shadow banking' sector has been 'reprocessing' climatic stability as well as other 'ecosystem services' as credits or information capable of flowing smoothly through global financial circuits. Indeed, Wall Street, the City of London and other

7 See also the papers of Jason W. Moore.

nodes of finance today form partnerships with various specialist institutions in restructuring the very science by which environmentalist patzers are accustomed to swear.[8] The result has been even more positional advantage for the chess masters in their struggle to keep fossil fuels flowing out of the ground.

By falling for the carbon trading gambit, in other words, the patzers were not only endorsing a mechanism that had been developed in the shadow of a surging financial sector, but also ensuring that climate policy – indeed, the very definition of the climate problem – would henceforth be heavily influenced by its institutional needs. Pressures from traders and speculators consistently favoured liquidity and fungibility of carbon instruments, securitisation, exchangeability and interlinkages with other commodities, as well as the expectations of high short-term return on investment that financialisation has promoted,[9] all of which further distanced climate action from the imperative for structural change away from fossil fuels, as well as the need for an approach that addressed the North's historical responsibility for global warming. Proposals for 'green bonds' based on carbon offset and other 'ecological' collateral meanwhile foreshadowed a new chapter in the de facto shift of climate and other ecological indebtedness from North to South.

Containing challenges, reframing narratives

The three key processes of positional consolidation sketched above – the institutionalised defossilisation of the global warming problem; the institutionalised deresponsibilisation of industrialised countries; and the financialisation of climate change action – are also, to vary the metaphor, movements towards containing a severe challenge to capital as well as towards assimilating a new opportunity for its expansion. In this process of enclosure and reframing, 'inconvenient' aspects of the climate problem – for example, its roots in inequality and the exploitation of fossil fuels – are made invisible and new scapegoats invented.

8 Lohmann, 2011; Robertson, 2004;Leach et al., 2012. Merrill Lynch, for example, has partnered with Dorjee Sun, a forest carbon trading promoter, in endorsing the pseudo-climatology underpinning REDD, according to which preventing the release of biotic carbon into the atmosphere is climatically equivalent to halting the flow of underground fossil carbon into the above-ground system comprising atmosphere, oceans, biota and surface geology.

9 Members of the International Emissions Trading Association, for example, in lobbying for a more liquid carbon market with greater opportunities for intermediation and speculation, attempt to influence the characteristics of carbon commodities themselves. See, for example, International Emissions Trading Association, 'IETA response to the call for input on modalities and procedures for standardized baselines', 22 March 2010, http://cdm.unfccc.int/about/standardized_baselines/sbase_ieta.pdf, which proposes means for streamlining the production of carbon credits through more 'mechanised' procedures of commodity construction that can quickly commensurate highly diverse modes of 'carbon-saving' behaviour. Cf. Paterson (2012).

Carbon trading and other manifestations of the 'green economy' strive to bring what come to be seen as troublesome 'external' factors – in this case environmental – within what historian and sociologist Giovanni Arrighi calls the 'economising logic of capitalist enterprise'. While the circumstances and the problem are historically unique, this is a classic dynamic of corporate interests trying to tame, commodify, and turn into a source of profit entities that have not hitherto been bought and sold. As with all such strategies, conventional analytic divides between 'state' and 'market' are seldom of much explanatory use. Just as the Dutch East India Company exercised quasi-governmental powers, and 20th-century Fordism and Keynesianism required far-reaching coordination between state and business, so too carbon and other environmental-service markets are hybrid public/private entities whose commodities are usually creations of government regulation.

These strategies involve new anti-commons moral narratives recounted in the language of orthodox mathematical economics (Lohmann, 2003; Hildyard et al., 2012). One such narrative is the dramatic script that casts those who depend on the commons as idle, non-industrious and non-deserving: capitalist crises,' George Caffentzis suggests, 'stem from refusal of work' (Midnight Oil Collective, 1992: see also Graeber, 2011).

Scientists who 'monitor, report and verify' emissions become political agents assigning responsibility for greenhouse gas production to physical territories like 'China' or 'Mexico' instead of to the social classes and technical infrastructures that consume the goods produced in such locations.

On the chessboard of the green economy, biologists, UNFCCC delegations, carbon accountants and bankers working in carbon markets often act as de facto legislators and moral reformers insofar as they help put together an elaborate infrastructure allowing pollution fines to be replaced with fees and legal judgements against environmental offenders with prices. Wealthy offset project sponsors like Cargill or Chubu Electric become virtuous agents creating ecological value (it is they who allow emissions that otherwise were 'inevitable' to be 'avoided'), while nonprofessional actors in already low-emitting contexts or social movements actively working to reduce use of fossil fuels are cast as passive objects or even global warming culprits.

Technicians calculating how much greenhouse gas emission a hydroelectric dam 'avoids' act as global legislators deciding how large European entitlements to the Earth's carbon dumps are to be. Scientists who 'monitor, report and verify' emissions become political agents assigning responsibility for greenhouse gas production to physical territories like 'China' or 'Mexico' instead of to the social classes and technical infrastructures that consume the goods produced in such locations. And just as environmental responsibility becomes a 'product component' of Starbucks coffee or monoculture plantation timber certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, obscuring underlying processes of enclosure, ecosystem services markets are in part a political move to contain and pre-empt the 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Alier , 2002) that poses such an enduring threat to business. Nowhere is this clearer, perhaps, than in the way the leftist agitation of the Brazilian rubber-tapper union leader Chico Mendes, who led a movement for community-strengthening 'extractive reserves' in the 1980s, has been digested and translated into support for new forms of capital accumulation. For his pains, Mendes was assassinated in 1988, but by 2012, his famous statement –

> In the beginning I thought I was fighting to save the rubber trees. Afterwards I thought I was fighting to save the Amazon rainforest. Now I realize that I am fighting for humanity

– was festooning a brochure promoting a North American-influenced plan to convert Acre, Mendes's home state, into an international exporter of pollution and biodiversity-destruction rights as well as many other 'green' products (Weiss, 2012).[10] 'Poor Chico,' one Acre activist commented 24 years after his murder. 'They never stop killing him.'

Such attempts to co-opt grassroots environmentalism are one aspect of the attempt of the 'green economy' to rewrite contemporary political ecology along colonialist and racist lines. REDD, for example, is infused with the myth that Northern industrialised societies are being victimised through Southern 'slash and burn', bureaucratic corruption, and lack of proper discipline and 'governance'. The motif, while decorated with 'technical' talk of all kinds,[11] is a familiar cultural expressions of contemporary racism, in which racists are presented as victims of immigrants, the dark-skinned, and so on (just as misogynists frequently present men as victims of women). Along the same lines, REDD likes to depict indigenous forest peoples as 'noble savages' to be rewarded for their stewardship of nature – but only as long as they do not resist containment within REDD's incipient provisions for property reform, monitoring, labour discipline, 'participation', 'consultation' and 'free prior informed consent'. If they do resist, they risk being redefined as obstructionist and environmentally destructive.

10 Among the supporters of the plan are the World Bank, WWF and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Acre Law N. 2.308 – reportedly first drafted in English – was promulgated on 22 October 2010 to incentivise the 'maintenance and expansion of supply' of 'ecosystem services and products'.

11 See, for example, the consulting firm McKinsey's 'cost curves' for REDD.

Consequences

If politics is the art of the possible, in short, the multiple mechanisms of the new green economy are having the effect of constricting political space by making effective environmental action – and even sober analysis of environmental problems – less possible. As this article has argued, carbon trading – to take the leading example of ecosystem services markets – is a culturally complex strategy favouring those types of climate action that first, do not impact on fossil fuel use; second, pre-empt juridical approaches to mitigation; and third, are subject to the imperatives of a dominant financial sector. Believing that by accepting the quid pro quo of carbon trading, they were helping keep open paths for future change that 'fundamentalists' with tiresomely 'moral' or 'ideological' obsessions were endangering, patzers unwittingly helped close them off, as the depoliticisation and deresponsibilisation that resulted from carbon trading consolidated the overall 'board position' of their opponents. Both inside and outside the UN, carbon markets helped crowd out intelligent political debate (Lohmann, 2008), putting the patzers in what chess players call zugzwang, in which the only moves you can make will weaken your position further. (In the instance of zugzwang pictured here, from a famous game played in Copenhagen in 1923, it is White's move. Ahead in material, White nevertheless finds that all of the moves available lose the game for him.) Particularly with the launch of the EU ETS in 2005, the diversity of political resources available for constructive change dwindled.

Ahead in material, White nevertheless finds that all of the moves available lose the game for him.

The patzers never even got the passing satisfaction of having induced the US into a few nominal emissions cuts. In a supremely contemptuous gesture of cynical mastery, the US withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol three years after it had succeeded in inserting carbon trading into it, and long before the associated institutional processes had fully played out. More than a decade later, the results of those processes were on view at COP-17 in Durban. After having launched the multitude of carbon trading practices that eroded the principles of historical and 'differentiated' responsibilities, the US set the seal on its victory when the principle of 'legal equivalence' or 'legal symmetry' of obligations between North and South was allowed to enter discussions over the constitution of a new protocol. By the time of the Durban talks, similarly, the so-called 'binding targets' of yesteryear were being openly derided in favour of 'pledge and review' measures. While 'new market mechanisms' of even greater benefit to fossil-fuelled industry than the CDM were being mooted, the future appeared to be one of a 'proliferation of low-value, nontransparent carbon markets without any binding global cap on emissions' (Whitington, 2012: 113).

Almost from the moment the US had seen its winning gambit of 1997 accepted, the smirks had been clearly visible in Washington, the derisive, mocking chuckles almost audible.


Eric Draper


Peter Arnold

Many patzers squawked, some even resorting to the desperate expedient of trying to rejuvenate yesterday's US agenda (Kyoto) as an alternative to today's. But the damage had already been done. By the time the position that had been achieved in 1997 was played out (with great help from the EU, which had become the leading force behind carbon trading between 1998 and 2003), the rout of 2011 was little more than a formality. Almost from the moment the US had seen its winning gambit of 1997 accepted, the smirks had been clearly visible in Washington, the derisive, mocking chuckles almost audible. For those with ears to hear, the same sotto voce laughter was now rippling through Durban.

Conspiracy or pattern recognition?

For many, to see the introduction of carbon markets into the Kyoto Protocol as a prescient strategy in defence of fossil-fuelled productivism may look like an overestimation of the foresight and coordination of US elites, even to indulge in 'conspiracy theory'. Consider, first of all, where the idea of carbon markets came from. The theory of pollution markets was not the invention of scheming industrialists, but was developed over many years by serious economists such as Ronald Coase, John Dales, Thomas Crocker, Gabriela Chichilnisky, Robert Stavins and Michael Grubb before being promoted in the global warming arena by serious bureaucrats such as Peter Vis, Jos Delbeke, Timothy Wirth and Peter Zapfel, serious politicians such as Al Gore, and serious environmental organisations such as Washington's Environmental Defense Fund and National Resources Defense Council. Surely, common sense suggests, some of these individuals and organisations genuinely believed, at least at first, that carbon markets could support effective climate policy (a few of them have now expressed opposition) (Hilsenrath, 2009). Second, who could have foreseen all the ways that carbon markets would benefit fossil-fuel interests, banks and scammers while setting back the cause of a just transition to a low-carbon society? Third, who could have foreseen in 1997 that the EU, which was at first sceptical, would take up the baton of carbon trading after US politicians dropped it, saving it from obscurity and coming to account for more than 90 per cent of global demand? And fourth, why would anyone assume there was anything close to unanimity about carbon markets among US leaders at the time of Kyoto? Surely, the objection might be made, there was no hidden, flawlessly executed master plan, merely the usual mistakes, muddle, compromise, improvisation and unintended consequences that afflict everybody. The triumph for coal, oil and gas achieved by carbon trading was something that few intended and no one could have predicted. Basically, the objection goes, the US elites most concerned with preserving the rule of fossil fuels just lucked out.

The difficulty with this objection is that it is directed against a claim that has not been made. It confuses the mastery that the US displayed in Kyoto – and which a small group of US-influenced European bureaucrats and consultants were later able to transfuse into the EU leadership (Skjærseth and Wettestad, 2008; Braun, 2009) – with master planning. It confuses a proper respect for the well-developed, if imperfectly coordinated, pattern-recognition skills of experienced strategists with conspiracy theory. It confuses the undoubted sincerity of many of the original theorists of carbon trading with the opportunism of the policy-makers, businesspeople and financiers whose interests came to lie in developing the idea in ways that would reinforce fossil fuel use. To point to the strategic wisdom of the US gambit at Kyoto is not to suggest the behind-the-scenes working of malignant masterminds who achieved exactly what they wanted. Nor is it to suggest that the ranks of carbon trading's inventors and developers – or even the US delegation to Kyoto – did not contain their own patzers. Nor is it to minimise the role played by the EU's extraordinary late-1990s policy reversal. It is merely to acknowledge the underlying logic of the 1997 agreement in light of the particular conjuncture of forces, histories, institutions and interests at play. To vary the metaphor, insofar as a 'long con' was executed by a US elite (with the fortuitous later collaboration of a small EU clique) it was not one out of a Hollywood heist movie, replete with bleeping gadgets, synchronised watches and rubber masks, but one whose complex particulars were largely improvised as the play proceeded and which did indeed benefit from some lucky breaks.

Garry Kasparov in São Paulo, 1 september 2011

Everton Amaro / SESI-SP

Even chess masters, after all, seldom have everything worked out to the last move.

Some things just happen: in chess, as in the rest of life, intricately calculated plots have only a limited role. (According to Zermelo's theorem, a hypothetically determinable optimal strategy does exist for chess, but no one is going to find it in the foreseeable future.) Formidable calculating powers (say, nine or 10 moves ahead) may be a prerequisite for master playing, but among humans the game is not and cannot be won by calculation alone. What is decisive is informed intuition.[12] By this is meant nothing mystical, merely a power of pattern recognition born of long practical experience, a deeply ingrained sense of what pathways will be advantageous and what will not. Without EU participation, the carbon market strategy could easily have foundered; but without the inspiration of its presiding Washington geniuses, it would never have been launched at all.

'If you can't beat 'em …': From patzer to client

One part of the institutionalisation process that has consolidated the position of the US and European masters of commodified climate politics has been the assimilation of many of their erstwhile patzer opponents into their client base – an experience that provides a further cautionary strategic lesson for the conduct of campaigns about the 'green economy'.

For at least some patzers, the process in question was without question drawn-out and difficult. You know you've been snookered when a deal you yourself helped make turns out to undermine your deepest goals and allegiances at every turn. Nobody likes the feeling; but what do you do about it? If you can't turn the clock back or start the game again, or suddenly acquire so much mastery that you can turn the game around, or turn over the board and upset the pieces, one option is to modify those goals and allegiances. If, like most of us, you are afflicted by intellectual laziness, linear thinking and isolation from the grassroots, the temptation to try to put yourself on the other side of the chessboard can become almost irresistible.

That doesn't necessarily mean adopting outright the goals of the masters who outwitted you. But it may well mean devoting a bit of time and effort to the new interactions and new obligations entailed in finding a subordinate niche for yourself and some of your needs in the strategies or 'anti-politics machines' used to achieve those goals, and securing compensation for following an etiquette of abjuring any visible opposition to them.

In the language of political science, this is known as patron-clientage. Patron-clientage is a kind of exchange premised on the maintenance

12 The eccentric chess grandmaster Bobby Fischer, as Robert Osterbergh points out, sometimes said that he didn't know exactly why he moved a certain piece to a certain position – he merely 'felt that that the board was burning in that particular spot' and therefore he had to move there.

of inequality. Classically, powerful patrons provide protection or other benefits to lower-status clients, who reciprocate by publicly endorsing the patrons' claims to leadership and offering support, assistance, compliance, votes and the like. The underlying asymmetry in power and status is clear but accepted as legitimate, and both sides rub along together symbiotically with the aid of a panoply of rituals and symbols of deference, mutual obligation and amity.

In climate politics, what patrons such as US and EU governments and corporations provide to their client governments, client NGOs and client technical institutions often includes financial resources and political connections. But perhaps an even more important gift is respectability and a certain measure of dignity – an escape from being seen as patzers. In return, clients provide loyalty and deference. The tacit understanding is that they will abandon their former climate goals, instead providing technical and moral support for their patrons' own climate policies and projects, and refrain from threatening their patrons' power by, say, attempting alliances with popular opposition movements.

For example, client NGOs can suggest technical refinements to the CDM (turning their backs on the CDM's grassroots opponents) in exchange for a public declaration on the part of governments or corporations that they 'take seriously' a 'Gold Standard' for CDM, say. Or they can supply support for (or 'neutrality' about) REDD in return for (infeasible) promises to respect the principle of 'free prior informed consent' of affected communities. In addition, client NGOs can help expand the entourages of their patrons by seeking fresh clients among grassroots groups, and discrediting movements that refuse such associations. Together with client academics, client NGOs can also pitch in to help displace the blame for carbon trading's failures onto an ever-expanding universe of culpable 'external' institutions. By making more and more far-fetched proposals for reform of that universe, they can help keep carbon trading itself innocent and free of responsibility for the ongoing failures of climate policy.

Thus carbon trading's lack of results is often attributed to governments' unwillingness to 'accept the advice of climate scientists on global caps' or the 'irrational' reluctance of Southern countries to agree to emissions limits (Hahnel, forthcoming). Its reliance on pre-existing inequalities is presumed to be 'not its department' and its vulnerability to financial shenanigans viewed as an 'external' question that can be cleared up by the simple expedient of replacing 'private with public finance' or subjecting 'private finance to competent regulation' (ibid; see also Henderson, 2012). By the same token, REDD becomes in principle benign as soon as it is realised that 'all forest people have to do is avoid expulsion by global "sharpies"' (Hahnel, forthcoming). Instead of questioning REDD on the ground that it poses a threat to indigenous territories, 'climate justice activists and advocates for the rights and well-being of indigenous people' should simply 'concentrate their efforts on helping forest dwellers keep their lands' (ibid).

I could have won the game if only the knight had been on a different square... if only I had seen the rook behind the queen... if only my opponent had fallen for my clever trick... if only she had not been a master...

It is at such points that client academics and NGOs most reveal their patzer roots, and patzer fantasy fully achieves its destiny as a structural component of clientelism. Saying that 'All forest people have to do is avoid expulsion by global "'sharpies'" is like saying that all chess players have to do to win chess games is unilaterally to rearrange both sides' pieces so that they can inflict a checkmate on their opponents in one move. 'I could have won the game if only the knight had been on a different square… if only I had seen the rook behind the queen… if only my opponent had fallen for my clever trick… if only she had not been a master…' This is the stuff of patzer post-mortems, not careful positional re-analyses aimed at learning where you went wrong in the first place. While such lazy reasoning may, at a pinch, serve as balm to the bruised egos of beaten adolescent chess novices, when used to defend carbon trading and REDD it is an emblem of acquiescence in lost land, ruined livelihoods and unchecked expansion of fossil fuel use. With its fatuous endorsement of the project of reshaping the entire political world to preserve the idealised image of a carbon market that 'could work', patzer logic is the ultimate gift of NGO clients and armchair economists to their respected patrons.

The beauty of such aspects of the patron-client system of contemporary climate politics is how well they accommodate and assimilate the edgy relationship that traditionally obtains between states or corporations on the one hand and NGOs and critical academics on the other. In the case of climate politics, part of the 'respect' that patrons provide clients consists precisely in putting on a public show of being 'challenged' by what are in fact tame recommendations or proposals that shift the onus for the failures of official policy onto 'external' entities. Clients are thereby allowed to 'make a difference'. In the classic traditions of patronage, as mentioned above, dollars and jobs as well as the respectability of being associated with a 'winning' project may well be on offer.[13] However, especially for those whose experience of having been patzers is still fresh in memory, it is the 'respect' part of the exchange that is likely to be more mesmerising.

13 For example, in Indonesia the indigenous network AMAN has received US$3 million for REDD from the World Bank and Japan (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/xinhua/2012-04-19/content_5723224.html), and Kemitran US$4.7 million from Norway plus about U$500,000 from CLUS and the Ford Foundation (http://bit.ly/JYYpyQ).

For patrons, too, much of the value of the exchange lies not in mathematically calculable gains, but in the execution of rituals symbolising and certifying power relations. Patrons particularly treasure the 'loyalty' part of the 'loyal opposition' that their clients provide. This is why they lay such emphasis on demands such as that expressed in the sentence: 'We will not take your criticisms of X seriously if you insist on undermining the very foundation of X.' Logically, this claim is almost unintelligible. In reality, elites tend to take most seriously precisely those critiques that are offered by open opponents of the overall approach in question, because they are usually the ones that are the most threatening. But if we rephrase the claim in terms of the rituals of patron-client exchange, then the statement makes perfect sense: 'We will not offer you respect unless you offer us loyalty.' This is also why client NGOs, despite appearances, are being rational when they buy into the fiction that they can have an influence on policy only by accepting their patrons' choice of terrain, and that they can fight on that terrain and exercise 'damage control' only if they make ritual obeisance to the policy in question. In many official processes, NGO participation is far better interpreted in patron-client terms than as a way of attempting to achieve environmental or social goals.

We NGOs are naturals for clientelism not only insofar as we tend to depend on philanthropy, but in other senses as well. First, it is chronically unclear what status and leverage NGOs have with respect to official or corporate power – advisory? oppositional? revolutionary? nonexistent? Our links with the public or with grassroots or popular movements tend to be equally unclear or shifting. It is thus perpetually uncertain how secure our existence is, and how much we can depend on anybody for that security. Second, by general consensus NGOs are only as good as the more or less visible, immediate results they achieve; longer-term, intangible outcomes do not usually come in a form that fits into project evaluation reports. Yet even immediate results can be elusive. Where are NGOs going to get them? In the face of this uncertainty, NGOs can be as vulnerable to the temptations of clientelism as any small farmer deprived of the support of customary kin relationships or feudal ties by colonial policy or postcolonial privatisation.[14] Particularly susceptible

14 As the communal land controlled by the village dwindled, as outsiders came increasingly to own land in the village, and as villagers increasingly worked for nonkin, the value of patron-client links increased for all concerned. In traditional Southeast Asia, as in feudal Europe...the inability of kindreds to provide adequate protection and security fostered the growth of patron-client structures. Both corporate kin groups and corporate village structures had depended on a certain level of economic autarchy for their vitality – an autarchy which colonial economic policy quickly eroded. These corporate structures (where they existed) tended to lose their monopoly over resources and personnel in situations where land and labor became free commodities... As a mechanism for protection or for advancement, patron-client dyads will flourish when kinship bonds alone become inadequate for these purposes' (Scott, 1972), See also Vandergeest (1991) for a superb discussion of why the gift relationship, which overlaps with patron-clientage, 'is not necessarily a relation which is opposed to "capitalist relations"' (p. 439).

are patzer NGOs who – whether through bias, inexperience, ignorance or lack of political imagination – have already limited their other options by cutting themselves off from grassroots movements or by assuming that official or corporate patrons have an oligopoly on the provision of security. Characteristic expressions of the type of patron-clientage that grows out of such circumstances include 'we have no choice but to become consultants on carbon trading because the train has already left the station'; 'we are where we are, and the task now is to take what has been placed in legislation and try to improve its efficiency' (Helm, 2009: 244)); 'so many millions of dollars will be available that we ought to be able to use at least some of it for our own purposes'. While there have, of course, been brief moments in the development of climate politics during the last 20 years when inexperienced or overconfident activists or experts – almost exclusively in the North – believed or hoped that they had found, in 'science', a source of power independent of private corporations, the state sector or mass movements, the idea that such a deus ex machina might offer politically weak or unimaginative NGOs a 'non-political' refuge from clientelism was always illusory.

Trevor Sikorski realised that 'the carbon market and global climate change discussions are fairly remote cousins, only vaguely acquainted with each other, hardly speaking to each other really'.

Anyone who doubts the dominance of clientelism over environmental concerns among official UN delegations needs only to consider the observations of Trevor Sikorski, a Barclays Capital carbon trader, at the Durban climate talks of 2011. In his blog, Sikorski reports with a certain bemused awe how difficult it was to find UN delegates who knew the first thing about carbon prices:

> I decided to see if the random COP delegate (let's call them COPpers, for short) had any idea of the chaos reigning supreme in the carbon market. I did this by approaching unknown, to me anyway, COPpers and asking them if they could tell me roughly the current market price of CERs. I was fairly happy to be generous on the answers, so anything between €4 and €6 would get a tick and a hearty well done from me. Like I said, I was being generous. After a punishing 15 minutes of doing this, I realised that the carbon market and global climate change discussions are fairly remote cousins, only vaguely acquainted with each other, hardly speaking to each other really (Sikorski, 2011).

The 'chaos' and acknowledged ineffectiveness of carbon trading, similarly, has never diminished the zeal of client Washington NGOs such as Environmental Defense Fund and WWF to lobby for new carbon markets in Mexico, China, Thailand and elsewhere (Volcovici, 2012), nor checked the determination of other client networks to expand existing carbon markets in Africa (IISD, 2012), nor put a lid on the extravagance of the promises of billions of dollars of money for forest conservation that REDD enthusiasts make to governments and community groups. It is not that the NGOs and consultants involved are idiots or have donned ideological blinders that prevent them from seeing the reality of carbon markets. It is rather that, in the eyes of such clients, the long-term environmental and economic performance of the markets is simply irrelevant to the patronage networks and other institutional arrangements that sustain them or provide their lives with meaning in the short term.[15] While even the most callow of patzers may keep tabs on prices in the wistful hope that the bishop they once captured will someday turn out to have been worth it, Sikorski's observation suggests that UN delegations and client NGOs and consultants, entwined as they are in clientelistic frameworks in which such details have little meaning, don't even bother.

From the point of view of environmental effectiveness, the line between patzerdom and clientelism may seem difficult to make out. The opportunities to achieve 'respect' that patrons offer their clients – the chance to formulate 'standards' and 'safeguards', to 'curb the cowboys', to 'improve governance and participation', to 'use our system for your own goals (land rights, etc.)', to engage in 'damage control' – may look to those who are concerned with long-term results like nothing more than a few extra poisoned bishops. The point, however, is that patzers become clients precisely by leaving the goal of environmental effectiveness behind. Environmentally speaking, both patzers and clients are failures – but which would you rather be? It is not only bankers and hedge and private equity fund CEOs who smile when Washington NGOs announce a campaign to institute new 'principles' and 'safeguards' at the World Bank so that it can 'lead the financial world in the right direction'. The NGOs get a nice flow of cash too. It is not only government ministers and corporate bigwigs who smile when executives of Big Green NGOs accept their invitations to lunch. The Big Green executives get a slap-up meal too – and a fetishistic sense that they are finally getting somewhere.[16]

Who are the ultimate patzers?

Many of us early critics of carbon trading flatter ourselves that we are neither as shortsighted as the patzers nor as blind to the power of potential grassroots alliances as the clients. Preening ourselves on our ability to see through the claim that carbon trading is an 'instrument for reducing the

15 The same is perhaps true with respect to average players in markets in complex derivatives, which swiftly reasserted their economic prominence following the financial crash, despite increased awareness of their dangers.

16 To put it in terms that Slavoj Zizek uses to describe certain kinds of fetish, the executives 'know very well' that they are not getting anywhere, '*mais quand meme* ...', they continue to 'believe'.

cost of achieving climate goals', we criticise people who describe their work within the trading establishment as 'damage control' as having fallen into a lazy clientelism.

Smugly, we note that all the evidence about the effects of carbon trading (and carbon trading reform) is on our side. European Union carbon prices have been so low for so long, for example, that they have become an embarrassment to EU officials, who, forced to admit that the market is providing no incentives for a green transition, are putting on a belated, desperate, contradictory and doomed show of trying to overhaul it (Point Carbon, 2012; Qassim, 2012). With the Clean Development Mechanism in disrepute, ideas such as that (say) a Gold Standard for carbon credits might help redeem it now look as quaint as the idea that the current US regime might commit itself to deep emissions cuts. The notion that REDD could be used to squeeze authoritarian governments into agreeing to the principle of 'free prior informed consent' is clearly on course towards the same destiny. The moment for 'we told you so' triumphalism seems to be fast approaching.

But before gloating too much, perhaps we should take a closer look at ourselves. We find fault with the patzers and the clients for being distracted from the task of grassroots organising by the carbon market gambit. But haven't we made the same mistake, year after year mounting all sorts of sophisticated intellectual assaults on what is in many ways a mere decoy when we should have been targeting the fossil fuel interests behind it? In learning to ridicule molecule targets, have we not drained a lot of energy that could have been devoted to organising to keep oil in the soil, coal in the hole, tar sand in the land, gas under the grass? Have we not spent too much time confronting patzers and clients with logic and evidence when we could have instead been building better alliances with the popular movements who have never given much weight to their opinions anyway? By lavishing critical attention on the patzers' premise that carbon trading is structured to foster (efficient) climate action – when everybody should know that it isn't – have we not ourselves walked into a trap and wound up reinforcing the delaying and temporising functions of market environmentalism?

Perhaps before too long carbon trading will indeed collapse, and the traders who remain will be released into the streets to seek new, equally lucrative professions. But so what? Carbon markets have had a nice 20-year run, which is perhaps more than anyone had a right to expect. And during that time all the controversy over them – including a lot of the criticism – has succeeded beautifully in distracting public and official attention from the underying issues.

Perhaps it is true that we carbon trading critics have been able to avoid the extreme political naïvety of the patzers, as well as the political unimaginativeness or sauve qui peut cynicism of the clients. But again, so what? From the point of view of larger social transformation, how different are we from the market proponents and reformers? We like to tell ourselves we are more 'masterly' than the patzers, but, given that we ourselves have spent so much time on non-issues, it has to be asked who the real masters of the game are, if not, again, the US government, the EU, dirty industries in North and South, financial firms, and so on.

Strategy and patriarchy

Our soul-searching might extend even further. Assuming that we too have been patzers, might not our most patzer-like action, paradoxically, be the very use of concepts like 'patzer' and 'strategy'?

No one who uses the word 'strategy' can afford to be unaware of the reeking baggage it carries of warfare, exclusion, containment and top-down planning. Traditionally, such words are most at home in a masculinist environment, or at the very least in a simplified, ludic, zero-sum world

For those who concentrate on survival rather than triumph, on multiple rather than single identities, on coexistence rather than purging and containment, terms like 'strategy' – along with chess and warfare metaphors generally – might appear to be a symptom of something that needs to be resisted.

of winners and losers.[17] In assuming everybody must strive for a superior 'strategy', are we not precluding the possibility of rejecting such a simplified world, or putting it in its proper place? In heaping insults on patzers, are we not implicitly conjuring up a competitive, machista vision of ourselves as their masters rather than as co-inhabitants of the same world? Are we not buying into the same myths promoting patriarchal containment that we criticise? Shouldn't we rather try to avoid or transcend those games that encourage a drive to evolve 'strategies' to beat patzers? To put it another way, to what extent should we be interested in spending our lives trying (and inevitably failing) to be Garry Kasparov? Most activists are likely to feel that they have better things to do than go around pretending that some day they, too, can learn to be chess masters – miniature Machiavellis like Todd Stern, Andrew Steer, Christiana Figueres, Al Gore or Barack Obama. For those who concentrate on survival rather than triumph, on multiple rather than single identities, on coexistence rather than purging and containment, terms like 'strategy' – along with chess and warfare metaphors generally – might appear to be a symptom of something that needs to be resisted.

The point of highlighting the significance of strategy in climate politics, however, is not to propose that popular movements and their supporters necessarily can or should 'master' the same game that, during the past 15 years, patzer NGOs and diplomats have consistently lost. Quite the contrary: it is to suggest that they might better honour their nature and achieve their goals by not staking everything on political plays involving complex attempts at commodification in which big business, a few powerful states and an elite corps of technical and legal consultants are the undisputed pros. By the same token, the point of criticising clientelism among NGOs is not to say that the challenge of promoting climate justice that they face could be addressed if they somehow found a way of becoming patrons instead of clients, but rather to warn that activists genuinely seeking to achieve climate results need to be wary of the whole system of patron-client relations that has grown up around the carbon market as around so many other international policies. For movements that may be relatively weak politically at the outset, the objective of talking about strategy is not necessarily merely to follow the constricted, linear path of proposing expert methodologies for 'winning' what are in fact unwinnable zero-sum games, but rather to insist on a broader vision that includes the 'metagame' or 'intergame' where more political space can be found. Over the past century, many intellectuals of a liberatory

17 The poet George Oppen once noted that it always seems obvious at the time which political actions are valuable or not, although afterwards such judgements are impossible to prove; whereas with art it's impossible to prove whether an art work is valuable at the time of its creation, yet afterwards it becomes perfectly clear whether it is or not.

bent have furthered this vision by opening up new senses of 'strategy' that float away from the word's militaristic connotations. For example, Karl Polanyi speaks of a 'double movement' (Polanyi, 2001), Michel Foucault of 'discursive strategies', Ashis Nandy of ways that colonised peoples turn the coloniser into a 'digestible bolus' (Nandy 1983), James C. Scott of oppressed groups' development of 'hidden transcripts' on 'protected sites' (Scott, 1990), J. K. Gibson-Graham of strategies that build alternative economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006), cultural critics of 'artistic strategies', gender theorists of strategies of presentation, and nearly everybody of 'strategies for survival' used by the poor. In the case of global warming, one way of moving away from the dominant (militaristic, calculative, repressive) strategy of 'controlling emissions' (which inevitably rebounds on those who 'emit least' as well as failing to address climate change itself) towards a richer approach would be to help set in motion a more collective questioning of fossil fuel civilisation, thus working to connect movements concerned with extraction, pollution, globalisation, exploitation of labour and much else besides.

To broaden the meaning of 'strategy' in this way is not to suggest that there are no ways popular movements can also use or reclaim its more restrictive senses. Market logics, for example, are constantly used by all sides in nearly all struggles; few critics of market environmentalism can be accused of being 'against markets' or of being 'ideological purists', although their opponents typically love (for 'strategic' reasons) to try to put them in this box.[18] [19] Moreover, even those practices most narrowly associated with competition, warfare or profit – assuming that they are of interest as power matrices at all – can be seen as internally constituted by various edifying conversations or dances, not simply instrumental

18 'In a meeting in Dar es Salaam in 2004, a UNDP official asked me if I was "against markets". We were discussing the prospects of the country's new land law for safeguarding local land rights in the light of the current policy environment to promote private investment by setting up a national land bank for foreign investors. The request that I declare whether I was "for them" or "against them" seemed quite strange, given that we were talking about a variety of forces influencing the new law's implications for rural livelihoods and development. This question was not only problematic for the false choice that it posed, but also for presenting a development narrative in which that choice was even imaginable. For many Africans, rejecting all markets is not plausible or desirable, no more than blindly embracing widespread and deepening market relations as a solution for poverty, insecurity and rights' (Gardner, 2012).

19 In a parallel from musical politics, McClary analyses the way a Madonna song 'sets up residence on the moments of the harmonic context that fluctuate' between a 'masculine' single resolution and a more 'feminine' region of desire and freedom: '[T]o the extent that identification with the feminine moment in the narrative spells death, the piece cannot embrace this reality without losing strategic control. Thus the singer risks resisting identification with 'her own' area, even if it means repeated encounters with that which would contain her... Rather than deciding for the sake of secure identity (a move that would lapse back into the narrative of masculine subjectivity), she inhabits both and thus refuses closure' (McClary, 1991: 160).

activities for control freaks. In After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre famously chose chess as an example of what he calls a 'practice' or 'coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that type of activity' can be furthered and 'human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.'

Thus chess analysts tend to focus not on winners, losers or prize money, but rather on what they rather poetically call 'the truth of a position'. Instead of abandoning the metaphor of chess, it might be fruitful to look at it more deeply and, rather than assuming that the game must be seen as an instrumental 'black box' for external ends, identify the range of practices other than warfare with which it is cognate.

Conclusion

Maybe not so many of us can be chess masters. Maybe not so many of us want to be.

Maybe not so many of us can be chess masters. Maybe not so many of us want to be. Nevertheless, there is something important to be learned from the shame of the patzers – which is all our shame – especially now that the pieces are being set up for new chess games called the 'green economy' and 'climate finance'.

First, amateurs though we may always be at political strategy, the time may have come to devote more effort to understanding the rhythms of 'long games' – including the game involving carbon trading that began before Kyoto, or the 'green economy' game whose opening moves are being played today. The purpose is not necessarily to learn to outscheme the masters at their own chosen profession, nor to assign any particular prestige to it. But we need to understand their game and its context well enough to know whether and when to play it, always keeping in mind the centrality of painstaking movement-building. Only by acquiring a proper respect for its intricacies and dangers can we forestall a misplaced confidence that we can navigate its formalities as well as or better than they can. That need not entail becoming a calculating fiend, but it may well mean trying to learn to think at least two or three moves ahead rather than just one (always keeping in mind the old adage about being careful what you wish for); and working to acquire, through broad experience and historical study, at least some of the pattern-recognition skills required for better foresight. This may involve not just closer attention to struggles at the grassroots but also comparative study of the whole range of market environmentalisms and the contradictions involved in their construction, as well as historical investigation of accumulation cycles and the convulsions of finance over the past 500 years (see, for example, Lohmann, forthcoming).

This carefulness may help instil, second, a greater awareness that the structure of expertise and leadership that shapes official policy in all countries on matters involving fossil fuels will always be characterised by a bottomless indifference and cynicism. This is not a remark about personalities – indeed, to read it that way would be once again to slip into patzerdom – but about institutions and their interests and privileges and about capital and its logic. No one should waste time trying to 'reprogramme' the institutions in question with purely rational argument or make alliances where no alliances are possible. Climate change and other global crises are not ozone-type problems that can be solved by governments, corporations, banks or a UN protocol. The movement-building of tomorrow needs to be understood as clearly as the patzers' failures of yesterday.

Third, Northern environmental activists in particular need to learn to trust more the political judgement that more oppressed groups have learned through hard experience, rather than the flashy, brainlessly self-confident, neoclassical culture of official Washington, London and Brussels meeting rooms or the lazy, superficial, tactical theories prevalent among even some of the most well-intentioned professionalised NGOs and academics. As the carbon trading experience has shown, underestimation of the political intelligence of the radical grassroots, particularly in the South, both goes deep and bears a high cost. Programmes of mutual learning regarding new threats, new legal infrastructure, new technostructures of complex trickery and fraud, financialisation's weak points, and ways of breaking NGO patron-client chains are all essential, as is greater solidarity among the whole range of struggles for the commons. As the future unfolds, it will be increasingly necessary, if never easy, to look beyond the enticing poisoned pawns and bishops to see where the real games lie, in the playing of which so many millions will live or die.[20]

kris krüg

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