

A review of the work of Nafeez Ahmed

We are living in a time of rapidly multiplying global crises. Soon rising temperatures, dwindling natural resources and the intensification of conflict at home and abroad will mean civilization as we know it will inexorably and inevitably come to an end - so runs the argument of Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed: an award-winning journalist, academic and prophet for the coming post-carbon age.

Ahmed's argument, expressed most succinctly in his book *A User's Guide to the Crisis of Civilization* (2010) and adapted more recently in his *Failing States, Collapsing Systems* (2017), is attractively comprehensive and comprehensible. According to Ahmed the various 'crises' occurring across the globe today (identified in *A User's Guide* as climate change, energy scarcity, food insecurity, economic instability, international terrorism and the militarization of social relations both domestic and international) are not as discrete nor as aberrant as conventional analysis would suggest. Instead, not only are these crises mutually reinforcing but they should be understood not as temporary deviations from the 'normal' running of society but as an integral part of hydrocarbon dependency, US hegemony and the neo-liberal world order.

Ahmed's analysis of energy scarcity, given prominence in *Failing States*, shows this thinking in action. The neo-liberal world order, established on the premise that limitless economic growth is both possible and desirable, is necessarily reliant on hydrocarbons, particularly oil, as the only energy source able to meet the ever-increasing energy demands of perpetual economic growth.

Unfortunately for this model of society, Ahmed argues against those whose analyses delay the predicted onset of 'peak oil', that humanity has reached, or is about to reach, peak oil production. Thereafter, any further use of hydrocarbons as an energy source faces a declining 'energy return on investment'; the ratio of energy invested to energy received worsens. Much vaunted prospective sources of fossil fuels, such as Venezuelan 'heavy oil' or the Canadian tar sands, he claims are not as bountiful as they first appear. This precipitous decline risks energy supply crises in the developed world¹, a phenomenon already being experienced in regions like California.

¹See also by Ahmed; <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/chinas-economic-boom-is-about-to-be-cut-short-by-peak-oil-warns-state-funded-study-exclusive-2533df2aeb6b>

Central to Ahmed's argument however is that declining energy supplies will also serve to aggravate other global crises. The neoliberal model of industrialised agriculture, dominated by transnational agribusiness, is energy intensive and heavily dependent on hydrocarbons both as an energy source and a source of synthetic fertilizer. Dwindling oil reserves threaten to further exacerbate global food crises. Most recent of these was the 2007-8 hike in food prices, an event overshadowed by the 2008 economic collapse and from which global food prices never fully recovered; to this day the global south continues to experience food shortages. Climate change, a global crisis in its own right and also a contributing factor behind the rising food supply crises, is also driven by burning fossil fuels. Here Ahmed draws a particularly lurid picture from Mark Lynas's book *Six Degrees* to describe the impact of a three degree rise in global temperatures: 'the Amazon ... would burn down in a firestorm of epic proportions ... tens of millions of climate refugees ... world food supplies will be critically endangered ... in northern Europe and the UK, summer drought will alternate with extreme winter flooding as torrential rainstorms sweep in from the Atlantic'. Alarmingly, Ahmed describes such a prediction as 'deeply conservative'.

Ahmed also links energy scarcity to the global terror crisis and efforts by the northern powers to secure access to oil and thus the international system in which they reign supreme. For Ahmed the 2003 invasion of Iraq was motivated by such a need. The narrative that links this kind of interventionist behavior and the anti-Imperialist sentiment to Islamist terrorism is well known. Ahmed, in characteristically conspiratorial fashion, takes the argument a step further, arguing that the northern states actively patronised al-Qaeda affiliate terrorist organizations in order to aid the process of securing middle eastern oil. In a particularly striking expose published on his *Insurge Intelligence*, 'people-powered watchdog journalism for the global commons', Ahmed flags up a US government document showing how western governments allied with al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups to undermine Bashar al-Assad in Syria². If Ahmed's reporting is accurate, this exposes a troubling duplicity at the heart of western security policy, which simultaneously promotes Islamist terror abroad whilst using the threat of terrorism to justify the construction of 'police states' at home.

The imposition of stringent surveillance networks and militarized rule will only help the establishment ride out the social consequences of these converging global crises for so long.

Within the next thirty years, despite the best efforts of the northern elites to cling to power, these global crises will multiply and amplify, prompting social crises like mass migrations and civil unrest and thus bringing about the collapse of contemporary industrial society. In the Middle East even apparently stable states like Saudi Arabia will collapse under the combined weight of energy depletion along with climate induced water and food scarcity. In

²<https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/isis-was-state-sponsored-by-us-allies-says-former-government-intelligence-analyst-exclusive-51a9e999c437>

Africa, a series of 'authoritarian turns' emblemized by the return to power of Muhammadu Buhari in Nigeria or the rapid pace of authoritarian reforms under Tanzania's John Magufuli, will serve only to temporarily repress the social impacts of earth systems destabilization before these states too succumb to collapse. India and China, far from ascending to their oft prophesied role as new world powers, will be unable to support the ever increasing food and fuel demands of their economies. Even the so-called 'Euro-Atlantic Core' will no longer be able to isolate itself from the impact of global crises as it has done thus far. Europe not only faces a fuel and food crises but the prospect of ever-growing numbers of refugees arriving at its borders. The nationalist sentiment this would spark, and the damage it could do to the European project, can be seen in the electoral success of far-right populists across the continent. The United States is more directly vulnerable to water and food scarcity; vast areas of the Southwest and Central Plains face the prospect of severe drought along with California, the nation's bread basket. By the mid-20th century even these 'core' nations will descend into mass civil unrest, with the concomitant rise in militarism, nationalism and xenophobia that incidents of widespread disaffection entail.

Into this stark narrative Ahmed weaves a thread of optimism. Whilst the collapse of industrial civilization is inevitable, what will follow is not set in stone. A retrograde descent into xenophobic violence is only one possible path civilization could take. Equally plausible for Ahmed is that individuals and grass-roots organizations will seize on the demise of industrial civilization and bring about a new post-carbon society. Here Ahmed's argument shifts from cataclysm to sunny utopianism. He forecasts how the collapsing environmentally and psychologically damaging structures of industrial capitalism could be replaced by structures more conducive to human wellbeing. The current system of industrialized agriculture, for example, would give way to small-scale localized organic farming. Other features of this new civilization would be wider ownership of the means of production; an alternative to our unsustainable debt-based monetary system; and a decentralized network of renewable energy. More broadly Ahmed's post-carbon civilization would do away with the materialist ethic of limitless growth that underpins capitalist society, to be replaced by a value system that gives due weight to humanity's non-material needs. How Ahmed's brave new world is to be implemented remains disappointingly obscure.

Like all good prophets Ahmed's unorthodox views have been at times obfuscated and opposed by the establishment. In March 2013 he began to publish a regular blog for the Guardian entitled 'Earth Insight' on 'the geopolitics of environmental, energy and economic crises', giving him a forum to showcase the applicability of the above framework to contemporary crises. A particularly choice example is his article explaining the growth of the Nigerian

terrorist organization Boko Haram³. Here Ahmed argues that a combination of fossil-fuel induced climate change and local energy crises, caused by Nigeria's dependence on waning oil reserves, generated support for this Islamist terrorist sect. On top of this, he also links Boko Haram's success to support from al-Qaeda, spreading throughout the Maghreb under the auspice of the Algerian intelligence services, who were themselves backed by the US and the UK in order to secure critical oil supplies in North Africa. This article showcases the ready applicability of Ahmed's inter-disciplinary framework to contemporary events.

Barely a year after its inception this blog was unceremoniously axed by the Guardian (the blog's output, and a short biography of Ahmed himself, remains on the Guardian website⁴). A short press release issued by the publication cites the reason for the termination of Ahmed's blog his drifting away from his original brief. Ahmed's own interpretation of the incident, and that of Jonathon Cook, fellow antagonist of the Guardian, is that he was censored for publishing a widely shared article⁵ which undermined Israel's publicised rationale for going to war. Singled out as the architect of this general policy of pro-Israel censorship was Jonathan Freedland⁶, then executive editor for opinion at the Guardian, a claim both Freedland and the Guardian have denied⁷.

Ahmed's singling out of Jonathan Freedland speaks to a broader point of tension in his interpretation of the 'Global Media-Industrial Complex' (GMIC). According to Ahmed the ill-defined GMIC, which perhaps we should interpret as the 'mainstream media' (a term with substantial problems of its own), persistently fails to present the real, systemic nature of global crises. Instead the GMIC identifies each crisis as a distinct issue. A Guardian article by Max Siollun, published just five days after Ahmed's piece, does exactly this. Siollun's own reasons for the growth of Boko Haram⁸ all hinge on specific conditions within Nigeria, including an economic and educational imbalances within Nigeria; disparities in the provision of sharia law across the country and a particularly harsh government crackdown on the group in 2009. Whilst Siollun's historical analysis shines a welcome light on the specificities of the Nigerian case it lacks the wider systemic angle of Ahmed's analysis. By missing this systemic angle Siollun's work precludes any critique of the global socio-economic

³<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/may/09/behind-rise-nigeria-boko-haram-climate-disaster-peak-oil-depletion>

⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/nafeez-ahmed>

⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/jul/09/israel-war-gaza-palestine-natural-gas-energy-crisis>

⁶<https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/palestine-is-not-an-environment-story-921d9167ddef>

⁷<https://www.theguardian.com/gnm-press-office/2014/dec/05/statement-in-response-to-a-blog-post-by-nafeez-ahmed>

⁸<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/14/boko-haram-why-nigerian-militant-group-powerful>

system which produced Boko Haram. He is thus representative of the deficits Ahmed perceives the GMIC to possess.

What is less clear is to what extent the GMIC, however defined, is willfully obfuscating the 'real' nature of these crises. At times it appears that Ahmed is suggesting that inadequate reporting by the GMIC is simply symptomatic of a wider knowledge deficit, the GMIC reflecting the broader lack of holistic inter-disciplinary analysis that Ahmed's work tries to fix. At other times, like the suggestion that Jonathan Freedland et al are working to defend a pro-Israel line, Ahmed suggests that the GMIC is actively defending an order in which it has vested interests. With lines like 'the Global Media-Industrial Complex ... has served simply to allow the most powerful vested interests within the prevailing order to perpetuate themselves and their interests' and 'the opportunity of the Internet is being rapidly coopted by the Global Media-Industrial Complex' the GMIC is set up as the mouthpiece of a group with vested interests, a global 'them' against a global 'us'. It is the same ill-defined dichotomy that underpins statements like 'it will be the people, rather than governments, who will be on the frontline of worldwide demands for meaningful social change'. Quite who represents 'governments' or 'vested interests', and how they are to be distinguished from 'the people', is unclear.

The amorphous nature of Ahmed's people/establishment distinction is representative of the gaps in Ahmed's Marxist revisionism. Ahmed's Marxist influences are both clear and avowed; he does not 'suggest that Marx's work be taken at face value and drawn upon uncritically – but rather that a critical analysis of the global political economy cannot afford to ignore Marx's contribution'. The whole rhetoric of opposed interest groups smacks of a Marxist class system and indeed one of Ahmed's principle bones of contention with recent histories of civilizational change is that they fail to recognise the importance of class dynamics within civilizations. Critically however, Ahmed's amorphous 'people' lack the clarity of Marx's proletariat. Whereas the latter was defined by their relationship to the means of production it is not clear how the prospective revolutionaries in Ahmed's analysis are to be identified.

Having abandoned the proletariat Ahmed also loses them as a motor of history; one of the most well-worn elements of Marx's original analysis is that it is an uprising of the proletariat that will bring about world socialism. It is not clear that Ahmed has managed to locate an effective replacement. When it comes to constructing his post-carbon utopia it is suggested that the impetus will come from grassroots communities. In the absence of workers downing tools worldwide, Woking in Surrey and its admirably forward thinking council, is made to function as the advance guard of a coming post-carbon revolution, with its entirely energy self-sufficient and carbon neutral town centre Perhaps naturally Ahmed too has a role to play in his own revolution. The first step in the revolution is to overcome the flawed and fragmented nature of global knowledge of these crises; only once the veil is lifted and people

realise the interconnected nature of these crises and the flaws of our system as a whole can they begin to formulate the effective solutions that will form the bedrock of a post-carbon society. Here Ahmed's own analysis and his 'new action-research agenda' is implicitly essential.

More problematic is how any positive movement, however well informed, would be able to overcome the extent of the crises Ahmed so pointedly emphasizes. Take climate change: even if we disregard indications that the 'tipping point', after which widespread earth systems disruption becomes inevitable, may have already been reached, it seems deeply unlikely that such change can be averted. In the race between rising temperatures and the massive overhaul of the global system required to reduce carbon emissions, the former, with both inertia and the powers-that-be on its side, will almost certainly triumph, despite the best efforts of Woking town council. By the time the system has begun to unravel and the way is opened up for a post-carbon revolution the latter will be able to do little but watch as the chain of events, put inexorably into motion by the regime that preceded it, play out.

This is not to disparage Ahmed's Marxist position entirely. Ahmed's convincingly demonstrates that Marx's critique predicted elements of contemporary capitalism, not least by grounding his own analysis of the importance of energy in a Marxist framework, linking it to Marx's concept of the 'mode of production'. Neither are Ahmed's shortcomings unusual; the lack of an adequate historical motor in the absence of the proletariat is a common critique of post-Marxist analyses⁹.

Particularly valuable also is Ahmed's emphasis on the importance of humanity's non-material needs, which could well have been lifted from the oft-overlooked 'young Marx' and that chimes with the arguments of the so-called 'new left' of the late 20th century. Both Ahmed's critique and his positive recommendations could be seen as a continuation of this socio-political movement which took the spirit of 1968 and broke with the materialist, trade-union centric Marxism of the 'old' left. In particular, the self-destructive nature of industrial society, a critique of capitalism motivated by environmental and existential needs and the need for a radical shift to a society geared not towards material growth but humans' other needs are all hallmarks of both Ahmed's work and the political programmes proffered by representatives of the 'ecological' wing of this disparate 20th century movement¹⁰.

Much of the force of Ahmed's rhetorical style comes from simultaneously acknowledging, while vehemently denying, the validity of alternate arguments. It is worth noting however that these arguments do exist and have enjoyed longer shrift than Ahmed has given them.

⁹See, for example, Ellen Meiksins Wood's criticism of the eminent André Gorz neatly summarised in Little, A., *The Political Thought of Andre Gorz* (Oxford, 2006) pp.78-84

¹⁰A classic summary, Rudolph Bahro's 'Basic Position of the Greens', can be found in Dryzek, J. & Schlosberg, D., *Debating the Earth, The Environmental Politics Reader* (Oxford, 2005) pp.145-53

For instance, Ahmed roundly dismisses those ‘neo-Boserupian’ arguments which argue that the pressure of necessity will lead to inventions thereby saving the current system from climatic disaster. In contrast, Ahmed is dismissive of the prospective benefits of negative emissions technology, thorium and the so-called ‘singularity’, all of which have their proponents. So too do market-based solutions to environmental problems and the work of international organizations like the UN, of which Ahmed is deeply critical of both. Readers of Ahmed’s work should be careful to avoid being lulled by the rhetorical ferocity of his admittedly convincing work and be ready to question the certainty with which Ahmed dismisses alternate viewpoints.

That said, it is the rhetorical forthrightness of Ahmed’s work that is its principal strength. Across the board Ahmed’s controversial cataclysms do a fantastic job of drawing attention to the immanence of prospective environmental catastrophe, foregrounding issues that are liable, when competing with the Trumps and Brexits of this world, to fade into the discursive background. His systemic framework is both compelling and valuable, not least in combating northern NIMBY-ism, and it would be gratifying to see his call for wide-ranging interdisciplinary analysis answered. Indeed it is on this argument, rather than on his ambiguous recommendations for a post-carbon future, that Ahmed’s work should be judged. *A User’s Guide to The Crisis of Civilization* is after all the title of Ahmed’s most substantial work *And How To Save It* merely a subtitle: it is the apocalyptica, rather than the utopianism, that looms largest. Certainly, lurid blog-posts entitled ‘*Global Civilization to descend into ‘hell on earth’ unless we choose a new paradigm*’¹¹ and ‘*Pentagon study declares American empire is ‘collapsing*’¹² are an excellent way to garner attention on social media and financially support the embattled prophet lifestyle.

More importantly, however, his work is also an excellent way to spark a desperately needed conversation about the interrelated crises facing our planet; a future conversation without which there will be no future left to shape.

¹¹<https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/global-civilisation-to-descend-into-hell-on-earth-unless-we-choose-a-new-paradigm-e516811317a4>

¹²<https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/pentagon-study-declares-american-empire-is-collapsing-746754cdaebf>