

## *The Anthropocene* **Planet Titanic**



*The Titanic hotel, in Antalya, southern Turkish riviera. If climate change has the projected impact on sea levels, later this century it will join the ship it is named for and designed after, under the waves*

### ***Colin Butler writes:***

I wish I could disagree with your editorials on climate change and its implications, Fundamentally, I can't. I particularly appreciate the point that humans prey on each other – though it's not just the top 1 per cent on the 99 per cent, it's also us (in the top 10 per cent, I suppose) preying (essentially) on invisible people way below us, now and in the future.

Still, we are trying to change that, and I'm not suggesting immense guilt will help, nor that inequality can be fully abolished. But I am suggesting inequality can and must be reduced, lest nature or revolution or both do it instead, ushering in a new Dark Age.

### ***Four decks***

*The Human Titanic* is the name of the book I have been dreaming of since at least 2000. It is aimed at a much larger audience. It is an analogy for the vessel, our planet that we live on, in one of four decks, each occupied by a different global 'claste', who rarely interact except within their own level, other than by rule-giving (or taking) or by ritualised hand-touching or foot kissing. High up are the Mary Antoinette suites, though they could be also be named after deceased members of this fabulously wealthy and powerful class: Mobuto, Marcos, Mengistu, or for that matter still-living icons like our very own Australian Gina Rinehart. These are cabins, decks and on-

board casinos inhabited by people who are fabulously wealthy and act as though the fate of civilisation that the ship hosts (and on which you and I also live) does not matter to them.

I live on the second claste deck, and so does virtually everyone I have ever met, and anyone who will ever read this, though some of us live on more or less privileged parts of this level. But some of us from this deck work on the upper floors, trained to be discreet and servile, such as by producing butlers, as they used to be called – and as one of my own ancestors may have been. Robert Frank has a long description of the production process for these butlers to the elite in his book *Richistan*.

Below us live the Precariat, and below them, in steerage, are people who are unimaginably poor, at least to most of us on the higher decks. They may number as many as a billion. I have encountered a few of them, for example in a village in Meghalaya, India, near the Bangladeshi border. Few birds live in the remnants of forest on the steep hillside, near the wet desert of Cherrapunjee. Most of the people I met there are less than 1.5 metres (5 feet) tall, due to lifelong under-nutrition. Many are chronically infected with parasites. They could become become radicalised, but are more likely to live a short life in poverty. I also once met a precariat member – he was from somewhere in South Asia and was flying back from Nigeria, maybe to Singapore. He'd been in Nigeria for about 24 hours, some mistake had occurred, over which he had very little control. Life in economy class beyond about 60 hours a week surely classifies as a hell realm, but at least he was well-fed, literate, and skilled.

You could argue my temporary companion on that flight really belonged on the second deck, but, like a lot of things in life, the boundaries of these claste decks are not absolutely precise. And some people can definitely move between decks, in either direction. President Mobutu Sesu Seko of Zaire, wasn't born to wealth or power, but for a while he achieved sufficient of both to be a genuine first-claste member. In fact, it was Mobuto's rule that first popularised the term 'kleptocacy' – rule by thieves

### ***The roots of this book***

The title *The Human Titanic* was suggested to me by Robert Chambers, who I worked with in 2002, and who had been involved with writing *Voices of the Poor* for the World Bank. We met for three days in San Francisco, finalising the titular chapter of the conceptual framework on human well-being and ecosystem services for the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Robert was a famous academic, but unlike the rest of us he travelled with a back pack, and didn't seem at home in five star hotels. But Robert also wasn't perfectly at home when interviewing the extremely poor, one of whom had asked him his salary. Robert couldn't bring himself to tell him.

In 1997 I had hoped to undertake a PhD on tropical medicine, preferably on malaria. But I changed my mind during the conference to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Ronald Ross's discovery that malaria was transmitted by mosquitoes,

in Secunderabad, India. One of the keynote speakers, before several hundred delegates, mainly Indian, spoke frankly of the futility of lobbying for further research funds, and suggested instead that malaria researchers would need to learn to better use their limited funds.

My immediate reaction was that though brutally honest, this was only true because those who suffer from malaria are overwhelmingly poor. It then occurred to me, with an intensity previously sensed comparatively faintly, that the way the population of the First World views and treats that of the Third World parallels the way some upper caste Hindus treat the 'untouchable' *dalits*.

### ***The claste system***

These thoughts led to coining of the word 'claste' and a substantially econometric analysis of the global claste system that my thesis comprised. But it soon also occurred to me that global economic discrimination also provided a previously under-recognised causal explanation for the process that I called 'environmental brinkmanship', akin to nuclear brinkmanship.

During my thesis I wrote two papers. In one I wrote: "The powerful exhibit contempt, for the poor, for nature, and for the future, of breathtaking scale. In this paper, humanity is compared to the travellers on the Titanic. Most live in steerage, unable to sense the iceberg's proximity or to escape. Above deck, the privileged enjoy entrancing conversation and entertainment. If, as in 1912, the unthinkable should happen, they know they have disproportionate access to the lifeboats.

"Those who escaped the Titanic reached the safety of New York. But if human demands on natural capital exceed the "environmental Plimsoll Line" then we risk not only the failure of civilisation, but its collapse. Even New York may be an inadequate haven for those sufficiently privileged to access the lifeboats; the hegemony of the currently wealthy may not guarantee future security.' I see that to read that paper, once open access, now costs \$45. Good thing I have a copy.

I have been trying to write this book, as I mentioned, for over a decade. I keep getting obstructed – there is always something more urgent, usually that is doing something that I'll get paid for, or meeting an obligation that I rashly promised I'd do. But, now I feel, getting these ideas to a wider audience is perhaps the most important thing I can do. At least I can write some introductions and instalments. More to come....

**Colin D. Butler**

University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia

***Email: colin.butler@canberra.edu.au***

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