

Review

Scorched: South Africa's changing climate

Leonie Joubert (Wits University Press, 2006)

Reviewed by Jacklyn Cock

In *Scorched* Leonie Joubert provides a compelling introduction to what is possibly the most serious challenge of our time – climate change. Climate change will have a devastating impact on working life, income and livelihoods. It is already evident in erratic weather patterns such as droughts, floods and violent storms. These are expected to become more frequent. The process will hit poor people the hardest, particularly in Africa, although the continent is not a major source of carbon emissions which are the main cause of climate change.

The book, *Heat* by English environmental journalist George Monbiot makes a good companion to *Scorched*, especially in its emphasis on solutions. Monbiot warns of 'ecological catastrophe' unless we reduce carbon emissions by 90%. Reduction involves developing low-carbon economies based on more efficient use of energy and raw materials, a process which can generate 'green jobs'.

According to the ILO action on climate change has "enormous potential to create productive and gainful employment for the 1.4 billion working poor in the developing world, but also for the tens of millions of unemployed in industrialized countries." "Green jobs' are growing in the north. "They are found in sectors like renewable energy generation, in energy efficiency services and equipment manufacturing, in mass transportation, in smart urban growth and in recycling. These

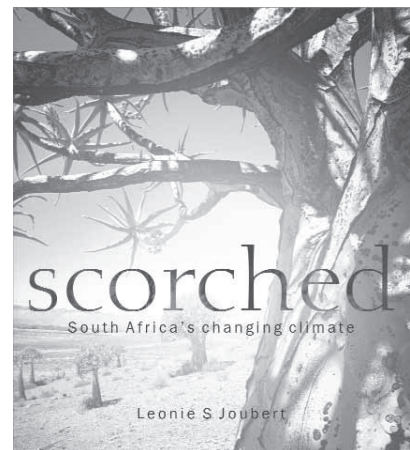
sectors are far from marginal. In Germany there are already 1.6 million green jobs, more than in the country's largest auto industry."

However, capital resists moves to low carbon economies. Harris-White and Harris show that in the UK, "energy policy is climate-change policy, and it is hard to see what it is doing other than serving as a mass tranquillizer". Companies such as Shell and BP are leading the resistance to renewable energy. "BP's products remain massive polluters, generating 5% of the entire world's fossil fuel emissions".

This resistance points to the weakness of *Scorched*, which also applies to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. In both, climate change is not contextualised as a political issue. Joubert wanted her book "to marvel at the wonders of nature rather than fuss over the complicated entanglements of the human condition". But the two cannot be separated.

The ways in which the poor will suffer first and worst from climate change illustrates how the issue is embedded in power relations, in the connections between the crisis of nature and of justice. The crisis of nature refers to increasing environmental degradation. As German theorist and activist, Wolfgang Sachs writes in *The Johannesburg Memo*, "if all countries followed the industrial example, 5 or 6 planets would be needed to serve as 'sources' for the inputs and 'sinks' for the wastes of economic progress."

The crisis of justice refers to increasing social inequality within



and between nations. About 20% of the world's population consumes 80% of its resources. It is the rich who consume disproportionate quantities of energy and water and produce the most waste including carbon emissions. This is why Sachs argues for "the alleviation of wealth rather than the alleviation of poverty". He believes, "The corporation-driven consumer classes" must live "at drastically reduced levels of resource demand".

Scorched takes us on a rich intellectual and geographical journey, introducing us to colourful individuals, fascinating creatures and vivid landscapes. Joubert hopes that an appreciation of how they are threatened will generate "a strong sense of responsibility".

In her next book she will explore the impact of climate change on vulnerable communities in South Africa. These include the successful Heiveld Co-operative whose rooibos plantations are threatened by encroaching desert. Hopefully she will address the root cause of this threat which is capitalism, with its appeal to greed, self interest, and its unrelenting pressure to expand in a search for profits and markets. Capitalism is ecodestructive, which is why Joel Kovel in *The Enemy of Nature* calls it a "suicidal regime". Last century Rosa Luxemburg posed the future as a choice between "socialism or barbarism". Today our choice is socialism or death. LB

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