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Climate Change and Our Political Future

Harry van der Linden

Under Review:

Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright. *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018. Pp. xiii + 207. \$26.95, hardcover. ISBN 978178663429-0.

This book addresses two important and urgent questions: what might happen politically as climate change increasingly takes hold, and how should the Left respond to the anticipated new political conditions? Mann and Wainwright write that their discussion of our political future as shaped by a worsening climate change is guided by four “core propositions.” The first two are not controversial among people committed to climate justice: the science of climate change as such need not be debated (which does not preclude the need for further scientific analysis) and the impact of rapid climate change is horrible and a threat to human life, especially for the poor and marginalized. The third proposition is that it is unlikely that we can avoid significant climate change and so “the time has come for an analysis that anticipates (even as it fights against) a rapidly warming world” (13). The fourth proposition is that, since the elites of global capitalism have failed to coordinate a response to the deterioration of the climate that will increasingly jeopardize their political and economic power, we must expect that “elites will increasingly attempt to coordinate their reactions, all while sailing seas of uncertainty and incredulity” (14).

In support of the third proposition, Mann and Wainwright point to overall growing global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, continual record warm years, the Paris Agreement with nations failing to set individual mitigation goals that will keep global warming within the proclaimed target goal of 2 (or even 1.5) degrees Celsius, and the withdrawal of the United States from this Agreement. They also observe that continuous accumulation is essential to capitalism; that fossil-fuel extraction has become more energy- and carbon- intensive, as exemplified by fracking and tar sands oil (25-26); and that adapting to climate change may make it worse. The authors point to the growing demand for air conditioning, especially in the

expanding and warming cities of the developing world, as an adaptation “that begets greater future suffering” since it increases fossil fuel-based electricity use and adds to the “urban heat island effect” (60).¹

But Mann and Wainwright reject the despairing response that “we are doomed.” We must instead keep on fighting for mitigation and examine how political institutions and practices may be transformed in light of climate change. The fourth proposition hints at what they think is the likely political future: in response to growing climate disruptions, the global capitalist elites will create a “planetary sovereignty,” constituted as an emergency, a state of exception, for the sake of security and defense of human life. The planetary sovereignty will involve a central authority capable of a forceful management of mitigation and adaptation on a global scale. The authors call this capitalist response to climate change “Climate Leviathan,” and draw from Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt to articulate it. On the basis of the dichotomies “capitalist” and non-capitalist” and “planetary sovereignty and “anti-planetary sovereignty,” Mann and Wainwright consider three other possible future political formations (or ideal types): “Climate Behemoth” (capitalist and anti-planetary sovereignty), “Climate Mao” (non-capitalist and planetary sovereignty), and “Climate X” (non-capitalist and anti-planetary sovereignty).

Climate Behemoth will emerge if some combination of fossil-fuel capitalists, market fundamentalists, climate change deniers, right-wing nationalists and populists, and millenarians who welcome a climate apocalypse triumphs in the long run. Wainwright and Mann say little about the political consequences of Climate Behemoth – they hint at fascism and plutocracy (47) – and view it mainly as an oppositional force to Climate Leviathan that they believe is bound to fail. As an oppositional force, Behemoth evokes what Naomi Klein describes as disaster capitalism, using “shock” to dismantle public services and promote de-regulated capitalism.²

¹ An additional problem is that air conditioning uses HFC refrigerants, which are extremely harmful GHGs. The Kigali Amendment, adopted by the signatories of the (ozone-layer protecting) Montreal Protocol in 2016, and taking effect on January 1, 2019, stipulates an almost complete phase-out of HFCs but allows three decades for the gradual accomplishment of this goal.

² The aftermath of hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico is instructive in this regard and discussed in Klein, *The Battle for Paradise*, 43-53. Mann and Wainwright seem to mischaracterize as “a

Climate Mao agrees with Climate Leviathan about the necessity of planetary sovereignty, but views capitalism as incapable of addressing climate change. It may come about when the people of China revolt against a Communist Party unable to sustain their material gains due to worsening climate change and then create an authoritarian state socialism that focuses on climate mitigation and adaptation. Wainwright and Mann opt for the designation “Climate Mao” because they argue that only China as the world’s largest greenhouse gas emitter could lead other countries, especially in the South, to support socialist global climate management. The capitalist North will resist, possibly triggering a global war between Mao and Leviathan (49). However, it is more likely that China will continue on its current state-capitalist path and support the capitalist climate management of Climate Leviathan. Finally, Climate X is the response of the non-authoritarian Left: it rejects the authoritarian climate management of both Climate Mao and Climate Leviathan and avoids the injustice of Climate Behemoth that makes the poor and marginalized the greatest victims of climate disaster. The final chapter of *Climate Leviathan* discusses Climate X, while Climate Leviathan is emphasized in most other chapters.

Extrapolating from Hobbes’ Leviathan as a response to the threat of civil war to the need for global sovereignty in response to the threat of climate change and adding Schmitt’s characterization of sovereignty leads to Climate Leviathan. Another theoretical avenue to Climate Leviathan is “green Keynesianism,” but one that, due to the borderless nature of climate change and the globalized economy, would transcend the level of the state and become a “planetary green Keynesianism” (126). This type of Keynesianism requires a global coordination center, i.e., Climate Leviathan. Finally, Bertrand Russell and Alfred Einstein, among others, argued that the threat of global annihilation posed by nuclear weapons necessitates a world government that could create a non-nuclear regime. The threat of climate catastrophe points in the same political direction (140 ff). Granted these “logics” toward planetary sovereignty, how might this sovereignty come about in political reality?

metaphor for Climate Leviathan” that hurricane Sandy left Manhattan in darkness with the headquarters of Goldman Sachs ablaze in light thanks to their generators (157). Behemoth leaves individuals to fend for themselves and those with little means end up “in darkness.” The regulated capitalism of Climate Leviathan involves collective measures against climate change, benefitting mostly (but not only) the rich.

Mann and Wainwright sketch two ways Climate Leviathan might emerge. First, “elites mainly from two leading capitalist states, the United States and China, are capable of reconfiguring the political so that sovereignty is organized and legitimated on a planetary basis” (145). Mann and Wainwright make conflicting suggestions as to how coercive this sovereignty would be. They write that this “elite program ... might be granted substantial legitimacy in a context of perceived planetary emergency” (145). But they also claim that “planetary governance would enroll on a lumpy, conflictual terrain” (152) since the input of most states is excluded and there is not one hegemonic power but rather a “G2” (the United States and China). In passing, Mann and Wainwright mention that India and Russia might have to be included in global climate governance (31, 152) and this would add to hegemonic struggle. The second way definitely implies coercion and conflict, since it has the United States obtaining total dominance in the development of space weapons, and then “space weapons will be mobilized to defend life on Earth: atmospheric geoengineering” (148). In a word, planetary sovereignty here includes the monopoly of space violence, enabling the United States to control through injection of synthetic aerosols how much sunlight is reflected back into space. This control requires the threat or use of violence in light of the controversial nature of geoengineering and its divergent impact on different regions on earth.

Mann and Wainwright suggest that the “G2” could use “the United Nations or other international fora ... as a means of legitimizing aggressive means of surveillance and discipline” (32), adding in a footnote that the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2011 considered the task of managing climate-induced conflict. This suggestion deserves elaboration since it points to an important possible scenario leading to Climate Leviathan. The UNSC has on several occasions debated whether climate change is a Security Council issue, partly under pressure of small island states who view the rising sea levels caused by climate change as a threat to their sovereignty and survival. More broadly, climate change may be viewed as an UNSC issue because it is a “threat multiplier,” meaning that climate refugees, reduced resources due to global warming, shrinking agricultural land, and the like add to existing or evolving conflicts. A case can be made that the UNSC has the authority to take Chapter VII (“coercive”) measures regarding GHG mitigation and adaptation to climate change. But most countries from the Global South have opposed making climate change an UNSC issue in any form, presumably being wary of “Western interventionism,” while the many supporting countries of the North have typically

avored some non-coercive UNSC role.³ However, if the Paris Agreement falls apart and more severe climate disruptions arise, this opposition might end, and so move us closer to the Climate Leviathan of “G2,” assuming that China and the United States would dominate UNSC decisions.⁴

Mann and Wainwright oppose progressive supporters of the Paris Agreement in the name of Climate X. For them the Agreement rests on a misguided belief in “green capitalism” and further involves a mistaken acceptance of state-centered solutions of climate change, thus foreshadowing Climate Leviathan. Climate X is anti-capitalist and rejects planetary sovereignty. Its main proponents are the Marxist Left and anti-colonial indigenous groups whose lifestyle prefigures how true green living must evolve. Climate X requires cooperation between the two groups, and radical climate activists engaged in blocking fossil-fuel developments and promoting divestment and boycotts offer a glimpse of this social formation (197). However, we cannot predict X’s institutional form: “We might expect it to emerge as a ragtag collection of the many, but cannot say anything definitive. X, after all, is variable” (193). Climate X follows three principles. It views people as equal, sharing the Earth; it emphasizes the dignity and voice of all (radical democracy); and it is guided by solidarity among divergent green communities and modes of life, offering multiplicity instead of global sovereignty.

The conception of Climate X is problematic on several grounds. First, it seems to discourage cooperation with liberal or progressive supporters of the Paris Agreement since the Agreement is seen as foreshadowing Climate Leviathan. Granted, green capitalism might not be able to deal effectively with climate change in the long run (though this can be debated), and it will surely be unjust in the sharing of the burdens and benefits of mitigation and adaptation. Still, we should support the Paris Agreement and similar initiatives (while pointing out their shortcomings) because they provide some room for anti-capitalist alternatives to grow before climate disruptions may lead to authoritarian global climate management. Second, socialism as a convincing response to climate change needs to be given more specific institutional content. For example, we need to address how workplace democracy might be conducive to greener

³ See Cousins, “UN Security Council,” 201-10.

⁴ For some objections to the UNSC enforcing carbon mitigation, see my “Climate Change Mitigation and the U.N. Security Council.”

production or how community input in investments might be conducive to greener transportation or electricity generation. To be sure, there are limits to envisioning a green socialist future (the authors emphasize the Marxian views that our historical location restricts our vision), but the struggle for this future minimally requires a discussion of concrete steps in this direction. Finally, Mann and Wainwright adhere to a conception of sovereignty that seems to preclude any significant role for the state and international or global institutions in creating climate justice. The weaknesses of the Paris Agreement, including the compliance problem of UNCFPP as the institutional basis of this Agreement, may in fact call forth Climate Leviathan, since the window of preventing climate disaster is small. But this does not mean that in the struggle to prevent this scenario we should not theorize and seek to materialize more democratic and effective forms of national, regional, and global climate governance. Our best hope may lie between Mao and X.

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