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## Book Review- Climate Leviathan A Political Theory of our Planetary Future

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## Book Review

### **Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (2018): *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of our Planetary Future*, London: Verso.**

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#### **Abstract**

*Climate Leviathan* provides an account of the possible trajectories of climate politics, arguing that adaptation to rather than mitigation of global warming is the most likely scenario, a planetary management organised on the basis of new forms of political sovereignty. It is argued that *Climate Leviathan's* ambition to project sovereignty globally and on the basis of existing social relations will face enormous problems, not least because of its incapacity to address issues of climate justice, equality and solidarity. Conversely, a non-capitalist form of global leviathan based on a change of policy in China and revolutionary upheaval in Asia would be very effective, but a reversal of its strategy of economic growth may have unacceptable political costs for the PRC. Fundamentally, however, *Climate Leviathan* embraces neither capitalist nor non-capitalist forms of global sovereignty but argues - following Benjamin's critique of sovereign power responses to the catastrophe of the 1930s - that only a conception of a politics of counter-sovereignty can be emancipatory and just.

As the title of this book implies, its concern is not with the science of climate change, nor directly and in any detail with the social and economic consequences of undiminished global warming, but with a particular form of sovereign power. The authors argue that in the absence of an alternative based on principles of equality, solidarity and justice the power deployed on a global scale to manage the process of adaptation will be of an unprecedented ferocity. *Climate Leviathan* hardly considers the possibility that global warming might be halted – so called mitigation – and accepts, as other recent accounts have, that adaptation to the realities of a warming climate is now inevitable. The book's premise is that this will most likely occur in a world within which capitalist social relations remain, its pessimism framed, nevertheless, in Gramscian terms: recognising the processes at work in order that they might be challenged realistically; requiring of the left that it abandon fantasies about the awesome power of current resistance movements and develop new theories, strategies and practices appropriate to the magnitude and global reach of the dangers faced.

Much of value has been written about the history and politics of climate change but *Climate Leviathan*, whilst broadly sympathetic to the approach of this work, is dissimilar and is best understood in the context of recent 'catastrophe' literature, such as the writings of Susan Buck-Morss and Enzo Traverso, in which political philosophy and critical theory are the dominant modes of analysis. Indeed, Geoff Mann's previous book might even be considered a companion piece to this co-authored volume: an account of Keynesianism and the broader historical context of the emergence of political economy in the wake of the French Revolution, presenting the novel thesis that Hegel was the first Keynesian. In all of this literature Thomas Hobbes, author of *Leviathan*, features, but the key figures are Carl Schmitt, Nazi jurist and proponent of the concept of the 'state of exception' as the underlying principle of sovereign power; and Walter Benjamin, whose writing between 1921 and 1940 took Schmitt's concept and reversed it. If Schmitt contended that the declaration of a state of

exception was the necessary sovereign act in order to overcome the chaos of civil war - the basis of his support for the Nazi destruction of the Weimar Republic – Benjamin argued that this state of exception already existed and was the problem to be overcome, sovereign power being the force commanded by the state and the violence it was ready to employ.

By focusing on sovereign power as the means to understand contemporary political responses to climate change Mann and Wainwright place these within a long historical trajectory, beginning with the birth of political modernity at the end of the 18th century. The first chapter is principally devoted to establishing two arguments. Firstly, that the effort to defend capitalist social relations in the context of a rapidly warming world will lead to changes in the form of sovereignty, tending towards techniques of government and modes of authority rescaled to a global level. Secondly, that a theory capable of grasping this development will necessarily have to join together two philosophical traditions: the Marxist critique of political economy, initiated by Marx and extended by Gramsci and Poulantzas; and theories of sovereignty first produced by Hobbes, elaborated upon by Carl Schmitt, critically appropriated and challenged by Walter Benjamin and, most recently, discussed in the light of contemporary political crises by Giorgio Agamben.

Whilst this attempt to combine theories of sovereign power with Marxism is not without problems it does introduce a novel historical dimension to the discussion about planetary crisis, not evident elsewhere. There is no explicit attempt to do this but - because the debate about sovereign power to which it alludes is closely associated with the protracted wars and political crises of the interwar period - historical comparisons inevitably arise. Schmitt, for example, considered a sovereign decision, with its imposition of a ferocious dictatorial regime based on no legal or ethical grounds but producing its own legitimacy, as a desirable means of ending the chaos of a fractured liberal society. Benjamin in contrast understood the “state of emergency” as itself the catastrophe rather than the means to end it, while at the same time arguing that a dramatic response was necessary: a revolution, defined by him as the application of an “emergency break” on the calamitous movement of history. The book embraces Benjamin’s response and it follows that the main concern of *Climate Leviathan* is not climate change per se but the catastrophic modes of sovereignty that will arise in order to manage adaptation to its effects, although in contrast to the 1930s now deployed at a global level. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is its focus on the forms of planetary sovereignty liable to emerge in the wake of climate change crisis, each examined in terms of its viability but also in relation to the principles of climate justice.

The book outlines four ideal-type social formations that might arise in order to manage climate adaptation, two of which are based on the continued existence of capitalism: *Climate Leviathan* and *Climate Behemoth*; two premised on non-capitalist social relations: *Climate Mao* and *Climate X*. In each of these the mode of production and its social relations are overdetermined by different forms of political authority and conceptions of the political. Thus, *Climate Leviathan* involves a putative solution to global warming in the form of a series of opportunities for capital: trade in emissions permits, ‘green’ business, nuclear power, catastrophe bonds, carbon capture and storage, and geoengineering; but it also and more fundamentally depends on the exercise of sovereign authority over territory beyond the nation state, controlling access to fresh water, strategic technologies, flows of climate refugees, and population size, constructing a planetary-wide machinery of regulation and surveillance, and creating a draconian regime, the legitimacy of which is proclaimed as a mission to ‘save the planet’.

Whilst such a declaration of a sovereign state of exception for the purposes of saving civilization is reminiscent of National Socialism, Mann and Wainwright argue that in its current form it is more comparable to Keynesianism as it developed in response to the economic and political crises of the 1930s. Mann has argued in his earlier book on the politics of Keynesianism that the latter's aims were complex: regarding capitalism as a necessary arrangement if civilization was to be preserved it also produced an imminent critique of liberalism, accepting its standpoint but questioning its capacity to manage society. Although writing from the left Mann offers a generous account of Keynesian thought, from Hegel's commentary on the French Revolution to Keynes himself in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, the conclusion of *Climate Leviathan* is that, for numerous reasons, a Keynesian solution is not available in the form taken in the interwar period: such a strategy requires a sovereign nation state, but changes in political and economic sovereignty on the territorial level mean that the state's capacity to manipulate cross-border flows of capital, goods and services has been eroded; the financialisation of the economy has enabled fast, unregulated, speculative movements of capital, making Keynesianism volatile and unstable; and a Keynesian strategy is or has been heavily dependent on material throughput, a problem for any approach requiring a reduction in consumption (pp. 118-120).

One of the dilemmas to which this book draws attention is that green Keynesianism remains, despite its obvious limitations in the world we now inhabit, very attractive to the left. Following the crisis of 2007-08 a wide range of centrists and progressives considered a green strand to be vital in their advocacy of a global recovery through boosting aggregate demand. This diverse and otherwise incompatible group included the left critic Susan George, Keynesian economists Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty, and Obama economic advisor Lawrence Summers (pp. 109-111). Progressive and left-wing critics and activists may not recognise the term but they are frequently advocates of *Climate Leviathan*, through their embrace of green Keynesianism and exemplified by their demand for action from elite institutions and intergovernmental bodies such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. There are complex strategic issues at stake in the left conducting their politics in this way, the authors argue: protesters at the COP21 meeting in Paris in 2015 demanded that any agreement go much further than it was likely to do, but this constituted only "a vague and limited critique of the international climate politics regime", and was tantamount to an endorsement of the latter (p. 164). This is a real problem, they argue, and represents an as yet inadequate politics of climate justice, but it is one to which there are no clear solutions.

It is intriguing that *Climate Leviathan's* prospectus offers a form of draconian sovereign power, a regime of ferocious planetary management, but its advocates are from the progressive and liberal wing of politics. This is interesting because it invites comparison with the politics of neoliberalism of the last two decades and the extent to which its new modes of governmentality have been associated with social democratic or putatively progressive parties. The implication is that the exercise of sovereign power, with all of the force and violence that follows in its wake, is not only the act of the fascist, dictatorial regimes of the past: "the act of deciding the exception - determining what is crisis and what is not - is the sovereign backstop to modernity, even in its national-popular, democratic forms" (p. 22).

Mann and Wainwright argue, however, that the fundamental problems of climate change cannot be addressed by "liberal economic reason", because within the latter's episteme or "horizon of thought" considerations of political economy are entirely absent. In such circumstances all attempts at adaptation will certainly perpetuate and increase gross inequalities, the poor and those most vulnerable

to “socio-natural catastrophe” will be required to adapt, whilst a genuine politics of adaptation able to confront capitalist social relations will be ignored. What can be expected will be an exponential growth in climate refugees, the persistence of an “apocalyptic narrative of a world overrun by masses of unrooted people”, which will contribute to Climate Leviathan’s “securitisation” measures, outlined at various points in the book as involving unprecedented levels of control and surveillance with the constant presence of force and violence.

The complexities and contradictions in the extension of sovereign power from the nation state to the level of planetary governance is explored, with a discussion of its many historical antecedents. Kant’s idea of cosmopolitanism was conceived in 1795, in the wake of the Haitian Revolution and offered as a critique of European colonialism, slavery and war (p. 135); more recently and particularly since 1945 the notion of world government has been posited as a solution to the catastrophe of war and its now immensely destructive potential. If the logic of the latter position is that the prospect of nuclear annihilation would be a spur towards international cooperation for peace there is, however, a converse interpretation: the control by the global hegemon of the most recent generation of space-based weaponry, the development from these of projects for atmospheric geoengineering, and large-scale carbon capture and storage involving massive geological engineering, will all further the development of Climate Leviathan; this is not the cosmopolitanism envisaged by Kant, equated with the “ ‘right to the earth’s surface which the human race shares in common’ ” (p. 134), but a terrible form of domination. If this particular arrangement of planetary adaptation does prevail then it will perpetuate the catastrophe within which the world is enmeshed, but when placed in the context of the other ideal-type social formations discussed the future looks more complicated if not necessarily more optimistic. Climate Leviathan is premised on planetary-level sovereignty, effectively “a political and geographical extension of the rule of the extant hegemonic bloc: the capitalist Global North”. The authors consider this most likely and that the “waning US-led, liberal capitalist bloc will collaborate with China to create a planetary regime”, at the same time requiring approval for the project from India and other nations formerly excluded from global governance (pp. 31,32).

Ensuring Chinese support complicates the role of capital in this regime of global sovereignty, but the authors consider an alternative scenario for China and for the populations most at risk from global warming, those living “mainly in South and East Asia, between Pakistan and North Korea. Asia is, they argue, the home of most people in the world as well as the centre of capital’s economic geography, and it might be expected that “climate-induced social turbulence [will] combine in a region with an enormous, growing capacity to reshape the consumption and distribution of the world’s resources” (p. 43). The potential for revolutionary change in this region the authors define as Climate Mao. This is, they say, another incarnation of Climate Leviathan, except not the version of political modernity associated with liberalism but, conversely, the “end of the red thread running from Robespierre to Lenin to Mao.... Climate Mao expresses the necessity of a just terror in the interests of the future of the collective, which is to say that it represents the necessity of a planetary sovereign but wields this power against capital” (p. 38).

Mann and Wainwright note that such a sovereign power would have a distinct advantage in comparison to liberal democracy, particularly in its ability to “coordinate massive political-economic reconfigurations quickly and comprehensively”. There is much enthusiasm for this authoritarian, decisive, state-led response to climate change on the left. This was the position taken by Giovanni Arrighi, Mike Davis expresses similar sentiments, as does, most cogently, Minqi Li. There is of course the problem of this not being the trajectory currently endorsed by the Chinese Communist

Party, that its commitment to economic development will increase emissions dramatically, and that any reversal in its policy would likely have unaffordable political consequences, given that the basis of the state and its ruling elite's legitimacy is in economic growth. Even so, the authors recognise how effective the Chinese state can be when it exercises its full regulatory powers: re-engineering the air quality of Beijing during the 2008 Olympics; blocking General Motors' sale of the Hummer to Sichuan Tenzhong heavy Industrial machinery in 2010 because of its emissions levels, effectively killing the vehicle. These were political achievements unimaginable in a liberal democracy and give an indication of what would be possible if China was both a global hegemon and transformed through revolutionary pressure (p. 40). The Maoist revolutionary tradition exists still in much of Asia and is officially remembered in China itself, but the Chinese Communist Party remains committed, for the moment at least, to the building of a capitalist Climate Leviathan. The authors consider nevertheless the potential for Climate Mao across Asia, under Chinese leadership, as "millions of increasingly climate-stressed poor people" face an imminent catastrophe abetted by the political structures they confront.

If Climate Mao has some potential in Asia the world's core capitalist countries are haunted by the spectre of reactionary conservatism, one form of which is Climate Behemoth. Hobbes' concept of Behemoth had signified the masses and anarchy, embodied for him in the English state of the Commonwealth era; Schmitt understood it as the force to which the declaration of a sovereign exception must respond; Franz Neumann used the idea to analyse the workings of the Nazi state. Mann and Wainwright find evidence in the USA of its characteristic forms of reactionary populism in climate change denial, partly led and funded by the capitalist class fraction associated with fossil fuels, allied to subaltern groups amongst the proletariat who perceive climate change adaptation as a threat to their jobs and to cheap energy as well as a means to empower elites. Across the world similar populist right-wing movements have grown, energised by different issues such as immigration and maintaining privileges for racial or religious groups, but in most cases, also, the rejection of international agreements to address climate change. The authors don't consider that there is a social base amongst these varied political movements for a transnational alliance, but they are a force for obstruction because wherever they appear they oppose "the legitimacy of a distinctly international political sphere" (p. 45). Mann and Wainwright consider that, ultimately, Climate Behemoth is too incoherent and contradictory to offer a challenge to the liberal capitalist leviathan, after which they turn towards Climate X and the possibility of equality, solidarity and justice in the management of climate change.

Quite early in the development of the book's argument the authors state that the "momentous socio-ecological transformation" now occurring is "best grasped as a dangerous, conjunctural moment of transition in the planet's natural history", one that requires above all an adequate political response. But, they go on, this cannot be "merely a transformation in politics - more representative proceduralism, for example, or more precautionary environmental policy-making - but a transformation of the political". This involves asking "not only what political tools, strategies, and tactics" might be needed but "what conception of the realm of the political might render such tools, strategies and tactics imaginable" (p. 28). Possible answers to these questions are discussed through the concept of Climate X. To imagine this new realm of the political is not easy, however, and the left is drawn towards Climate Leviathan "because the further consolidation and expansion of extant power structures would seem to be the only structures of scale, scope and authority" capable of attending to an otherwise bleak future. In particular many on the left are convinced that Climate Mao is the "planetary sovereign... capable of [taking] the emergency measures needed to save life on Earth" and

that “democracy as we know it... seems profoundly inadequate to the problems that lie ahead (pp. 181, 182). Whilst the left might be inclined to support a just, sovereign terror able to act with necessary force, modern liberalism is also dismissive of the capacity of democracy to preserve planetary civilization. The “multitude”, the “mob”, the “rabble” are very old fears, spectres threatening “to destroy not only the bourgeoisie, but the entire order it understands as civilization” (pp. 182, 183). Mann and Wainwright offer, therefore, a critique of the conception of politics associated with liberal democracy and Keynesianism, but also of the strategies advocated by Marxists such as Mike Davis and Giovanni Arrighi. Although the former aims to preserve capitalism and the latter are resolutely anti-capitalist, both endorse the necessity of a sovereign power, which the authors of *Climate Leviathan* do not, and this, ultimately, is the principle upon which the book is based. The outline of the political alternative - *Climate X* - is not developed in detail. The authors say they “cannot claim to know what form it might take”, but “whatever form it takes, it has the extraordinary merit attached to that which is absolutely necessary. We must create something new. More of the same is not an option” (p. 173). They do, nevertheless, provide some guidelines to different ways of thinking. They draw an extremely fruitful parallel with an earlier moment of putatively immanent catastrophe, the late fifties and sixties, when Marxist political critique was reenergised and the arena for the enactment of radical politics was expanded. The principle of solidarity and how it should animate the politics of climate justice is thoroughly discussed, particularly as it relates to the concepts of sovereignty and counter-sovereignty. Carl Schmitt had argued in *The Concept of the Political* that “universal solidarity is an oxymoron”. Any “properly political entity, including a state, is irreducibly constituted in enmity; for Schmitt, there is no ‘us’ without ‘them’” (p. 177). The authors reject this division, because of the terrible forms of nationalism, racism and violence it has rationalised in the past but also recognizing the extent to which forms of “planetary” associated with *Climate Leviathan* will depend on such distinctions: the forfeiting of ‘other’ peoples, communities and territories, making the sovereign decision regarding who has to be sacrificed in the universal interest.

The politics of *Climate X* is not clearly identified in *Climate Leviathan*, except through the contention that it will necessarily be both anti-capitalist and a politics of counter-sovereignty, embracing the approaches of those emancipatory movements with Marxist roots and the “ways of being” of indigenous and colonized peoples whose “long historical experience” in struggle against capital and the sovereign state are invaluable. Although the final chapter is a little provisional this shouldn’t detract from the argument presented throughout the book, which is that capitalism is overdetermined by the political forms of sovereign power and that any attempt to challenge the former is inextricably connected to the latter. This was Benjamin’s insight in the interwar years when confronted by that era’s catastrophe; our current catastrophe, rescaled to the planetary level, bears comparison. By far the most powerful and sustained critique within the book is of *Climate Leviathan* in its capitalist form. In particular, Mann and Wainwright’s discussion of this in relation to the left and progressive enthusiasm for green Keynesianism gives a real insight into contemporary dilemmas. Even though the authors are not advocates for *Climate Mao* they provide a more than reasonable defence of the evident capacity of a state socialist power elevated to global hegemon for the exercise of decisive and effective climate politics, as well as offering a perspective on the potential for revolutionary change in Asia. Many will continue to think that this type of solution is the world’s last, best hope, but it’s still important to consider, as *Climate Leviathan* does, how sovereign power might operate in such circumstances, and the alternative: a concept of the political based on principles of counter-sovereignty.

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