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Book Review

Andreas Malm. *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century*. Verso (2020)

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Abstract

This book offers insights into the similarities and differences between climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, arguing that a significant cause of the former and the primary cause of the latter is the destruction of biodiversity as a consequence of capitalism's colonisation of the world. Covid-19 and planetary heating have distinct spatio-temporal effects, however, and have elicited different types of government response: vigorous and immediate in the case of the former; dilatory and ineffectual for the latter. The argument of the book hinges on these distinct responses, which are addressed through an historical analogy, suggesting that the decisive and immediate response to the pandemic is comparable to 20th century wartime measures. Nevertheless, such measures are insufficient if they only deal with effects. Any serious attempt at mitigation or adaptation will have to attack the causes of climate change, a strategy for which the Bolshevik policy of war communism provides a partial model.

There are two aspects to this book. First it argues that the Covid-19 pandemic and planetary warming are both instigated through structural features of capitalist modernity. Capitalism is regarded here in its totality, as a global phenomenon, characterised by processes of space-time compression and a corresponding series of uneven spatial and temporal causes and effects. If climate change and the coronavirus pandemic are quite distinct phenomena, a significant cause of the former as well as the primary cause of the latter is the accelerated commodification of 'wild nature' - the purpose of which is to supply Western countries with a vast range of consumer goods - and the spatial separation of production and consumption through extended distribution chains. When tropical forests are felled they are no longer available for the capture of greenhouse gases, their obliteration and subsequent replacement with agriculture then leads to further emissions, whilst the accompanying destruction of biodiversity causes zoonotic spillover and the eventual global dispersal of pathogens into human populations. The effects in space and time of climate change in contrast to the pandemic are different, however, with the consequence that the latter has prompted vigorous and immediate, albeit severely limited, state action whilst the response of governments to the former has been gestural, dilatory, and ineffectual. The second aspect of the book considers these different reactions to global crises - and the limitations of even the most determined efforts of states to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic - through the framework of an historical analogy: the policy of war communism pursued by the Bolsheviks from 1918 to 1921, which is contrasted to other responses by states to world war in the 20th century. This analogy is then extended to address the politics of the contemporary green movement by way of a strategic vision defined as 'ecological war communism'. Whilst the book's argument regarding the dire consequences of inaction is irrefutable, as is its analysis of the structural role of capitalism in creating these circumstances, its conceptions of crisis, emergency, catastrophe, etc, are relatively unexamined. Furthermore, the book adopts an inherently binary approach, regarding *either* a resolution through decisive action against powerful vested interests, *or* climate catastrophe, as the only possible paths. In contrast, Mann and Wainwright have argued that there are several distinct

routes to climate adaptation, including: ‘Climate Leviathan’, a modes of planetary sovereignty within which draconian powers will be employed to manage catastrophe, preserving existing social relations and perpetuating inequality and climate injustice; and ‘Climate Mao’, an equally severe but more just and equitable non-capitalist route through ecological crisis.¹

Pandemics happened in antiquity but have occurred with ever-greater frequency since. In the era of modernity, global transport - by ship, steamship, aeroplane and mass air travel - has progressively increased the speed at which zoonotic pathogens have been dispersed amongst human populations (69-74). Rapid mass transport at a global scale is the *sine qua non* of the current pandemic, but its origins are at the more fundamental level of zoonotic spillover, now widespread in the era of rampant deforestation. Prior to the extensive destruction of tropical forests numerous animals were host to and happily coexisted with zoonotic pathogens. Only when a host is threatened does it shed its pathogen, and in the past this has sometimes resulted in transmission into human populations, as was the case with bubonic plague and rabies. The wholesale destruction of forests has been ongoing for decades, but earlier exploitation in the form of state activity has more recently been replaced by their opening up to global circuits of capital through the actions of large corporations. Now, encroachment of forest land is for the purpose of making commodities such as palm oil, beef, soybean, and wood products for global distribution.

Through this process ‘the teeming lifeforms hitherto left on their own’ come into contact with human populations in overcrowded encampments at the edge of the diminishing forest (42). Groups of thousands of immigrant workers lodged on company plantations - paid below the minimum wage, deprived of their passport on arrival, held in debt bondage (46) - encounter the pathogen ‘bridge hosts’, typically mice and mosquitos, that tend to flourish in these zones. Deforestation has devastating consequences for biodiversity but has the effect of accelerating pathogenic evolution and diversity: where its long-term host is threatened with destruction the pathogen is compelled to find an alternative path to survival, taking ‘advantage of any mutation and genetic drift’, experimenting with different hosts, all of this occurring in close proximity to large groups of humans living in densely-packed dwellings (42-43).

The causes of zoonotic spillover are not situated in the place where it initially occurs (44-45, 50) because demand for the commodities now produced in areas of deforestation comes from distant locations. A fundamental characteristic of late capitalism/globalisation is this spatial separation between production and consumption (51), and whilst hugely exploitative of workers in new areas of commodity production, wealthy nations do not simply export poverty, they also export disease and the destruction of biodiversity: deforestation boosts the mosquito vector and malaria (54); coffee consumption in the North ‘presupposes deforestation in the tropical belt’ (52); the presence on the supermarket shelves of Europe and North America of goods such as chocolate, beef, coffee, palm oil, and numerous other commodities, causes devastation far away from these locations, destroying the diversity of living organisms on ‘latitudes closer to the equator’ (53). So time-space compression, understood also as a form of time-space appropriation, facilitates a global circuit through which consumption is to an unprecedented extent abstracted from the places, circumstances and localised effects of production, a process exemplified by the magnitude of land and labour value transferred to wealthy countries in order to satisfy their demands: ‘measured in terms of full-time person-years of

¹ Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright. *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*. Verso (2018)

employment embodied in commodities, hundreds of millions of lives' worth of labour are shifted across the global marketplace' (79).

A long tradition of Marxist, radical and progressive thinking has acknowledged that poverty is created through exploitation, low wages, and the systemic oppression of immigrants, of ethnic and religious minorities, and of women and children, and that the vulnerability of impoverished populations to disease, and to climatic and other disasters, is also social and systemic in origin. So there has been an emphasis on the uneven effects of such events on different and systemically disadvantaged populations, but only recently has it been understood that the frequency, magnitude and characteristics of 'natural' disasters are caused by human action and also arise from social and economic systemic factors. In order fully to demonstrate the extent to which both the climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic are social phenomena, rather than 'natural' in the limited sense of this term, Malm examines the theories of vulnerability first discussed in the late 1970s by Ben Wisner and colleagues in the journal *Disasters*. This initial foray into the social character of purportedly 'natural' disasters had focused entirely on their uneven consequences, arguing that droughts, hurricanes and volcanic eruptions occurred with the same frequency over long periods of time, whilst the number of victims of these events had increased considerably, most specifically in the Third World. Within these populations susceptibility to hazards was determined by class, gender, age group, ethnicity. The effects of drought were greatest for those lacking resources such as cattle herds and other assets (95), and the experience of epidemics worse for people without adequate 'diet, shelter, sanitation, water, and access to healthcare' (96). But early exponents of this vulnerability theory were reluctant to regard the disaster event itself as also having a social character, and were resistant to the notion of anthropogenic climate change; rather, they wished to maintain that effects could be mitigated by addressing the inequalities that produced vulnerability.

Disasters such as global heating and pandemics borne of zoonotic spillover are not simply natural events requiring action to mitigate their effects, however, but products of systemic social and economic activity. Malm argues that: 'human action is responsible for both the generation of people's vulnerability and the increased level of hazard' (100), but such an insight, if more readily accepted than previously, has not led to concerted action to address both causes and effects, although in the case of the coronavirus, state interventions addressing the latter have been considerable. In fact, most left-wing discourse in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic welcomed prompt government action and directed criticism at those instances where the response failed the most vulnerable, arguing that excess deaths were a consequence of the neoliberalisation of health care, austerity, and inadequate financial support for those needing to stay at home; and it warned that global inequalities would be reproduced through unequal access to vaccines eventually developed by pharmaceutical companies. Malm offers some initial explanations for the extent of government responses to the pandemic, and why there has been no comparable action in relation to climate change. He argues that the discrepancy is because of the 'timeline of victimhood': the earliest casualties of Covid-19 have been in the wealthiest countries whereas climate crisis affects the poorest countries first (21). And because of the different temporalities of climate change and the pandemic the extent of state intervention is correspondingly varied: the latter strikes suddenly and is shocking in its immediate effects, forcing governments to take action irrespective of economic cost (24); the former, however, is a secular trend, providing its perpetrators with an extended period in which to obfuscate and to obstruct attempts to address its causes (23). So the Covid-19 pandemic has prompted significant levels of state intervention into the functioning of capitalist markets, measures of a type and to an extent not seen in some countries since the Second World War, but these actions have also focused entirely on the immediate

effects of the pandemic rather than its fundamental causes. These observations are the pivot upon which the overall argument of the book is made, and provide a link between its descriptive, analytical, and strategic-relational components; they allow for the move from a discussion of causes to the definition of the current circumstances through the politically-charged concept of ‘chronic emergency’.

It would be impossible to question the scale or the seriousness of the problem identified, and the idea of ecological emergency is widespread and has been adopted across the entire spectrum of climate politics. But conceptions of emergency, crisis, impending catastrophe, etc, have underlying premises and historical precedents, and these could have been examined more thoroughly. Malm’s argument is in fact driven by different types of crisis theory and offers an intriguing synthesis of several approaches to the politics of urgency: recent theories of capitalist crisis within which a significant ecological component can be discerned; already existing and widespread conceptions of a climate emergency as tantamount to war; notions of urgency and immediacy that arose in Bolshevik discourse in 1917 and informed policy during the subsequent civil war; and finally and somewhat schematically, ideas about catastrophe taken from a broader and heterodox Marxist tradition.

One reason for the inadequacy of responses associated with the ‘green new deal’, Malm argues, is to be found in capitalism’s intractability, and those aspects of its contradictions and crises not fully understood in earlier eras. Classical Marxist theory had identified the ‘contradictions of overproduction, overaccumulation overfinancialisation’ and the ‘falling rate of profit’, as the drivers of capitalist crises, but James O’Connor in the late 1980s and Nancy Fraser more recently argue that contradictions fundamental to the *conditions* of capitalist production play an equally significant role. The first condition is labour power, the bearers of which must be reproduced and maintained in a fit and healthy state, even whilst subject to ruthless exploitation; the second is non-human nature, a resource external to capitalism to which it must become attached in parasitic fashion. Logically, both of these background conditions are necessary for the efficient functioning of a capitalist economy and should therefore be afforded some protection, but, Malm argues, the tendency is for these to be impaired or destroyed rather than reproduced, so the ‘logic is more like that of an abusive man, who self-destructs by compulsively destroying those who gave him life (111).

Malm discusses the extent to which the notion of war has currency within climate change politics. He suggests that when Greta Thunberg had proclaimed in 2019 that the climate crisis was a type of emergency equivalent to war, she was merely articulating a well-established idea amongst climate activists. Bill McKibben had argued in his essay of 2016, ‘A World at War’, that the use of the term was not simply metaphorical: ‘It’s not that global warming is *like* a world war’ he wrote, ‘*it is* a world war’ (11). Some critics have questioned the value of this concept, because of its connotations of ‘bloodshed’ (154), and because it suggests an enemy to be fought directly in battle, but Malm doesn’t argue for the necessity of violence in the face of a conventional adversary, rather, he maintains that the logistically focused, concentrated, massive effort of total war is the only viable response to the ongoing ecological catastrophe.

If the war analogy has been readily adopted by climate change activists the history of wartime measures is more complex, however, and Malm identifies two types of 20th century war effort. During the First World War all belligerent powers had interfered in markets by introducing measures to protect the food supply, to ensure equitable distribution of food through rationing, as well as enacting numerous other forms of regulation and control (126). So states have had the capacity and willingness

to negate the operation of capitalist markets in times of crisis, taking decisive action involving the exercise of ‘hard power’ (125). But these actions are then contrasted to the policy of war communism pursued by the Bolshevik government during the 1918-21 civil war. This policy involved nationalisation and the control of key industries, agricultural surplus requisitions, the militarisation of labour, rationing, and other measures. Whilst there were similarities between Bolshevik civil war measures and the forms of control imposed generally by belligerents in wartime, Malm suggests that their differences provide a valuable historical example for climate change politics, in the important respects that the former addressed the causes rather than merely the symptoms of catastrophe. Malm offered a useful summary of his approach to this distinction in an article written for *Jacobin* prior to the publication of the book. In distinguishing between two types of 20th century war effort, Malm introduced the concept of ‘ecological war communism... as a counterpart to the long-standing idea that World War II provides a model for countries to follow in dealing with the climate crisis’. Acknowledging that this idea had ‘resurfaced in the discourse surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic’, he argued that it was a ‘useful analogue’, yet limited in value because ‘the war effort was based on the prodigious consumption of fossil fuels’ and had ‘left the position of the capitalist class largely intact’. Malm considers that an effective climate politics required ‘emergency action’ to challenge ‘the vested interests of very powerful factions of the dominant classes’ and to bring about ‘a rapid, state-driven transformation of production and the organization of the economy in the face of massive opposition’. Such a ‘green transition’ would also require a degree of coercive authority to be imposed on fossil fuel companies that have so far done everything in their power to postpone and obstruct climate change mitigation’.²

So one aspect of the book is to expose contradictions within the politics of the contemporary green movement and to question its capacity to effect change. This is a key argument of Mann and Wainwright’s *Climate Leviathan* and has also been addressed more recently by Adam Tooze in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, suggesting the ‘deeply ambiguous logic of crisis politics’ and questioning whether the green movement really has the capacity to reinvent social democracy along a trajectory remotely similar to that of the post-1945 era.³ Exploring this further in an early response to Malm’s book, Tooze argued that there was a direct correspondence between the political economy implications of the ‘green new deal’ and the ‘US war effort in WWII’, the latter being ‘an absolutely classic demonstration of the power of state-led, capitalist-driven, carbon-intensive economic growth’, during which US emissions of carbon surged from 481,133,000 to 704,364,000 metric tons.⁴

Even where state action is decisive it is unlikely to dismantle the carbon economy whilst it remains beholden to capitalist interests, but it is still necessary to consider whether the Bolshevik policy of war communism offers an appropriate model for responding to the ecological crisis. War communism provides, Malm argues, a powerful if imperfect historical analogy, and he is careful not to suggest too close a correspondence between the current crisis and the historical event (127), in particular avoiding sanctioning any of the latter’s excesses (159); rather, the scale of the current catastrophe is the basis of the comparison. But there are unexamined assumptions in this argument, in regard to the complexity of the policy of war communism and its relationship to broader social transformations. The rationale for Malm’s adoption of the war communism analogy is that the current crisis requires measures to deal with causes rather than effects, and must subject catastrophe-inducing areas of the economy to public

² Andreas Malm “To Halt Climate Change, We Need an Ecological Leninism” *Jacobin*, 15th June 2020

³ *Foreign Affairs*, January 2020

⁴ https://twitter.com/adam_tooze/status/1308137723413360648 (21,09,2020)

control. This might be an irreproachable objective, but the policy of war communism was driven by the imperatives of civil war, its provisions were temporary, and it was not envisaged as being the first step in the transition to socialism, even though some in the Bolshevik leadership thought otherwise. Furthermore, when the policy was abandoned it was recognised that its measures had been extremely damaging to the relationship between the Bolshevik government and the peasantry, its erstwhile ally.⁵ In the period following the abandonment of war communism there was a return to a market economy and Lenin engaged in a re-evaluation of the revolutionary process in the light of its failures, considering that social transformation would not be rapid and would require a new beginning.⁶ Malm offers the reasonable argument that the global crisis of planetary heating necessitates draconian measures - that states will have to act decisively rather than relying on 'individual enlightenment' or 'nudging consumers to voluntarily mend their ways' (133, 134) - and undoubtedly, the ecological crisis demands an extreme response: directly confronting capital and its institutions to the extent of halting numerous areas of production, restructuring economic activity, and thereby creating the possibility of life outside of the exploitative and oppressive forms of capitalist social relations. But, as Panagiotis Sotiris has argued in reference to Malm's discussion, 'social change is not simply about the state having the ability to commandeer private resources. In the end it is about inventing new ways to organise and coordinate social production and reproduction. This cannot be done "by decree"'.⁷ Furthermore, a transformation in the scale and to the extent envisaged requires a revolutionary, collect subject beyond our current imagination (which Malm does concede), an 'explosive combination of different agents'⁸ not yet constructed.

More generally, the concepts of catastrophe and emergency as types of historical conjuncture with a particular temporality would benefit from greater examination. Malm cites Lenin's sense of urgency in September 1917, the latter stating on the eve of revolution that 'delay is fatal' and that one must act 'this very evening, this very night' (150), a perfectly understandable response at a moment of systemic collapse, when a unique combination of antagonisms afforded an unrepeatably opportunity. But a chronic emergency is not a punctual occurrence but can persist for decades, as was the case with the prolonged catastrophe of the first half of the 20th century, a protracted civil war punctuated by momentous events such as the October Revolution as well as ruinous conflicts, untold destruction and slaughter, fascism, and genocide. The tempo and periodisation of catastrophe is not addressed when urgency is given an overarching primacy. The character of the historical conjuncture we occupy is one of catastrophe, but the catastrophic or apocalyptic is a specific mode of time.

In Walter Benjamin's conception of the permanent catastrophe of the present - a constant theme in his writing between 1914 and 1940 - he was responding to conventional definitions of sovereign power as that which is invested with the authority to declare a state of exception: the sovereign acting as dictator or tyrant at moments of crisis. When the full weight of sovereign power is wielded in order to manage a declaration of crisis, these very actions can *be* the catastrophe. Benjamin suggested that a permanent state of emergency was the enduring condition of all oppressed classes, and that the latter would have to declare their own state of exception. The 'train of history' was 'heading for the abyss', he argued,

⁵ Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Revolutions*. Macmillan (1983)

⁶ Lenin 'On ascending a high mountain' from *Collected Works*, vol. 33, (1965). Quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009) p.86

⁷ Panagiotis Sotiris. 'Thinking Beyond the Lockdown: On the Possibility of a Democratic Biopolitics. *Historical Materialism* 28.3 (2020) p.30

⁸ Žižek p.92

and an ‘interruption of this catastrophe-bound journey’ was needed, ‘revolution’ conceived not as progress but as humanity activating the ‘emergency break’.⁹ Whilst this sense of enduring crisis is not directly represented by Malm it does underly the heterodox Marxist tradition to which he refers towards the end of the book, when he cites Horkheimer and Adorno, major figures of Western Marxism. These references to theorists of the calamitous nature of human progress are brief but offer a counterpoint to more dominant themes in the book, and perhaps a way of bringing these different perspectives into dialogue could be through the ideas of Benjamin, the 20th century’s most significant theorist of catastrophe.

A more recent exposition of some of the problems inherent in the exercise of untrammelled state power is in Mann and Wainwright’s *Climate Leviathan*, where the authors argue that the future will not unfold as a simple binary choice of *either* decisive and immediate action against the vested interests of the dominant classes, *or* climate catastrophe; rather, in the era of global warming the most likely scenario is a system of planetary management organised through new forms of political sovereignty and based on existing social relations. Such a system will not address issues of climate justice, equality and solidarity and will be draconian in form, making decisions as to who will survive and prosper, who will suffer and die; under the new dispensation tasked with saving the planet, hard power will be employed when considered necessary, but it will not be directed against the perpetrators of global warming. The deployment of sovereign state power at the planetary level would not prevent climate catastrophe but would be innovative and dynamic in managing the process of adaptation, preserving and extending existing inequalities and visiting ruin upon vast populations.

A final aspect of the book is in regard to its geopolitical grasp, and in this respect Mann and Wainwright are again relevant. These authors are pessimistic about the future and regard adaptation to climate change overseen by a leviathan state invested with huge power as a likely outcome. But they also envisage another possible future - defined as ‘Climate Mao’ - in which China rather than the USA and Europe lead the global effort to adapt to a heating world, and whilst the measures adopted will be similarly draconian they are likely to be infinitely more effective, equitable and just. This geopolitical context is not directly represented in Malm’s book, but surely any movement capable of effecting change at a global scale must take account of a balance of power within which Western nations have a diminished position in the world, and will also have to conceive its role in relation to significant state actors such as China. A comparable historical situation (as Tooze also argues) is the relationship developed by communists, socialists and social democrats in the 1930s and 1940s to the Soviet Union, through the politics of the Popular Front. This leaves us with the intriguing possibility that for all of its many qualities, Malm’s book might have focused on the wrong historical analogy, and that the example of popular front politics rather than war communism provides the most insight into the potential for a radical climate movement in the immediate future.

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⁹ Michael Löwy. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*. Verso (2016) p.114.