

Sovereignty on a Changing Planet: Re-Reading Climate Leviathan

Article by Virgile Levrat

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What are the horizons of a global system adapting to climate breakdown? What forms will state responses take and with what consequences? *Climate Leviathan* (2018) maps out possible futures for the global order in a warming 21st century. Amid a pandemic that has shaken international politics, does the authors' vision of a coming planetary sovereignty – or of the alternatives – still hold?

In answering these questions, geographers Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright blend two great philosophical traditions: the critique of capitalist political economy and a reflection on sovereignty. In that they consider the catastrophe to be necessary but not certain – they are what French economist Jean-Pierre Dupuy calls “enlightened doomsayers”. Mann and Wainwright highlight the processes at work in relation to climate change, as terrifying as they may be, and interrogate them realistically to understand what types of sovereignty might emerge in response.

Climate Leviathan's most useful contributions are the four different politico-economic paths that it sets out in a dual historical and speculative approach. Each scenario is defined by its position on two axes: the first is whether capitalism remains the dominant way of organising production and the second relates to the potential coming of planetary sovereignty. This global form of political authority is described as the power to determine who can and who cannot emit carbon through a complex mechanism of regulations and surveillance implemented in the name of saving the planet and its inhabitants.

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For Mann and Wainwright, the most probable outcome for the international system will be what they define as Climate Leviathan. This scenario would see the extension of sovereignty to planetary level – planetary sovereignty – and view capitalism as the solution to climate change rather than the problem. Although it has not yet become reality, they explain, this scenario exists *in potentia* through cooperation between powerful national political authorities and international institutions such as the United Nations, which are calling for a transition towards global green capitalism. According to the authors, this vision is comparable to the Keynesianism that grew in response to the economic and political crises of the 1930s, but this endeavour will not be enough to reverse climate change. Indeed, while they acknowledge that implementing a Green New Deal would represent a breakthrough, they seriously doubt the ability of states to act quickly and consistently regarding climate change. What's more, there are many ways to design a Green New Deal, some of which do not involve any change to the social order or any significant reduction in environmental impacts. In other words, for the authors, the Climate Leviathan does not fundamentally question the growth imperative and continues to disregard planetary boundaries. Its proposed

solutions are almost invariably business opportunities: green businesses and technologies, nuclear energy, carbon capture and storage, tradable CO₂ emissions permits or geoengineering. Moreover, these technological and economic tools are a way for the Climate Leviathan to establish planetary sovereignty by geographically and politically expanding the Global North's power.

The paths that lie ahead

Mann and Wainwright recognise that incorporating China into this new world order remains complicated. That's why they put forward another scenario, Climate Mao, which embodies a certain willingness of South and East Asian countries to move towards global sovereignty while rejecting the capitalist model. In this scenario, power is concentrated in the hands of the sovereign state and market forces give way to planning. Maoist theories are projected onto environmental problems: "just terror" implemented in the interests of the collective future. This approach would enjoy an advantage over liberal democracies in its ability to rapidly mobilise massive political and economic resources to fight climate change. Setting aside concerns one may have about the fairly complacent tone in which the authors discuss this anti-capitalist Climate Leviathan, the probability of this scenario still leaves room for doubt. China's current policy continues to encourage economic growth, and thus increasing greenhouse gas emissions so the prospect of Climate Mao seems unlikely.

An alternative future that haunts the Global North is the Climate Behemoth. Forged from an alliance of climate-sceptic conservative and populist movements with the fossil fuel industry, it consists of a reactionary capitalism hostile to any form of planetary sovereignty. Mixing unfettered consumerism with anti-immigration and climate-sceptic public policy, this vision is being embraced by a growing number of governments across the world, whose best-known flag bearers are Donald Trump's United States and Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil. Yet Mann and Wainwright view the Climate Behemoth as too incoherent and fragmented to take the upper hand over the liberal democracies that dominate international politics.

The authors lay out a final alternative, Climate X, in which the ecological emergency would be tackled through revolutionary and democratic transformation inspired by the movement for climate justice. Far from being perceived as a magic bullet, such a scenario is presented as a model, a road down which climate policies should head in order to fight the neoliberal consensus. Nevertheless, it seems clear that to happen, this outcome, which the authors say is desirable, will have to transcend the capitalist mindset and current direction that is taking us closer towards planetary sovereignty. Furthermore, it must become a more defined and precise political project – even though Climate X was a deliberate choice by Mann and Wainwright intended to keep options open. Here we have a classic contradiction in political theory: dispersed solutions to tackle a problem that transcends divisions in time and space.

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The fragility of the Climate X scenario lies in the difficulty of building on the current dynamics of the climate justice movement. The authors outline three simple principals to guide Climate X whose origins lie in the climate justice movement: equality and dignity for all, radical democracy and solidarity, and "an affirmation of both our common cause and our multiplicity." So, in the Climate X scenario, there is vagueness surrounding the political and economic system that would succeed capitalism and what the precise form anti-planetary sovereignty would take. What is certain, though, is that Climate X will emerge from collective struggles to reduce greenhouse gas

emissions rather than from the will of a state. Indeed, Mann and Wainwright do not subscribe to the idea that the state is the best and only way to solve crises quickly. Like André Gorz before them, they are wary of the “expertocracy” that reigns at the heart of the Climate Leviathan, preferring instead a form of “self-limitation” that can only be achieved with Climate X. This strategic choice can, however, be qualified. Though the authors’ reluctance is understandable, it is sometimes strategically wise to compromise with state institutions to secure hard-fought gains^[1] or to seize them and use their power.

Overall, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of our Planetary Future* makes an invaluable contribution to political ecology, offering an angle as useful as it is rare. By presenting a bold map of the politico-economic outlooks that lie ahead in the decades to come, this book goes against the grain of much of the literature on climate change, which tends to focus either on its environmental consequences or the political theories that need developing to address it. As well as being intellectually stimulating, this approach is also necessary to meet the challenges facing not just political ecology, but each and every one of us.

However, given the reshaping of the geopolitical landscape seen over the last few years, it is worth asking the book’s key question again, three years after its release: what will the politico-economic consequences of climate change be? And is Climate Leviathan still the most likely scenario?

Geopolitical rumblings

At the end of the chapter discussing the concept of planetary sovereignty, Mann and Wainwright envisage two possible types of Climate Leviathan: the first is centred around the United States as the hegemonic nation, while the second is based on the United States and China managing the Earth’s habitability conditions together. Already in 2017, the gradual decline of American global reach and the rise of other powers like China seemed to rule out the first scenario. On the other hand, the authors considered the emergence of the second to be probable, a hypothesis which, three years after the book’s release, seems more uncertain to come true. Indeed, since Donald Trump’s election, there has been growing diplomatic conflict between the United States and China and it is unlikely that a Joe Biden presidency would put the US-China relationship on a fundamentally different footing.

Following the trade war that broke out in January 2018 but subsided with the signing of phase one of a trade deal last January, relations between Washington and Beijing have deteriorated once again during the Covid-19 crisis. Both countries’ leaders have accused the other of mismanaging the pandemic, and even creating the virus, culminating this July in the closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston, followed by the tit-for-tat closure of the American consulate in Chengdu. To compound matters, in May 2020 Donald Trump announced that the United States was severing all ties with the World Health Organization. The decision, by its very opposition to an institution representing a form of planetary sovereignty, confirms that Trump’s United States fits the Climate Behemoth paradigm.

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Turning now to the European Union – little mentioned in the book – and more specifically its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, the picture is mixed. EU leaders did manage to agree on a recovery plan that includes, remarkably, debt mutualisation through 390 billion euros of grants allocated to its worst-affected member states. However, coordination between member states was difficult and slow to establish, with the European response only agreed upon after acrimonious negotiations marked by profound disagreements between northern and southern

states. The “corona bonds” proposed as a solidarity-based response to the crisis by nine European countries – Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Ireland, Portugal, Greece, Slovenia, and Luxembourg – were rejected by Germany and the “frugal” states – Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia – who feared that they would be left picking up the tab for other, more profligate EU countries.

Despite the undoubted step forward that the European recovery plan represents, its measures do not represent a real break. The initial proposals were watered down with grants cut from 500 to 390 billion euros and financial contributions from the frugal states also reduced. The European Union finds itself caught between two conflicting dynamics. On the one hand, the recovery plan reaffirms European sovereignty and keeps alive the prospect of a Climate Leviathan in which the EU is one of the powers managing the world’s climate. On the other hand, the sometimes fractious relations between member states, which are often the result of conservative governments – Hungary, Poland, formerly Italy, and Austria (although this is more debatable since the Greens joined the Austrian government alongside the Austrian People’s Party) – putting their national sovereignty first, makes the creation of a Climate Leviathan based around the European Union difficult. Conversely, it increases the likelihood of a Climate Behemoth. Despite all this, given that the European Green Deal unveiled in December 2019 is based on nothing but green growth, free trade and a gradual end for fossil fuels, it seems reasonable to think that the European Union’s future will resemble more the Climate Leviathan than the Behemoth.

Choosing an alternative path

That said, there is nothing to stop us imagining what the European Union would look like if it took the path towards Climate X. What would some characteristics of this desirable future be? Despite the fuzzy outline of Climate X, one thing is clear: it is based on the three key principles of solidarity, equality, and dignity for all. To abide by these principles, the European Union should adopt policies that do not shy away from curbing the fossil-fuelled economy, re-writing the Eurozone’s debt rules as part of fiscal integration, and putting an end to trade agreements that are unequal and disastrous for the environment, and fostering solidarity between member states. With this in mind, the European Green Deal would be a radical programme based on guaranteeing jobs and taking strategic areas, such as housing and transport, out of the private sector.

But there remains the question of the anti-sovereignty that defines Climate X. Mann and Wainwright based this concept, inspired by Glen Coulthard’s ideas drawing from indigenous experiences in Canada in *Red Skin, White Masks*, on two principles: reciprocity between a people and the territory in which they live, and the right to be responsible. The first is based on a relationship with the territory, an affiliation to a socio-ecosystem that does not involve the control and domination of this territory; the second implies that with territorial rights comes responsibility for the goods and services without which the ecosystem and, by extension the people inhabiting it, cannot survive. Defined as such, anti-sovereignty looks a lot like the ecological conception of territorial rights developed by Omar Dahbour. None of this excludes the state or inter-state cooperation, in fact, Omar Dahbour sees the state as the guarantor of environmental safety – so long as it respects the two principles cited previously – and advocates inter-state cooperation if one or more ecosystems are shared between different states in an unsustainable manner.

These, then, are the radical but necessary changes for setting the European Union on the path to Climate X. Such a political and economic shift will not be easy to bring about, particularly since such a project does not have “a monopoly on the criticism of fossil development.”^[2] Indeed, since Xi Jinping’s recent announcement of a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the spectre of a Climate Leviathan centred around China has been haunting the world. In this geopolitical battle, the emergence of Climate X relies on its ability to establish a balance of power in its favour. To achieve this, it seems essential to develop a mass social movement that is not exclusively middle class but also speaks to the working class by uniting post-colonial autonomist utopians, eco-Jacobins advocating

for the Green New Deal, and a green technocratic elite.

^[1] Wright, Erik Olin. *Utopies réelles*, Paris: La Découverte, 2017 [2010].

^[2] Pierre Charbonnier. "The realistic turn in political ecology. Why environmentalists must learn to speak the language of geopolitics" *Le Grand Continent*. 30 September 2020. <https://bit.ly/37Mt6gX>.



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