

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Responses to Wainwright and Mann's 'Climate Leviathan', July 2012

Commentary on 'Climate Leviathan'

Larry Lohmann

The Corner House

<http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/>

larrylohmann@gn.apc.org

Anyone who knows the work of Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright will approach their article "Climate Leviathan" with real anticipation. When the authors of such mind-expanding works as Mann's *Our Daily Bread: Wages, Workers, and the Political Economy of the American West* and Wainwright's *Decolonizing Development: Colonial Power and the Maya* team up to survey the political possibilities surrounding the climate crisis, it's time to sit up and pay attention¹.

Few readers, I imagine, will be completely disappointed with the results. Leftist thinkers badly need new ideas in their efforts to come to grips with climate politics, and Mann and Wainwright's inspiration of trying to bring the issues into conjunction with the work of Schmitt, Hegel, Gramsci and Karatani as well as Marx is fresh and welcome.

Still, I hope Mann and Wainwright will not take it amiss if I suggest that many climate activists are likely to be left wanting them to push the analysis further. For all its novelty, the approach of "Climate Leviathan" still gives the appearance of straining to break out of the shackles of various constricting intellectual conventions.

¹ Mann G (2007) *Our Daily Bread: Wages, Workers, and the Political Economy of the American West*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; Wainwright J (2008) *Decolonizing Development: Colonial Power and the Maya*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

One relatively superficial difficulty is the – as it were – 'squareness' of the paper's organization. Those of us whose scalps prickle at the word 'dichotomy' are likely to view the neat paring of the world's prospects into Leviathan, Mao, Behemoth and X with a certain foreboding. At first this is perhaps occasioned as much by an instinctive wariness of (and weariness with) the box format and its obligatory selections and omissions as by any substantive objection. Greimasian squares, Cultural Theory matrices, Karatani quadrants: sometimes it seems like the world itself has turned into a giant Borg cube out of *Star Trek*.

True, such grids can serve as heuristics for leveraging existing understanding into fruitful new explorations. One has to start somewhere ... and as Hilary Putnam dryly inquires, “We should use somebody *else's* conceptual scheme?” Karatani's magisterial distillation of societal evolutions into shifts in mixtures of four basic modes of exchange, for example, is bound to be an extraordinarily fertile stimulus for future historians and activists.² But any such lattice is made to be unsettled by unexpected questions. Where in Karatani's box, for instance, is exchange involving nonhumans?

Mann and Wainwright's own grid may need particularly swift amendment given the way climate politics is developing. The sharp line the authors draw between Leviathan and Behemoth, for one thing, seems misleading. Despite their location in the upper-right quadrant of the box, for example, capitalist species of Behemoth will always aspire to – even if they cannot achieve – planetary sovereignty. At the same time, the inchoate global Leviathan mooted by the likes of the UNFCCC, Ed Barbier or John Holdren is continually breaking into (or finding it hard to go beyond) sovereign-lite, climatically-ineffective individual fragments – regional or voluntary carbon markets, rogue geoengineering projects, token green finance ventures, cancerous agrofuel expansion schemes, orphaned carbon capture and sequestration projects, corporate social responsibility diversions and so forth.³ Admittedly this latter process (or stasis) owes something to Behemothian monkeywrenching from the US – but not so the fact that climate Leviathan's trappings were actually designed from the outset in a way that keeps fossil Behemoth warm and happy by delaying actions directed at keeping coal, oil and gas in the

2 Karatani K (2008) Beyond capital-nation state. *Rethinking Marxism* 20(4):569-595

3 Pace Mann and Wainwright, climate Leviathan is, *qua* Leviathan, far from being “strong and coherent” – and not only because it does not address climate change and is unable to achieve its advertised goal of rejuvenating profit rates at the same time it relies on intra- and inter-national alliances that presuppose greater equality.

ground.⁴ To put it another way, climate Leviathan has never more than fractionally been about enabling the “elite transnational social groups that dominate the world's capitalist nation states ... to moderate and adapt to climate change” or “stabilize the conditions that produce their privileges”, but is a much more complex, multifaceted, *bricolaged* outcome of declining rates of profit, financialization, the need to safeguard fossil fuel use, the drive to develop new commodities and avenues for speculation, and so forth. The theatrical hostility that Behemoth representatives like Sarah Palin or the US Senate display toward Leviathan ideology is perhaps more a defense of a peculiarly North American postwar symbolism linking fossil fuels, *laissez faire* narratives and individual liberty⁵ than it is an effective, broad-front assault on 'green' or any other financialized innovation in fossil capitalism. As such, it is perhaps to be taken no more literally than Ronald Reagan's or the George Bushes' supposed 'opposition' to 'big government'.

On the deepest level, in other words, climate Leviathan is in no way 'at war' with capitalist Behemoth. Indeed, satellite imagery suggests that, far from occupying a separate compartment in a 2 X 2 matrix, Leviathan is being encouraged to rent out space on Behemoth's upper floors. This should not surprise us. In the political practice of the last two centuries, the ideological Leviathan posited by Malthusians has always heralded capitalist Behemoth far more than it does the fulfillment of a Holdren-like fantasy of global ecological management.⁶

A perhaps more basic limitation of the vision offered by Mann and Wainwright is its reliance on Leviathan's own interpretation of climate crisis in preference to that of X. Climate Leviathan claims to organize itself around the Cartesian/Malthusian notion of meeting “necessary emissions targets” or “sharply reducing carbon emissions”. Climate X tends to see the climate question differently: not in the first instance, *pace* Mann and Wainwright, as “organizing for a rapid reduction of carbon emissions” but rather, more fundamentally, as one of understanding and halting the transfer of fossil carbon from underground into an above-ground pool circulating among the atmosphere, the oceans, vegetation, soils and surface geology. The

4 See, e.g., www.carbontradewatch.org for up-to-date documentation on this point.

5 See Huber M T (2011) Oil, life, and the fetishism of geopolitics. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 22(3):32-48

6 See Lohmann L (2003) “Re-imagining the population debate.” Corner House Briefing Paper No. 28 www.thecornerhouse.org.uk and (2005) Malthusianism and the terror of scarcity. In Subramaniam B, Harmann B and Zerner C (eds) *Making Threats: Biofears and Environmental Anxieties* (pp81-98). New York: Rowman and Littlefield

difference is critical. The Leviathan conception of climate crisis connects with a short-horizon, 'depoliticized' programme of measuring, commensurating, managing, pricing and trading greenhouse gas molecules emitted by private corporations or national or regional 'geobodies',⁷ and moves swiftly to geo- and financial engineering. The more 'metabolic' X conception, by contrast, naturally leads to an analysis of the long-term political role of fossil fuels in labour productivity, globalized markets, dispossession and the plundering of human and nonhuman nature, and looks first to alliance-building among those affected or excluded by fossil fuel extraction, transport and pollution, as well as by the “existential crises” and “elite expropriations” of which Mann and Wainwright write. Rather than immediately obsessing about world governance over greenhouse gas flows, X insists on first demystifying the framework which locates the roots of climate crisis in geobodies' or private or corporate persons' technically-incorrect management of molecules. Instead of focusing on experts, classic organizations of sovereignty and ends of pipes, X asks who built the pipes and why, and how they are maintained, and hunts through history and the present for those who best understand their effects and, most of all, weaknesses. “Collective boycott and strike” as components of an X strategy? By all means. But the potential of such actions is rooted less in a Leviathanesque programme of “rapid reduction of carbon emissions” than in a spectrum of existing movements that discover themselves to have been always-already linked to climate history and, in Minqi Li's words, by relating the “implications to their own lives,” come actively to “participate in the global effort of stabilization”.

7 Winichakul T (1994) *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press