

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

‘Climate Leviathan’ symposium

Solving for X: A reply to our critics

Joel Wainwright

Department of Geography

Ohio State University

wainwright.11@osu.edu

Geoff Mann

Department of Geography

Simon Fraser University

geoffm@sfu.ca

“The reality of our wretchedness is that of Job, the questions and the answers that we pose to the world are the same as Job’s. We express ourselves with the same desperation, uttering the same blasphemous phrases. We have known riches and hope, we have tempted God with reason - we are left with dust and inanity. Will we be able to lead our wretchedness through an analytic of being and pain, and from that ontological depth rise up again to a theory of action, or better still, to the practice of the reconstruction of the world?”

Antonio Negri (2009: 15)

“[T]o lead our wretchedness through an analytic of being and pain, and from that ontological depth rise up again to a theory of action”: that is our task, and it may explain why, like Negri, we

call on figures from the Book of Job. It also suggests why our debate on climate change turns, like Job's with God, on sovereignty. Capital is also a fulcrum, but it seems our arguments concerning it - e.g., that its ceaseless expansionist imperative drives carbon emissions; that its relation with the nation-state impinges upon possible responses to climate change - are relatively uncontroversial. Partly this reflects the views of the vibrant *Antipode* community, yet it also says something about the broader discourse on climate change today. Until recently only a few Marxists and political ecologists, in various shades of red and green, contended that planetary environmental change was a logical consequence of the dominant social formation. No longer. Today even some of capital's champions (e.g., Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, and Roger Scruton) draw the connection between accumulation and climate change. This is not to say it is common sense, soon to shape state policy; but it is a noteworthy and important step. It also makes discussions such as the one around our paper more tractable and fruitful, as amply demonstrated on *Antipode's* website. We offer our sincere appreciation to those at *Antipode* that have made these exchanges possible, and to all who have participated.

The nub of these criticisms, then, lies not with capital but with those concepts conjoined in our conception of Leviathan: the state, hegemony, and planetary sovereignty. We expand upon certain ambiguous points below, but first we should emphasize why these concepts matter. *A critique of capitalism is necessary but insufficient to an effective climate politics.* Many peculiar qualities of climate change as an environmental problem - the importance of climate science for diagnosing the problem; the geographical unevenness and variation in its effects; the apparent urgency of a coordinated response; the atmosphere's 'common pool' characteristics; and so on - can be neither explained nor overcome with an analysis limited to M-C-M'. Our argument, to recapitulate, is that only a theory capable of radically examining capitalism *and* sovereignty holds any hope of orienting us today. To be capable of building a revolutionary theory of climate justice, we need a theory of that being, or that politics, for which we act. For many who desire a rapid global response to climate change, that implicit being and politics is planetary sovereignty. This will not produce a livable world.

* * *

One of the many provocative theses advanced in Mick Smith's *Against Ecological Sovereignty* is that sovereignty is essentially "an antiecological...principle" (2011: xiii), since it emerges from a conception of the world as a space of resources for human use, hence in need of a sovereign to govern. Elaborating, Smith asks:

"What if sovereign powers take it upon themselves to decide that there is, after all, an ecological threat to people and state [and capital] sufficient to warrant the definition 'crisis'? *Isn't there now a real...possibility that the idea of an ecological crisis...will find itself recuperated by the very powers implicated in bringing that crisis about, as the latest and most comprehensive justification for a political state of emergency...?*" (2011: xvi).ⁱ

What Smith describes here as a "real...possibility" is, in our terms, Leviathan's fraught hegemony, and his propositional warning ("Isn't there now...?") is in no way conspiratorial fear-mongering. To the extent that Smith can write of this development as 'real', i.e. recognizable and discernible, Leviathan is already present.

While our description of Leviathan as a definite social formation (§II.1) may be a contingent abstraction, and may prove to have been wrong, the spectre of Leviathan is no less real. The desiring subjects of climate Leviathan are effects of something. The mass mobilization for a meaningful agreement in Copenhagen, however quixotic, was no aberration.ⁱⁱ On the contrary, it was desperately sincere and driven with a palpable urgency. This is not unrelated to why climate Mao appeals so strongly to some, like [Patrick Bigger](#). Even if we ultimately reject his argument, we certainly sympathize with his position. For while it is clear to him that Leviathan is the only choice, we are not so sure. Yet his logic must be respected. We expect it to become more popular, and not only on the left. The shrill calls emanating from elites demanding a global finance-sovereign are the precipitate of similar reasoning: the problem is identified as arising from gaps in sovereignty, and their solution is a rule without gaps or boundaries - a single, decisive monolith; a sovereign fit for a capitalist world.

The question implicit in some of these responses - 'Does Leviathan really exist?' - is not the one we are hoped to provoke. We did not set out to develop a taxonomy of the world, whence to

decide where to place our bets. Our aim, rather, is *abstraction*: to grasp how the world is moving in the face of a *necessary* conjuncture which is nothing but a product of *contingency*. This ‘necessity’ has absolutely nothing to do with inviolable laws of historical development; neither does it translate to ‘inevitability’. Rather it is a necessity in the full Hegelian sense, one that describes the conditions, dynamics, qualities and forces that make our conjuncture what it is, and not something else. *The necessity of the precarious world in which we live lies not in what supposedly unavoidably made it that way, but in what it in fact is.*ⁱⁱⁱ We can debate, as we must, the state of the world, how power operates, what opportunities are available, and so on. But we must take those conclusions, tentative and partial as they always are, as a description of the *necessary* conditions in which we work, and attempt to anticipate, via an analysis of these conditions, what futures they might bring.^{iv} To put this in methodological terms, our paper represents a conjunctural analysis, not a teleology. We seek to describe an array of forces and the paths along which they are unfolding. Such analyses are always limited, but always necessary.^v

The aspiration of planetary sovereignty, whether it ever realizes itself, is already at work in shaping our world. This bears emphasis because several of our critics reject our claim that Leviathan is hegemonic. For [Larry Lohmann](#), Leviathan and Behemoth are inseparable: “climate Leviathan is in no way ‘at war’ with capitalist Behemoth” (p. 3). What appear to be conflicts among elite groups over climate politics are, for Lohmann, merely superficial differences. Elites, he claims, all share a common goal: they are uniformly pro-capitalist and pro-sovereignty. Failing to achieve planetary sovereignty, they settle for “sovereign-lite” non-solutions. Thus for Lohmann even capitalist Behemoth, our upper-right corner, will “always aspire to - even if they cannot achieve - planetary sovereignty. At the same time, the inchoate global Leviathan...is continually breaking into (or finding it hard to go beyond) sovereign-lite, climatically-ineffective individual fragments” (p. 2). We reply: it is true that Leviathan remains presently inchoate; but its existence is *defined* by this aspiration of planetary sovereignty.^{vi}

[Josh Barkan](#)’s analysis, though cast in more theoretical terms, reaches a similar conclusion. His claim is that there is no Leviathan today - and that if there were, it wouldn’t be Schmittian:

“[C]ontemporary climate politics are not dominated by a sovereign who decides. Rather, today’s order is characterized by continuing discussions...[T]here are certainly calls for a global sovereign who acts in the name of human welfare. Nonetheless, global politics is oriented toward liberal theories of deliberation between formally equal sovereign states (p. 3).

We agree, to a point. We stress that Leviathan is “neither consolidated nor uncontested” (Wainwright and Mann 2012: 5) and that climate change poses political problems for which the current order has no answer. Clearly we did not make the crucial, underpinning Gramscian argument firmly enough, viz: we are living through a period where the hegemonic conception of the world (Gramsci 1971: 323-343; Q11§12) desires and even presumes the existence of a planetary sovereign - though this has not yet been realized. This claim may seem paradoxical. Yet history is replete with illustrations of highly unequal and apparently contradictory social-political orders ruled by elites who lacked answers to fundamental problems, yet remain hegemonic for a considerable duration, typically with violent consequences. Gramsci describes one such period: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (1971: 276; Q3§34). Are we not surrounded by the morbid symptoms of planetary interregnum?

* * *

We turn now to [Mazen Labban](#)’s more fundamental criticisms concerning the weakness of climate X as a political theory.^{vii} For Labban, our conception of X as an irreligious Behemoth is problematic for several reasons. In the first place, its relation to our reading of Schmitt’s reading of Hobbes is tenuous:

“The symmetry between Climates Leviathan/Mao and Climates Behemoth/X stands as an obstacle to the development of a radical conception of X, and this partly derives from the choice to base the derivation of Climate X, as ‘another Behemoth’ from the binary culled from Carl Schmitt’s reading of Hobbes. Granted, Wainwright and Mann want to rescue a ‘more complex’ Behemoth from Hobbes and from Schmitt - but is there a revolutionary, anti-state democratic Behemoth in Hobbes or Schmitt?” (p. 8).

Our answer to this question is no. We are in no way faithful Schmittians, and never claim to be. On the contrary, we note that Schmitt saw capital as an “epiphenomenon” (Wainwright and Mann 2012: 8) and that a planetary sovereign is a *non sequitur* in Schmittian terms (hence, *pace* Barkan, we do not use the phrase ‘Schmittian Leviathan’). This explains why, in the concluding section of our paper, we turn to Marx’s critique of Hegel and, finally, to Benjamin. But before elaborating, let us follow Labban’s critique another step toward its decisive conclusion:

“There is an ambiguity in the status of Climate X that derives both from the ambiguity in the position of X and the ambiguous relation of X, as revolutionary practice, to climate justice... On the one level Climate X is posited as the outcome of a radical counter-response to climate change in the name of justice - in the same way that Climate Leviathan, Climate Behemoth and Climate Mao are outcomes of hegemonic and reactionary responses to climate change in the name of the capitalist nation-state. But then Climate X is formulated as a world in which it finally becomes ‘possible to imagine a just response to climate change’, after Climate X has already defeated Climate Leviathan...” (p. 9).

We agree that our language regarding climate X is ambiguous in both respects specified by Labban. Yet such ambiguities do not prevent us from conceptualizing X as a left political strategy or laboring to realize it as revolutionary practice. We see at least two possibilities for such expressions, each implied in §III of our paper and reflecting distinct philosophical traditions. On one hand, there is the possibility represented best by the early Marx, both in his critique of Hegel’s conception of sovereignty (1843-44) as well as in his refusal to define communism except as “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things” (1845). On the other hand there is the possibility represented by Benjamin and his conception of the politically-resolute witness to crisis. That these thinkers produced these ambiguous positions is part of their greatness. They are the logical result of the impossible-yet-necessary structure of their political thought, a structure which demands the politicization of the present and an incessant questioning of the future - neither nostalgia for a lost past, nor utopian blueprints. We would like to think the same of climate X. We are aware, of course, that we are not Marx and Benjamin. We are also aware this response will not satisfy everyone for remaining too abstract.

For those readers, it may be useful to give a straightforward answer to pair of questions that crystallize Labban's critique:

“Does Climate X intervene, in the way of *X as regulative idea*, compelling us ‘against our own will’ to realize the republic of ends in the name of climate justice? Or is Climate X that *republic of ends in which we can achieve climate justice* - a world that can be attained without, and before, we articulate ‘a theory for revolution in the name of climate justice?’” (p. 9).

We reply: yes and yes! We reject the implied opposition and affirm that climate X is at once a means toward, a regulative ideal of, and a necessary condition for *climate justice*.

* * *

[The discussion on AntipodeFoundation.org](#) has productively confronted key issues, some of which echo or elaborate on the arguments of the discussants, some turning over different ground. It is impossible to address each comment point by point. However, at least two themes that did not arise in the four responses seem to merit a reply. First, some argue that we do not take the science seriously enough, and, second, that we miss the difference between the mitigation of carbon (on which we focus), and the politics of adaptation to a warmer planet (e.g., resilient cities, transgenic crops, green infrastructure, and so on).

To be sure, we follow the science and we get the mitigation/adaptation distinction.^{viii} But it is unclear to us why science should matter to our analysis beyond discerning the ground upon which we move. As we note in our assumptions, there is no debating climate change *per se*. July 2012 was the hottest month in US history. Arctic melt rates this (northern) summer have been 50% greater than anticipated. Global warming is uneven, stochastic, and complex in its effects, but it is here, and intensifying. Nor are there any strategies, however minimal, that will *not* involve adaptation: the entire world is already amidst adaptation! While we may have emphasized what gets categorized as mitigation in some parts of our paper, our argument concerns the politics of climate change adaptation - or, better, the *adaptation of the political to*

climate change. That there are fine-grained responses to climate change, or that the science demonstrates this unevenness to be inherent, in no way precludes the emergence of Leviathan.

Barkan, Ben Wisner, and Stephanie Wakefield call us to task for ignoring the historically and geographically specific ways in which climate reactions are formulated. Yet such particularities do not militate against the emergence and power of Leviathan, Mao, and Behemoth. Part of our argument is that it is precisely the variety and disarticulation of the many reactions to climate change - the lived particularity of adaptation, if you will - that invite these regimes. Thousands went to Copenhagen to endorse a Leviathan to whom they all would willingly submit, and they did so not despite but because of the disparate effects of climate change and probably lack of a ‘coordinated’ response at the planetary scale. All social formations, at all scales, are shot through with specific *in situ* dynamics, forms of resistance, and so on. Yet the fact that history and geography happen ‘on the ground’ does not end a conversation about their relations with broader social forces that do or do not determine them. Fine-grained worlds unfolded under Stalinism, and those who had to endure it mitigated it and adapted to it. Stalinism stood nonetheless.

However unintentionally it arises, part of the problem with fetishizing science, and the social and material technologies of adaptation versus mitigation, is that it obscures the *political* argument that drives §III of the paper. To reiterate:

“[T]he problems posed at present are not new, despite their novel appearance via atmospheric chemistry and glacial melt-rates. The basic questions which have tormented the left for centuries - the relations between sovereignty, democracy, and liberty; the political possibilities of a mode of human life that produces not value, but wealth - are still the ones that matter. The defining characteristic of their present intensity is that they have an ecological deadline. The urgency global warming imposes does not cut us off from the past, but only reignites it in the present” (Wainwright and Mann 2012: 17).

We can only understand the present by coming to grips with those contingent historical dynamics that combine to make it necessarily what it is. Only then can we glance, tentatively, into the

future. This history is not without hope, but our efforts to rally it to our current conjuncture are inevitably fraught. There is certainly no reason to expect X will ever consolidate at this or that scale, which means that even if it is to ultimately realize itself, it will almost certainly never be a unified phenomenon, such as a regime or mode of organization. We might expect it to emerge as a ragtag collection of the many. We cannot say. X, after all, is a *variable*.

To assert that climate X is constitutively incomplete, as we do, may seem like an elaborate means to hide the imprecision of our analysis. We prefer to see it as an intellectually responsible posture in radically uncertain times. Our task, we might say, is not ultimately positive, but defined by the labor of negation; not to draw up blueprints of an emancipated world, but to reject Leviathan, Mao, and Behemoth. What remains is all we have: an X to solve for, a world to win.

August 2012

References

Healy J (2010) Bin Laden adds climate change to list of grievances against U.S. *The New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/30/world/middleeast/30binladen.html> (last accessed 28 August 2012)

Gramsci A (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International

Mann G (2008) A negative geography of necessity. *Antipode* 40(5):921-934

Marx K (1843-44) *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/index.htm> (last accessed 28 August 2012)

Marx K (1845) *The German Ideology*.

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm> (last accessed 28 August 2012)

Mercer K, Perales H and Wainwright J (2012) Climate change and the transgenic adaptation strategy: Smallholder livelihoods, climate justice, and maize landraces in Mexico. *Global Environmental Change* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2012.01.003> (last accessed 28 August 2012)

Merleau-Ponty M (1969 [1947]) *Humanism and Terror*. Boston: Beacon

Negri A (2009) *The Labor of Job*. Durham: Duke University Press

Smith M (2011) *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Wainwright J and Mann G (2012) Climate Leviathan. *Antipode* doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.01018.x

Endnotes

ⁱ In such an event, Smith writes, we would “find that the global war on terror will segue...into the crisis of global warming” (ibid.). We might ask whether such a ‘segue’ cannot be found in the figure of Osama Bin Laden.

ⁱⁱ The conversations that led us to write our paper started during the heady days before Copenhagen, a time when we each spoke publicly on these matters. Our paper is, in the first instance, an attempt at self-critique and clarification.

ⁱⁱⁱ This concept of necessity is not terminological sophistry. We use the word, with its Hegelian meaning, all the time. For instance, if we say ‘Urban design has made the car a necessity in

North America’, we do not mean that the car was inevitable. Neither do we mean that the objective necessity of automotive transport is so absolute that car ownership determines life. We only mean that the car, as well as the ‘need’ for a car, is a defining feature of our social formation - or to use more colloquial terms the car is ‘a reality’. Climate change is spoken of in this very sense in a statement attributed to Osama Bin Laden (Healy 2010): “Talk about climate change is not an ideological luxury but a reality”.

^{iv} On Hegel’s necessity, see Mann (2008).

^v “It was said long ago that politics is the art of the possible. That does not suppress our initiative: since we do not *know* the future, we have only, after carefully weighing everything, to push in our own direction. But that reminds us of the gravity of politics; it obliges us, instead of simply forcing our will, to look hard among the facts for the shape they should take” (Merleau-Ponty 1947: xxxv).

^{vi} Also, its ‘fragments’ are not necessarily ‘sovereign-lite’, whatever that may mean. And the fact that climate Leviathan is presently ineffective at reducing carbon emissions does not mean it will go away.

^{vii} We gratefully acknowledge a debt to his incisive essay. We sketched a section of our paper on Karatani’s analysis of capital-nation-state and X, but excluded it from the final manuscript. Labban’s elegant critical summary (pp 2-6) corrects this gap.

^{viii} For instance, on climate adaptation and transgenic agriculture, see Mercer, Perales and Wainwright (2012).