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

Red Terror on the Atmosphere

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The ecological state of emergency is here and the imperative to envision and enact alternatives has been laid bare by Wainwright and Mann. The authors show that Climate Leviathan and Behemoth are both unwilling and incapable of restructuring global political economy to avert catastrophe. So the question is, what institutions or other means of social organization are best positioned to intervene in the geography of atmospheric carbon and provide hope for transformation of the magnitude necessary, not only to ensure the continued survival of recognizable socio-nature, but to improve the quality of life of the greatest number of people? The need for improvements in material standard of living for vast swaths of the world beyond climate stabilization alone is not incidental. Successful radical political movements typically have in common at least the promise of tangible material benefits for the populations that make the radical change, rather than solely high-minded appeals to abstract concepts of "justice" or "virtue". As described by Wainwright and Mann, Climate X *may* fulfill this need for material benefit if it is able to coalesce; however, I argue Climate Mao, with some modifications, is the most promising climate future and one that we should strive for. Below, I offer some ways we can re-envision Climate Mao to make this future more pragmatic and perhaps more ethically palatable to the authors, but with the recognition that large scale, fundamental change invariably creates winners and losers and consequences for some that would likely appear biblical in

magnitude. We can think of these processes and the consequences visited on certain groups as ‘red terror’ against ‘climate whites’ in the service of the reorganization of societies along more equitable lines, rather than the jealous revenge of a vindictive, singular global sovereign.

There are many reasons to prefer Climate Mao to the loosely defined ‘Climate X’ but my reasoning breaks down along two primary, interrelated lines. One is scalar; the second revolves around Mao’s capacity for flexible action within a coherent political program. First, the scalar. The authors note that climate change is a global-scale governance problem that requires an unprecedented and broadly orchestrated effort. Even Climate Leviathan recognizes this, if half-heartedly. Climate Mao is well equipped in this regard as modern socialist movements have consciously aspired to the global and have frequently adopted an internationalist perspective. This is one feature of what makes Climate Mao the most actionable, rather than just the most plausible, of potential climate futures. Given Climate X’s refusal to be defined, at best it can have no scalar ontology, or at worst would reject scale as a matter of concern. The fluidity of Climate X makes it the ‘none of the above’ option where the line between it and Behemoth is indiscernible and definitional looseness makes choosing (and deciding who chooses!) how, where and when emissions reductions occur an even more impossible project than the global accounting regime rejected by the authors. This is not to say that global, socialist sovereign(s) should undertake such an accounting project; it would inevitably be informed by the misguided projects of Climate Leviathan that already attempt to do so. However, some level of ideological and epistemological consistency would have to be maintained in order to facilitate meaningful discussions about the types and timing of emissions reductions required. Further, a consistent framework is necessary to avoid intractable non-conversations between idealism and materialism, or the constant (and likely legitimate) accusations of imperialist intervention even within some sort of post-sovereign framework. Creating a basis for debate and action predicated on a relational, bounded notion of scalar politics that is capable of incorporating territory, ecology and political economy is the task of Climate Mao.

The fragmented political response of Climate X could make dialogue on lowering emissions, much less action, nearly impossible because of the resiliency of the value form the authors point to as the primary challenge to any anti-capitalist response. The continuing reemergence of the value form will always lead to the reemergence of the state-labor-capital triad, given the interdependence of capital, the contemporary nation-state, and the particular

manifestation of sovereignty founded on bourgeois ideology. The threat of the reemergence of the value form is particularly salient when the illusion of M-M' is a prevalent component of modern accumulation strategies. M-M' itself poses scalar political challenges through the economic benefits it provides to post-industrial elites through the displacement of high carbon-intensity industries to low wage settings. The attendant blame-game for aggregate emissions that plays out under Climate Leviathan, and that would reemerge under Climate X, would be avoided by Climate Mao through the successful destruction of the law of value through the refashioning of the constituent scales of the global. The planetary character of finance and climate change requires a similarly planetary response that can cope with the distributed network of financialization that facilitates commodified labor's reintroduction beyond the purview of Climate X. Finance capital is amorphous, but with distinct and shifting centers of gravity, meaning that there has to be a coordinated effort to dismantle it in ways that self-organizing movements appear to be ill-suited for. If we think of the US anarchist movement as an example of Climate X in the Global North, then we must already be wary of the ability of finance capital to elude its grasp, both conceptually and practically.

The need for coordination leads to the second line of thinking for our support of, and participation in, a flexible, scaled and socialist response to climate change and its causes. A somewhat centralized response does not require a singular planetary sovereign embodied in a person or a single party. Rather, we need multiple climate sovereigns who can (re)fashion institutions to create rapid, decisive action grounded in a non-accumulation based political economy that improves material wellbeing across time and space. So while Climate Mao very likely will be the strongest to emerge in this vein, this movement will undoubtedly be located within a constellation of transitional political spaces. It is politically and ethically imperative that we recognize and support Climate Lumumba, Climate Morales, Climate Castro, Climate Nasser, Climate Ho Chi Minh – even Climate Robespierre – which must be buttressed with the theoretical and tactical insights of Climate Luxemburg, Fanon, Che and Trotsky, among others. This network would be capable not only of political action to create Benjamin's real state of emergency, but also have the materialist foundation that is potentially or actually absent in Climate X. To take one example, Climate Nasser is always preferable to Climate Bin Laden because Nasser's pan-Arabist framework at least attempts to work through the Karatani triad, while Bin Laden's version of political Islam, at best, can contend with Nation, but has thus far

had little to say about State or Capital. Other intractable challenges would be bound to emerge, like attempting to discuss new climate science with factions of Climate X whose ontological commitments prevent them from acknowledging a material basis for that science.

An internationalist framework for addressing climate change has the added advantage of being able to adapt to regional, multi-scalar relations based not singularly on climate as its rallying call. They would be able to synthesize the relations that lead to climate pollution with other processes, like the value form, that facilitate continued and growing global and intra-national inequalities in health, food security and water access operating along axes of gender, ethnicity and ability. This is not to say that each of these climate socialisms do not have historical baggage or practical drawbacks, but they also have strengths and offer lessons to one another, particularly because of their shared materialist underpinnings.

A chorus of climate socialism would most effectively appropriate and transform the global means of production for rapid transition to a negative carbon economy in the name of climate justice. What this justice looks like remains to be seen. We can tell from Wainwright and Mann's assessment of capitalist 'solutions' that it cannot be a Lockean or Rawlesian justice, and it must be a justice advanced far beyond rights discourses that rely on existing state forms for legitimacy. It is also easy to see the specter of Climate Stalin in Climate Mao, a singular sovereign buttressed by technocratic scientific-rationalism. But rather than Climate X's cacophony, Climate Mao et al. must insist on processes in which leaderships, emerging science, and popular needs go beyond simply climate stabilization, the righteous urge to punish historical polluters, or geoengineered quick fixes. Climate socialisms (if we are able to bring them about) can offer positive vision and action, leading to the expanded consumption that would improve material wellbeing in a way that does not require increased pollution. These improvements would be achieved through decisive measures arrived at through negotiation and new scalar politics. There is no doubt that sovereignty must be refashioned, but to abdicate it would be to consciously reject the most powerful tool (and best hope) that radical politics can aspire to for climate stabilization and global social transformation. Getting to, and then deploying Climate Mao, Climate Nasser and Climate Lenin will entail difficult choices, but it is the ability to get to this point in the most expedient way possible that make them necessary, even if we must unleash red terror to undo the value form and reimagine the scales of action.