

Against ‘hybridism’: for a distinction between nature and society

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Book Review

Malm, Andreas (2018), *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*, Verso: London

Let me start this review by a few preliminary remarks.¹ First, Malm’s project² is not only academic, but also political and militant: in good Marxist (and, more broadly, continental) tradition, Malm – rightfully, I think³ – wants to *change* the world (i.e. stop global warming), not only understand it (as analytical philosophy typically does). That being said, Malm’s book is nevertheless very convincing. Indeed, I do not think that objectivity is necessarily opposed to political engagement. Quite the contrary: as long as the two are kept separate, objectivity is even a necessary preliminary to political action, and the latter can fruitfully make use of the former.

It is difficult to summarize this very rich book, and I will only insist on its most salient and interesting features. From a scientific and even common sense perspective, Malm’s book may sometimes seem to make use of unnecessary argumentative and literary sophistication to support its main claims (e.g. “epistemological climate realism”, which should be obvious to anyone) or its harsh critique of what Malm calls “hybridism” (which should appear absurd to anyone)⁴. Unfortunately, (climate) science realism is still contested and “hybridism” still promoted by an obscure part of academia (to which the book appears in fact dedicated, given his rather difficult form), making Malm’s enterprise salutary; and its very rich and informative argumentation, as well as its delightful (sometimes poetic or satirical) form, certainly contributes to its efficacy.

In his introduction, Malm⁵ laments a double oblivion, characteristic of postmodernism: an oblivion of our dependency on the past, and an oblivion of our dependency on nature. Our society only lives in the present, and is blind to the heritage of its past choices. This is, in particular, the case of global warming, which has emerged as a consequence of our dependency on fossil fuels for the past two centuries, the inheritance of which will last long into the future, regardless of our present actions.

Similarly, our society lives insulated from nature, shielded from it by countless “electronic surrogates” (intro., 30). In the face of this blind double synchronicity (in time and space), Malm urges us to recognize the profound diachronic character of our climate predicament.

¹As I only have the epub version, references are to footnote numbers within a chapter (n-m: passage between footnotes n and m; -n: passage between beginning of chapter and footnote n; n: passage directly referred to by footnote n; -n: passage between footnote n and the end of chapter). All emphases in the quotes are original.

²As a historian, Malm has previously insisted on the legacy of our past choices of basing our economy on fossil fuels. See Malm, A. (2016). *Fossil capital: The rise of steam power and the roots of global warming*. Verso Books.

³Let’s be clear: I am not sympathetic to Marxism or Leninism, but to the project of changing the world. Thus, when Malm cries: “Less of Latour, more of Lenin: that is what the warming condition calls for” (ch. 3, 98-), I only agree with the first part.

⁴It is Bruno Latour’s work that is the main target of this book, to the point that Jouvenet dubs it “Latour’s trial”. See Jouvenet, M. (2019). Penser « la nature et la société » face à la catastrophe climatique (ou : le procès de Bruno Latour). *Zilsel* 5(1), 367–381.

⁵Quoting Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.

The goal of Malm's essay is to "scrutinise some of the theories circulating at the nature/society junction", where climate change typically lies, and to propose his own theory of our "warming condition" (intro., 29–30). He recognizes that theory may not be what is most urgently needed now (it is, rather, action we need, namely drastically reducing our CO₂ emissions); nevertheless, action is best served by clear "conceptual maps", and "some theories", such as "constructionism, actor-network theory, new materialism, posthumanism", "can make the situation clearer while others might muddy it", and "be part of the problem" (intro., 32–33). As a minimum theory should not hinder action, and it should clearly not worsen the situation. Malm presents several requisites for a "theory for the warming condition": it should be "historical"; in accordance with his previous diagnostic, it should "have the struggle to stabilise the climate – with the demolition of the fossil economy [being] the necessary first step", and "clear up space for action and resistance" (intro., 36–37). Most importantly, it should recognize the necessity to clearly distinguish nature from society, what the latter has done to the former, and how it depends on it at the same time.

Malm begins by criticizing constructionism, which is grounded on the fundamental "epistemic fallacy" according to which nature itself would be made up of our different ways (measurements, concepts, deductions, etc.) of knowing it. He points to the contradictions of constructionists, who both endorse the category of nature and dismiss it (ch. 1, 53). He shows how important it is to distinguish social factors from natural factors, that which depends from us from that which does not depend on us, otherwise it is impossible to think anthropogenic causation, and climate change in particular (e.g. ch. 1, 24–25). The distinction between nature and society is indeed indispensable for understanding what is going on. But that doesn't mean that we have not influenced nature (in its original, pure, untouched state).

Malm develops his critique by then analyzing what he in an illuminating way dubs "hybridism", a position (whose leading figure is Latour) according to which nature and society are "impossible to tell apart" (ch. 2, -1), do not refer to two different entities but are one and the same thing. Malm identifies two kinds of hybridism: ontological hybridism (society and nature do not exist) and methodological hybridism (there is no point, no use in distinguishing the one from the other). He uncovers several presuppositions of hybridism, according to which being mixed (as nature and society indeed are) means being one. Contrary to its official posture, hybridism in fact presupposes a strong distinction between nature and society, such that their combination provokes their disintegration. Malm convincingly shows that behind hybridism lies an extreme substance dualism, present everywhere from neoclassical economics to climate change denial and indifference to ecological issues (ch. 2, 11–16). Malm then unfolds the consequences of hybridism which, like constructionism, does not help to understand the world, but on the contrary makes it inexplicable. Substance dualism, which posits nature and society as ontologically different, makes their interaction – including the environmental degradation originating in society and "looping back towards it" – inexplicable (ch. 2, 35–36). The same shortcoming applies to a double monism of substance and of property.

Now, hybridism is a double monism, of substance⁶, and of property. But the problem of property monism is the following: "If society has no properties that mark it off from the rest of the world – what we insist on calling nature – how can there possibly be such an awful amount of environmental destruction going on?" (ch. 2, 30–31) Property monism makes the environmental crisis impossible to understand. On the contrary, property distinction is the indispensable premise for any solution of the environmental crisis (ch. 2, 33–34). One must absolutely "maintain the *analytical* distinction so as to tease out how the properties of society intermingle with those of nature. *Only in this way can we save the possibility of removing the sources of ecological ruin.*" (ch. 2, 34) "For the problem of climate change is constituted precisely by how social relations *combine* with natural ones that are not of their making" (ch. 2, 55–56).

Against hybridism, Malm advocates historical materialism, which is a substance monism (society is made up of the same substance as nature), together with property dualism (society has nonetheless some highly distinctive properties). Social properties ultimately depend on natural properties, but not the other way around. In particular, society as a whole is an emergent system grounded in nature, but with (emergent) properties nowhere to be found in nature. For example, intentionality (which Latour does not hesitate to attribute to natural entities such as a river) is an emergent property that cannot be reduced to the bedrock on which it supervenes, and cannot exist without it neither.

Another target of Malm is the contention of "new materialism", or the "material turn"⁷ that matter has agency, which is no more a prerogative of humans, but can be attributed to animals, inanimate matter, basically anything which exists. The principal source of inspiration of this movement is once again Latour, who bluntly defines agency as "making some difference to a state of affairs", and attributes it to worms, clouds or rivers, which he indifferently calls "actors" or "actants". Malm recalls that the notion of agency is supposed to be related to that of *intentionality* (in folk psychology as well as philosophy of action) and thus having a mind. In

⁶Note that this does not contradict the previous *presupposition* of substance dualism, which leads to substance (and property) monism.

⁷Posthumanism, which is a sibling of new materialism by denying our distinctiveness, is also a target of Malm.

contrast, the conception of agency according to new materialism leads to:

- either omni-intentionality: the category of intentionality is completely void (it is “the ability to make a difference” according to Latour), applied to anything;
- or anti-intentionality: the property of intentionality is not necessary to agency.

Worse, Latourian new materialism, by excluding unintended consequences of human agency (and attributing them instead to the agency of some material “actant”), thereby evacuates any distinctively human responsibility in climate change (ch. 3, 42-43). It is nothing but the denial of the anthropogenic origin of climate change (ch. 3, 77-78). Such a conception assimilates causal impact and agency, whereas the latter is only a subclass of the former (ch. 3, 47). Instead, and to cope with climate change, we must adopt a restrictive, distinctively human, conception of agency (ch. 3, 82): “the fact that humans act within the carbon cycle and other circuits of nature does not in any way diminish our agency”: on the contrary, “it amplifies it” (ch. 3, 52). It is not the coal or the oil which, once we have extracted them, are responsible for their burning: it is solely us. As Malm rightfully shows (ch. 3, 59), Latour’s extension of agency to all objects in fact leads to a depoliticization of environmental problems, contrary to what he pretends. Only humans have the power to alter the climate of the planet. Humans must recognize their unique responsibility in this process. They are utterly distinct from animals, machines or inanimate matter, they have a distinctive, central agency, and responsibility, in the warming condition.

In Latour’s anti-realist constructionism, Ramses II (in)famously did not die from tuberculosis because the pathogen of tuberculosis had not yet been discovered. Indeed, according to Latour scientists “ally” with all sorts of matter, and link up with it in networks. Thus the bacterium of tuberculosis did not really exist before scientists discovered it, “teamed up” with it and recruited it into their “network” (the question Latour does not answer is of course: what did Ramses II *really* die from, if it was not from tuberculosis?). Latour’s epistemology is clearly ridiculous, but Malm nevertheless takes the time to patiently and brilliantly show its inanity. He aptly captures Latour’s “epistemological nihilism” or “Machiavellianism”, for whom “what is right is solely a question of might”. He shows Latour’s contradiction when the latter claims that there is no consensual knowledge of climate change on which to base politics (calling himself a “climato-sceptic”); and at the same time recognizes the objectivity of climate change. Latour does not solve this contradiction. Instead, he strangely tries to defend climate scientists against climate deniers by claiming that the former send each other emails, organize workshops, apply for money, in a nutshell recruit allies, and that the latter are no better because they do the same, they “try to assemble another flock”!

With this defence [of climate scientists], Latour manages to place his constructionism on the right side of the battle, but with armour like a sponge: the climate scientists are not *right*. They have just been more successful than you in attracting allies. Accept that, and accept that everything is settled in trials – all entities ‘have to be *made*, constructed, elaborated, fabricated’ [this is a quote from Latour]– and that your proposition about the world has neither more nor less validity than the present consensus. [...] Right being a function of might, the denier ought to surrender to the right-might of the scientific consensus. At the time of this writing, Latour has yet to explain how this assessment is affected by the ascent of climate denialism to the most powerful state apparatus in the world. (ch 4, 26-28)

Against Latour’s absurd epistemology, Malm proposes an “epistemological climate realism” which should be obvious to anyone: the (warming) climate, like any natural phenomenon, is independent of the science that registers it. In other words, knowledge (here, climate science as a social product) *follows* (logically and chronologically) existence (something occurring out there in nature). One must distinguish the object of knowledge from the means by which it is known. Only in this sense is climate change objective. And the fact that humans have released the carbon into the atmosphere does not make climate change in any sense subjective.

But Malm also provides other interesting, properly social, insights about climate change, mastering and summarizing a wealth of literature on how it is so much denied by the beneficiaries of the *statu quo*, because climate science threatens the ruling class. Indeed, “support for existing social hierarchies strongly predisposes people to denial. So does approval of capitalism.” (ch. 4, 47-48) Quoting numerous studies, Malm documents how conservative or right wing political orientation, loyalty to the free market and capitalism are the most distinctive factors of climate science deniers. Even personal experience of climatic catastrophes can be of no avail, so strong are the ideological blinds. Malm interestingly quotes the work of Norgaard⁸, who has documented what she calls “implicatory denial”, which is not a set of beliefs but a way of living that professes

⁸Norgaard, K. M. (2011). *Living in Denial. Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. The MIT Press.

awareness of climate change while doing business as usual, and which is sustained by both helplessness and fidelity to institutions.

On the contrary, for Latour climate science denialism comes from excessive criticism in existing networks, and a lack of trust in the institutions. “But not only does it seem bad advice to trust the institutions of a society that is rushing headlong into calamity, *it is precisely an excess of such trust that generates denial*, the refusal to acknowledge the science [is] a conspiratorial corollary of a deep-seated allegiance to the status quo.” (ch. 4, 54–55). Malm convincingly shows that Latour, and all associated theory, are useless for studying the social dynamics of global warming. Worse, they actually amount to climate denialism (as I have shown elsewhere in the case of Latour⁹).

On a more economic level, Malm also rightfully shows how global warming does not in the least threaten capitalism, but on the contrary how capitalism – and the very rich in particular – will be the last to suffer from it (after millions of poor people might have died from it) and will take advantage of it to the end. Also very interesting is Malm’s analysis, in ch. 7, of the respective autonomies of:

- labour (autonomous) and nature (autonomous but without agency) on the one side;
- and capital (contradictorily trying to emancipate itself from the former by using them at the same time, by “colonizing” them as an occupation army, ch. 7, 38–39) on the other.

He shows how fossil energy seemed to be the panacea in capital’s self-undermining enterprise of emancipating itself from nature and labour, until nature finally struck back with global warming. Technologies for regulating the climate (such as solar radiation management or geo-engineering) are nothing but attempts to treat the climate itself as if it were a machine (ch. 7, 21–22). Sustainability in Malm’s sense is nothing but autonomy (i.e. self-government) of labour and nature. Of course, the latter cannot liberate itself: thus the necessity of a fundamentally anthropocentric ecological politics (ch. 7, 39–40).

I would classify Malm’s book as excellent continental philosophy, i.e. factually and scientifically informed (not denying common sense or scientific evidence), socially and politically engaged (not just describing the world but aiming at changing it), and beautiful and sometimes even poetic to read. In spite of my repeated attempts to read and understand several “hybridist” authors – and in particular Latour –, I never managed to find any sense or interest in them. In particular, I came to the conclusion that Latour’s reputation as a philosopher and, even more so, as a social scientist, is an imposture (he may well be a great artist, but that is something else). His violation of basic logic, the absurdity of his absolute idealism, are discouraging and irritating. It has always been a mystery for me how intelligence (Latour is obviously brilliant) can be used to produce such non-sense. One of the merits of Malm’s book is to shed light on this phenomenon, to thoroughly analyze Latour’s (and more generally new materialism’s) thought, and show its epistemological absurdities and political dangers. For those (like me) who do not have the courage anymore to lose their time reading Latour and comparable authors, it is a very valuable read. More generally, it shows the conceptual absurdity¹⁰ of both variants of contemporary hybridism¹¹, namely either constructionism (which collapses nature into society), or new materialism (which does the reverse); and how their rejection is the necessary premise to any political militancy. He also illuminatingly recalls how these post-modernist strands of thought in fact rely on, and favour, capitalism, contrary to the received view which likes to consider them as anti-conformist: “Only in a society that strives to turn every bit of nature into profit can the idea that nature has no independent existence take root.” (conclu., 1–2)

Apart from its negative results, Malm’s book provides, on the positive side, an epistemology (climate realism) with which it is difficult not to agree. This epistemology, drawing a sharp line dividing nature and society, is inspired by Marx’s philosophy: “the creation of private property, the divorce between the direct producers and the means of production, the accumulation of capital are *not* acts or mechanisms of nature.” (ch. 5, 10–11) Nothing in nature dictates how people organize their society (in a capitalistic, or any other way) – but the latter social relations “dictate how people, under their dominion, relate to extra-human nature” (ch. 5, 14–15), and how they exert their own, downward, causal power. In a typically Marxist dialectic, nature and humans are not reducible to each other, while each has parts of the other, and it is “in the interstices of that unity-in-difference” that the origins, as well as the potential solutions, to global warming can develop (ch. 5, sec. “historical materialism as alternative”, esp. 16–17). That does not mean that there is no *combination*, no

⁹Stamenkovic, P. (2019a). The contradictions and dangers of Bruno Latour’s conception of climate science. *Disputation. Philosophical Bulletin* 9(3). Stamenkovic, P. (2019b). Y at-t-il un pilote dans l’avion? sur le dernier opus “atterrant” de Bruno Latour. <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02274505>.

¹⁰And vanity, taking “joy in transgression” (conclu., 6–7).

¹¹Malm also describes how hybridism can be seen as a current of “dissolutionism”, aiming at dissolving all conceptual categories (and in particular binaries), thus rendering any analysis impossible, and condemning itself to empty talk (ch. 6). As academic obscurantism unfortunately continues (with Latour being a lead figure), such work is salutary. Instead of dissolutionism, and in line with his dialectical philosophy, Malm calls for “more radical polarisation” (ch. 6, 32–33), on the conceptual as well as political level.

interpenetration of the natural and the social: but the two, while inextricably interwoven, remain distinguishable, and exert causal powers and each other. Thus all our technology relies on (independent) natural laws and properties (e.g. smartphones or even terraforming). We increasingly use natural resources, and in so doing “historicize” or “socialize” nature, alter the biosphere (by clearing a field, dispatching an electric current, etc.). But conversely, we integrate more and more natural substrata into society, thereby “naturalizing” it, making it more and more dependent on (natural) causal chains which we master less and less (ch. 5, sec. “on the proliferation of combinations”).

On the other hand, while being very much sympathetic to its political call and to its harsh critique of capitalism, I disagree with some of its Marxist-Leninist features. “Total expropriation of the top one to ten percent” (ch. 6, 33–34) is difficult to consider seriously. Revolutions (as Malm calls for, e.g. ch. 5, 38–39) often bear with them blind violence. “Ecological class hatred” (ch. 6, 49–) is hardly the solution. More generally, Malm’s insistence on the primacy of class conflict for understanding global warming is reductive: I think he underestimates how the responsibility of the current ecological disaster is shared across the whole spectrum of society (although of course the rich have more harmfulness capacity), and that there are other options than just revolution or passivity. More fundamentally, no violence (as Marxism vindicates at some point) should be tolerated in the political arena, or elsewhere. Otherwise, the new world might be just as bad as the current one.

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