

# Defending nature to prevent both future pandemics and global warming

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## Book Review

Malm, Andreas (2020), *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: war communism in the twenty-first century*, Verso: London.

With *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*, Andreas Malm proposes a timely book, masterfully addressing the relationship between two current fundamental predicaments: the coronavirus pandemic and climate change. The somewhat surprising subtitle (*war communism in the twenty-first century*) illustrates Malm’s Marxist signature, but is in fact not so central as its place might suggest (more on this below). As in his previous work, which I had the pleasure to review for *Inscriptions*<sup>1</sup>, Malm brilliantly manages to conciliate categories, which are usually separated. His book is at the same time extremely well-informed and scientifically grounded; politically engaged – even militant – and written in a literary, enjoyable style. In particular, the list of references at the end of the book is impressive. Malm is able to synthesize a huge body of academic literature (from various disciplines: epidemiology, climate science, human ecology, philosophy, sociology, political science... and from specialized as well as generalist academic journals such as *Science* or *Nature*) and of press articles together with historical Marxist sources. Malm puts them together to construct his very convincing thesis – namely, that capitalism is at the root of both ordeals (the corona virus and climate change), and that only state-led interventions can put a halt to our destruction of the planet, and of humanity by the same token.

Throughout the book, Malm delineates the similarities, as well as the differences, between corona and climate change. In the first part, Malm mainly analyses the differences between them. Contrary to climate change, corona is temporary, will sooner or later disappear such that we will be able to return to

the *status quo ante*. (4) More importantly, corona succeeded (again, contrary to climate change) in suspending the business-as-usual of capitalism, by forcing us to distinguish between essential and non-essential functions in society, and even in suspending private property (as the nationalizations of private companies in Spain, Britain, or Italy illustrate) (5–7). One is thus entitled to ask: *Why did the states of the North act on corona but not on climate (which represents in fact a much greater threat)?*

To answer this important question, one can find plenty of false arguments claiming “the unreality of the climate crisis, its comparatively benign character, or uncertainty, intangibility, complexity, remoteness or lack of front lines,” all of which belong in fact to “ideology.” (15) Indeed, it is *not* true that: corona is a more serious danger than climate change (which will kill much more); or that corona is scientifically better documented than climate change (which is established, consensual science since decades, whereas corona science is still in its infancy); or that contrary to corona, climate change is invisible (so is corona!); or that contrary to corona, climate change is a distant threat (in fact climate change has already been killing 150 000 people annually, since four decades!); or that no specific weather event, nor enemy is to be blamed for global warming (the enemy is in fact “fossil capital”).

There are also arguments, which deserve more discussion, for example that climate change is gradual: rather, it is an increasing trend made up of “abrupt destructions” (18).

And there are good points or arguments. First, the popular reactions do not differ (there was no popular demand for a lockdown: the impetus for this kind of intervention came from governments). Then, contrary to climate change, corona threatens “a core constituency of the ascendant right: old white people,” (18) rich

<sup>1</sup> Philippe Stamenkovic, “Book review,” *Inscriptions* 3, no. 2 (July 2020): 73.

people from the North, and not poor people from the South (as with climate change). “And that changed, as it were, everything. The timeline of victimhood placed rich and poor at opposite ends for corona and climate: in the former case, inducing governments of the North to do the right thing; in the latter, to behave in a manner that can only be called evil. Perhaps humanity should thank Covid-19 for taking the early route through Europe.” (23) What is more, climate change happens much slower than corona, which stroke in a “blitz” mode: “By dint of being a secular trend, global heating gave extended opportunities for obstruction to the perpetrators [i.e. fossil-based capitalism], in conjunction with a poor-first timeline of victimhood. Covid-19 negated both.” (24)

Malm notes that governments use a rhetoric of “war” in both cases, but the difference for corona is the war fits into the *nationalistic* paradigm:

It could be executed by closing borders, sending military to patrol them (Denmark jumped on this opportunity), promoting autarchy, shutting oneself off from the outside world. The benefits of such measures, insofar as they were effective, accrued straight to the national population. But when it comes to emissions cuts, gains would be distributed across the globe. [...] The war against Covid-19 could be conceived as a classical war, drawing on all the paraphernalia of patriotic pride – a nation protecting itself, as in previous moments of danger; a people sheltering behind the bulwark of the state – whereas a war against CO2 would tend to slip out of that mould. It would be a war for the benefit of one’s own and foreign others. First of all, it would be a war for the poor. (25–26)

What is more, corona and climate change both amplify themselves if left unhindered. Now states have shown that they can “cut the fuse” (26) in the former case, so *the proof exists* that it is possible to do so for the latter as well. Arguments that climate defenders were “unrealistic, unpragmatic, dreamers or alarmists” (27) in their demands are a lie, since all the measures taken for corona (which put capitalism to a halt very quickly) were also considered impossible just before corona happened.

Finally and to conclude this part, contrary to corona, measures for saving the climate could actually *improve* our quality of life. Whereas fossil capital has been preaching that CO2, a direct emanation of its quest for profits, was “good for humanity,” (29) no one would make such a plea for the coronavirus.

The second part of the book is dedicated to studying the common social drivers of corona and climate change, namely the capitalist-driven commodification and destruction of nature. Indeed, it is not surprising that corona comes from wild nature, where pathogens reside, and which we exploit and destroy more and more for our use and profit (35), in other words, which we suck into the capitalistic chain of value (78). Correspondingly, corona and climate change will appear to have more features in common than the first part initially presented.

First, Malm recalls that biodiversity inhibits zoonotic spillovers (i.e. infections residing in animals which jump into humans), and that the decrease of the former favours the latter (40). Now threats to biodiversity come from demands of the North for commodities such as coffee, beef, tea, palm oil (53); from population movements to urban areas (contrary to what one may think) where they eat more meat; or from wildlife trade. Second, deforestation also contributes to zoonotic spillovers, by bringing humans in closer contact with wild nature, and by weakening the immune systems of wild species. Finally, deforestation itself comes from the capitalist drive to exploit the forest for making profit, and in particular from “ecologically unequal exchange,” (54) where rich countries absorb the natural resources from the poor ones. To sum up, deforestation leads to biodiversity loss, which leads to zoonotic spillovers.

Focused on his critique of global capitalism, Malm insists that there is nothing specifically Chinese about the origin of the corona pandemic: “China could become the cradle of this disease only because global tendencies were present [there] in concentrated form.” (61–62) Even “[c]onsuming the wild [as the Chinese have been typically accused of] as a luxury delicacy or trophy appears to be a transhistorical habit of dominant classes. Anyone moderately familiar with Egyptian pharaohs or English lords will recognise it.” (66) Malm is certainly right to point out the global responsibility in China’s unbridled productivism and destruction of its ecosystem. Nevertheless, the “wet markets” (“so called because the stalls of animals are periodically drenched with water after slaughter” (62), and which Malm mentions several times) in the sense of *live, wild*, animal markets (which is the sense Malm uses) do seem to be a Chinese, or at least South-Asian, specificity and tradition. The fact that live bats and other wild animals are stored in such markets (where their excrements can contaminate other animals), slaughtered and potentially consumed there, while stalls are indeed “periodically drenched with water,” constitute perfect conditions for zoonotic spillovers, as Malm remarks. Now these conditions do seem to be a specifically Chinese and South-Asian practice (which can maybe be found in other marketplaces of the global South, e.g. in Africa or South America), which deserves to be forbidden if one is to stop the burst of zoonotic spillovers, as indeed it had been in China after the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak, before being authorized and forbidden again in 2020. That does not mean, as Malm aptly makes clear, that globalized

capitalism or wildlife trade in general is not to blame, but ignoring this Chinese specificity does not help either.

Returning to his comparison between corona and climate change, Malm interestingly shows that the differences are not so clear-cut as one may think. Contrary to what one may think, virus pandemics are not simpler than climate change (as they can have many causes, 76). True, infectious diseases come suddenly and then disappear, whereas global warming is everywhere all the time. Sooner or later the pandemic will be over, whereas climate change will continue. But “*the earth will also send more pestilence our way*,” (81) and the probability of another pandemic will inexorably increase, as humans interact with, and exploit, more and more wild nature. Learning that “the number of ‘emerging infectious disease events’ in the world will rise by *more than five per year*” if we continue the business-as-usual scenario (82)<sup>2</sup>, the reader wonders whether such adverse events could not be interpreted as a kind of counterbalancing reaction of the Earth system (in a purely de-anthropomorphized way, no Latour here!<sup>3</sup>), thus diminishing our capitalistic activity – as it did indeed happens with Covid-19. That would be a glimpse of hope, insofar as such pandemics would not, after all, repeat themselves, because of the huge disruption they create each time; and insofar as they might even be good for mitigating climate change (by reducing transportation – in particular airborne –, consumption, etc.). That is, indeed, a path Malm later takes when commenting on James O’Connor’s “second contradiction” of capitalism (see below).

Similarly, global warming reinforces itself, but so does biodiversity loss (85). Drivers are shared – in particular, deforestation, which is the second biggest source of CO2 emissions. But only corona may be an effect of climate change, not the other way around (91). For corona, health issues divide along class lines: the poor suffering from diabetes, heart or lung conditions are the most vulnerable, whereas the rich can isolate themselves in luxury private cocoons. For climate change, consequences are felt more acutely in the South than in the North. But for both climate and corona, the rich are the last to suffer, whereas they bear the highest share of responsibility.

Malm tries to model the double corona-climate crisis using the ‘pressure and release’ model of 1980s “critical vulnerability theory.” (98)<sup>4</sup> In this model the social is on the left: “root causes” (such as limited access to power or resources, ideologies such as political or economic systems) lead to “dynamic pressures” (such as lack of local institutions, or “macro-forms” such as rapid population change), which lead to “unsafe conditions” (such as physical environment: dangerous locations, or social relations: special groups at risk). The natural is on the right: “hazards” (such as earthquake or virus). Left and right converge towards “disaster” in the centre. But now the social is no longer on the left side only: it has saturated the hazards themselves (100). Capitalist development also creates root causes (e.g. “fossil fuels locked in as a material basis of capital accumulation”), which lead to dynamic pressures (e.g. rising global temperatures), which lead to “impacts” (droughts, floods, etc.). This holds not only for climate change, but also for pandemic disasters: root causes (wild nature dominated and converted into exchange value) leads to dynamic pressures (e.g. deforestation), which leads to impacts (zoonotic spillovers). Similar social drivers are active on both sides. But so far the political left has only focused on the left (traditionally social) side of the equation (by claiming e.g. that what kills people is the neoliberalisation of health care and the EU’s austerity measures), and has ignored the fact that the hazards (pandemics, climate change, but also insect collapse, plastic pollution, soil depletion, ocean acidification...) are themselves socially triggered. As long as this is ignored, actions will only be palliative.

The last part of the book defends state-led interventions as the only remedies for our ordeals. Malm recalls James O’Connor’s two contradictions of capitalism<sup>5</sup>: the first one, internal to capital (abstracted from its

<sup>2</sup>Malm relies here on Jamison Pike, Tiffany Bogich, Sarah Elwood et al., “Economic optimization of a global strategy to address the pandemic threat,” *PNAS* 111 (2014) (52), 18519–18523(?). Of course, not all these “emerging infectious disease events” will have the virulence of the current corona pandemic.

<sup>3</sup>Malm rightfully rejects Max Horkheimer’s expression of the “revolt or revenge of nature” (172) – an author whom he also somewhat dogmatically endorses p. 171, when quoting his claim that “man’s avidity [...] does not arise directly from his own nature, but from the structure of society.” He warns against such an obfuscating conceptualization, which “Latourians, posthumanists, new materialists and other hybridists” (see his previous book and my review of it in quoted in footnote 1) would surely endorse, while “anoin[ing] corona with agency.” (173) “This episode in the ecological crisis has once again underlined the indelible ontological distinction between humans and non-humans: bats didn’t one day tire of their forests. Pangolins didn’t offer themselves for sale. The organism known as SARS-CoV-2 has never devised a plan for infiltrating airplanes or borne any onus against anyone. The only agents with intentions in this affair are humans, who can think thoughts like ‘if I breed those rats I can sell more of them’ or ‘there’s oil under that swamp.’[...] What something like the corona crisis could be, however, is the moment when ‘human beings become conscious of their own naturalness and call a halt to their own domination of nature’, with Adorno, *conscious* here being a keyword. More precisely, zoonotic spillover of this earth-shattering magnitude should make it clear that *defending wild nature against parasitic capital is now human self-defence*. But the conscious organisation of such defence is solely up to humans.” (173)

<sup>4</sup>Malm initially relies on Ben Wisner, Phil O’Keefe and Ken Westgate, “Global systems and local disasters: the untapped power of people’s science,” *Disasters* 1(1977): 47–57; and then on Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis, *At Risk: natural hazards, people’s vulnerability and disasters*. Second edition (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>James O’Connor, “Capitalism, nature, socialism: a theoretical introduction,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 1 (1988), 11–38; “On the two

environments), states that capitalism produces too much for demand to keep up. According to the second contradiction, capitalism “free-rides” on its conditions of production, namely labour power and nature. This corresponds to the case of zoonotic spillovers, with workers who do not want to go to their workplace, and consumers who do not want to go into shopping malls. (Compare to the counterbalancing reaction of the Earth system I was evoking previously: it is not nature, but rather society here – labour, but also consumption power –, which counteracts.) However, no such fundamental crisis has happened yet with Covid-19: instead, the capitalist crisis is limited to the fact that capitalist states have intervened in the economy, ordered lockdowns, limited non-essential production and consumption.

Granted, sooner or later capitalism must come to a halt if the Earth continues to be destroyed (even if previous crises did not manage to do it). But contrary to other civilisation downfalls (e.g. the Roman empire or the pharaohs’ Egypt<sup>6</sup>, which were confronted with natural climate change and where the oppressed classes were in fact better off once the empire was down), our civilisation must *consciously* intervene so as not to self-destruct. Against social democracy (which presupposes time and gradualism, 121) as well as anarchism (for which statelessness is the panacea), the state (and organization more generally) is necessary to deal with ordeals such as corona. For example, states should audit (using their citizen surveillance programs, which should be redirected towards companies) how much tropical land is appropriated by private companies, terminate such appropriation in some cases (e.g. for the production of meat), and redirect essential activity to other locations. In other words, they should stop ecologically unequal exchange. Reforestation and respect of biodiversity (i.e. maintaining barriers between natural reservoirs and humans) is an investment in the habitability of the planet, with respect to pandemics: an action about their drivers, and not (as is usually done) about their symptoms. States should do this: one cannot trust individual enlightenment. In addition, laws (here to kill off demand) change norms (133). And excuses mentioning financial and job losses for maintaining business-as-usual should be rejected. Finally, states should use resources dedicated to stopping migrants for this: they should open borders to people, not commodities from the wild (it is difficult not to agree with Malm on this point).

With respect to CO<sub>2</sub> production, states should nationalise oil companies, and make them remove carbon from the atmosphere thanks to their skills, by directly capturing CO<sub>2</sub> (so that no land is needed). But captured CO<sub>2</sub> must not turn into a sellable commodity (indeed, capitalism cannot cure itself!), otherwise it is just recycled and the whole operation falls apart. Only the state can ensure such an operation *without profit*, namely CO<sub>2</sub> stocking for ever. With respect to CO<sub>2</sub> demand, planning is also required – and the corona crisis illustrates that it is possible to sharply reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions linked to transports. No more flights should be allowed inside continents, no more private jets or cruise ships; instead, one should produce turbines and solar panels *en masse* (through the automobile industry), expand collective transportation networks, high-speed rail lines, etc.

But of course no capitalist state will ever do this of its own accord: according to Malm, it must be forced by its population (through electoral campaigns or mass sabotage). The problem is that Malm does not seem to realize that it is the populations themselves, in their vast majority, who do not want to act if it goes against their comfort or lifestyle (as e.g., in France, the Citizen Convention for Climate, which recently took place and which I attended as an observer, illustrates). It is true that people have become more and more aware of the ecological crisis and the necessity to act in the recent years, but Malm’s nationalisation program still seems a very remote possibility, if ever it is achieved one day. It is all the more problematic that, as Malm himself recognizes, speed and coercive authority are paramount in our current predicament.

Finally, Malm discusses the widespread use, during the current pandemic, of war metaphors, which he deems useful (154). Initially, he does not seem to notice that their repeated use may also pave the way to democratic dangers, such as establishing a permanent state of exception<sup>7</sup>, threatening fundamental liberties, instituting an authoritarian regime. But he later seems aware of this, when evoking risks of “authoritarian degeneration” in periods of lockdowns (167)<sup>8</sup>. A war metaphor often cited in the fight against climate change is the World War II mobilization. According to Malm, it is a bad example, because the US then fought to preserve capitalism: it did not reorder the economy, nor confront vested interests, but deepened reliance on fossil fuels. Therefore, the metaphor of (ecological) “war communism” should be used instead, because it answers these concerns (to me this point remained somewhat obscure). Ecological war communism means notably “to live without fossil fuels in no time, breaking the resistance of dominant classes, transforming the economy for the duration” (167) and, following Lenin, to create preserved natural spaces. Now an expression such as “war communism” might, understandably, make any reader familiar with what communism *really*

contradictions of Capitalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 2 (1991), 107–9.

<sup>6</sup> Malm elaborates on Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: climate, disease, and the end of an empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), as well as on his forthcoming work for Egypt.

<sup>7</sup> In France, where presidents are fond of the war rhetoric, the majority of the last five years was spent in a state of emergency (either due to terrorism or to the corona pandemic).

<sup>8</sup> The subject of his next book, apparently.

amounted to historically feel uncomfortable, if not horrified. Fortunately, Malm seems aware of (some of<sup>9</sup>) the shortcomings of communism (159), and seems to take the term in an expunged, somewhat abstract sense. For Malm, the journey from war communism to totalitarianism, though it historically existed, does not mean that it is necessary (I am not sure to share his optimism on this point<sup>10</sup>), and therefore state-led emergency action should not be a priori excluded (I fully agree on this one).

It is also worth noting that, while Malm previously argued that relinquishing fossil fuels would lead to a better life, he warns that there would still be, during the transitional period, some forsaking and material constraints: outlawing wildlife consumption, terminating mass aviation, phasing out meat, etc. It is important, indeed, to recall that there will be sacrifices and discomfort – something people are rarely willing to consider (again, as the French Convention for Climate illustrates), not to speak of western governments which always pretend to conciliate environment protection with economic growth (be it “green” or not).

To conclude, in this new book Malm manages the admirable and very difficult conciliation of being politically engaged, yet scientifically objective. Once again, he provides a very convincing, salutary call for preserving our planet and stopping capitalist madness, from a Marxist perspective. It seems to me that he has somewhat softened his revolutionary tone since his previous book, which makes this new one even more worth reading.

*Philippe Stamenkovic*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>I still consider his stance towards communism over-indulging, but then again, he is a declared Marxist.

<sup>10</sup>Malm proposes as safeguards to always protect freedom of expression and assembly, but again, it seems like a rather theoretical safeguard.

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