

The Environmental Path to World Government? A Review of *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*

Mark Beeson

Posted: 26 August 2020

Mark Beeson is a professor of International Politics at the University of Western Australia. His recent publications include “A plague on both your houses: European and Asian responses to Coronavirus,” in *Asia Europe Journal*, and “Donald Trump and Post-Pivot Asia: The Implications of a “Transactional” Approach to Foreign Policy,” in *Asia Studies Review*.

One of the few unambiguously good things to come out of the environmental crisis that threatens to engulf us all and threaten the very continuation of civilization, has been an outpouring of thoughtful scholarship on what could or should be done to ward off its worst effects. *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*, by Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, is one of the more important contributions to this literature, especially for anyone interested in the prospects for something approaching world government. <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2545-climate-leviathan>

What would it take to ‘save the planet’? Assuming we all agree it actually needs saving—not a given, despite an overwhelming scientific consensus on the possible environmental dangers we collectively face—is it possible that something like a world government might be part of the answer? According to Wainwright and Mann it probably is, but they take little comfort from this possibility.

On the contrary, they see the emergence of what they describe as a ‘Climate Leviathan’ as the most likely response to a potentially terminal crisis of capitalism. To avoid this fate the capitalist class must try to resolve the ‘contradictions’ inherent in a capitalist economic order, ‘including the ecological contradiction that capital’s growth is destroying the planet’. Consequently, ‘capitalism needs a planetary manager, a Keynesian world-state’.

For all the hopes that have been placed in such initiatives as the ‘Green New deal’ and the development of more civilized and regulated forms of capitalism, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/global-green-new-deal/A46C5F39C7A8B8F87B7B4AC8E8855BC4> Wainwright and Mann argue that this is

ultimately a doomed, stopgap enterprise that will prove incapable of resolving the inequalities that are an inescapable and necessary part of a capitalist system of production.

Although some readers may not be terribly enamoured of Marxist accounts of either international politics or the implications of climate change, Wainwright and Mann have some powerful points to make that anyone interested in the possibility of world government needs to take seriously. As they point out, ‘Capital’s tendency toward greater inequality is at the core of the challenge of confronting climate change, because meaningful response requires sacrifices, transnational alliances, and trans-class cooperation.’

While the precise level of inequality may reflect specific historical circumstances and be notably worse in some countries than others, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674984035> there is little doubt that it contributes to the difficulty of achieving cooperation at either the national or transnational levels. The repeated failures of various climate summits to actually bring about coordinated and effective responses to global warming or reducing CO2 emissions is a reminder of the difficulties. For example, why should poorer countries not use coal to fuel development or exploit ‘their’ resources in precisely the same way that the West did?

This might seem a surprising backdrop against which to argue that some form of centralised global governance is more likely than not. Unlike some of a more cosmopolitan cast of mind, however, Wainwright and Mann argue that some new political configuration is the inevitable consequence of environmental change as human beings are compelled to adapt. ‘Climate Leviathan’, possibly centring on a ‘G2’ of the United States and China, is the capitalist version of what they describe as ‘planetary sovereignty’.

‘Climate Mao’ is a potential non-capitalist, state dominated alternative, which recognises the destructive nature of capitalism and which deploys ‘a just terror in the interests of the future collective.’ In this context, they suggest that China is definitely not in the anti-capitalist camp, which makes Climate Leviathan a more plausible option as the world’s great powers are likely to support it – for as long as it lasts.

Indeed, attempting to preserve an expansionary capitalist system that is the principal cause of environmental degradation and global warming is an unsustainable fool’s errand, many Marxists contend. <https://www.zedbooks.net/shop/book/the-enemy-of-nature/> Consequently, Wainwright and Mann argue that a new political configuration of social forces is needed to provide an alternative to both the inevitable failures of top-down rule or an undirected, reactionary, populist upsurge from ‘below’.

Their proposed model—Climate X—is both anti-capitalist and anti-sovereignty, the latter being seen as one of the key obstacles to necessary human cooperation that transcends national borders. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Climate X is rather better at suggesting why cooperation and equality are inherently good ideas, than it is about how we might actually

achieve them—especially in the unforgiving timeframes that are actually available to us to do anything meaningful about the problems we face.

To be fair, the authors are admirably frank in recognising ‘the chasm between what we know is necessary and the common sense judgement that it is totally impossible.’ Achieving the three key elements of Climate X—equality, inclusion and the dignity of all, and solidarity, ‘composing a world of many worlds’—looks inherently unlikely, but they draw inspiration from the actions of Mexico’s Zapatista movement, and the struggles of indigenous peoples to achieve autonomy everywhere.

Noble as such sentiments may be, they don’t offer a terribly plausible roadmap for the sort of revolutionary changes in politics, economics and international relations that are likely to be necessary to do anything about climate change, not to mention establishing something resembling global governance. In this context it is useful to juxtapose Wainwright and Mann’s perspective with that of the self-confessed ‘climate realist’, Anatole Lieven, who argues that only suitably powerful nation-states have the requisite capacity to respond to climate change – even if only by trying to insulate themselves from its effects for as long as possible. <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/climate-change-and-the-nation-state-9780241394076>

Perhaps the most striking thing that comes from reading books like these is that for all the very sophisticated and plausible analyses of the problems, no one’s got a really persuasive and plausible plan about quite what to do, especially in the time available to make a difference. Even when people do come up with what seem like realistic economic options, <https://www.blackincbooks.com.au/books/superpower> they are either studiously ignored by government or—if Wainwright and Mann are correct—unlikely to really fix the underlying structural problems anyway, particularly at the transnational level.

I hardly need to point out in a forum like this that the challenge for admirers of world government is not just to explain how this might be developed in the time available, but to detail what its operating principles might be. Short of an unimaginable transformation in global consciousness, Wainwright and Mann’s analysis suggests it might simply entrench unsustainable business as usual. Not quite what we were hoping for.