

Capitalism, Depoliticization, and Climate Politics*

Rob Hunter[†]

Introduction

Catastrophic climate change and ecological degradation raise the stakes for the critique of the capitalist state. State capacities are often foregrounded by those seeking to understand how to get out of our current predicament: “Can the climate movement grow by several orders of magnitude, gather progressive forces around it and develop some viable strategy for projecting its aims through the state—all within a relevant time frame in this rapidly warming world?” (Malm, 2016b, 139). Many proposals for “democratic decarbonization” focus on the institutions of liberal constitutional states as “the means we have”—while acknowledging those institutions’ limitations and contradictions (Battistoni and Britton-Purdy, 2020, 60). Contemplating possible planetary futures in light of ecological catastrophe necessarily involves considerations on the disposition and composition of international state systems (Mann and Wainwright, 2018). The dire urgency of climate

*Preprint copy of an accepted manuscript to be cited as: “Capitalism, Depoliticization, and Climate Politics.” *Science & Society*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (April 2021), 184–191.

[†]I am grateful to Jacob Blumenfeld, Kirstin Munro, Tony Smith, four anonymous reviewers, and the *Legal Form* editorial collective for their feedback.

change—the timing and pacing of which stand in contradiction with capital’s temporality (Stoner and Melathopoulos, 2015)—has rightly refocused attention upon the capitalist state.

This essay presents a critique of the pursuit of state power as a vehicle for mitigating climate change or for pursuing transitions to less ecologically destructive production relations. I proceed from the assumption that a decarbonizing transition at a global scale is an absolute necessity. The form of the capitalist state will tend to frustrate or thwart attempts at such a transition. The capitalist state depoliticizes society, thereby securing the conditions for capital accumulation; a wide variety of political activity is possible within the state form, but it is nevertheless bounded. I emphasize the mutual constitution of state and capital in the context of Marx’s critique of political economy; the critique of (and struggle against) capitalist social relations is incomplete without a critique of the state. The form of the capitalist state must be overcome if the transition away from ecocidal production is to be enduringly successful. Transitional programs pursued under the auspices of the capitalist state may well be necessary measures for mitigating climate change—but so long as the form of the capitalist state is uncontested, such programs will be incomplete, contested, and vulnerable to critiques (and dangers) of the kind outlined below. I stress the need to think seriously about expanding the scope of political contestation beyond the parliamentary boundaries of politics within the capitalist state form. Governing through the capitalist state is a dubious prize for any movement; for the climate movement, it is decidedly dangerous. Environmentalism must be linked to the struggle to abolish capitalism if it is to achieve “a radical transformation of the human relation to nature” (Saito, 2017, 258). Anything less ambitious is unrealistic (Davis, 2010).

Depoliticization and the Mutual Constitution of State and Capital

State and capital are mutually constitutive. Capitalist production presupposes specific forms of social relations, including juridical and political relations of ownership and domination (Wood, 1995, 19–48). And yet capital is not merely “embedded” within states (Copley and Moraitis, 2020); states are not anterior to capitalist social relations. Understanding the contradictory and mutual constitution of state and capital is a matter of apprehending both struggle and social form. Conflict and struggle are socially constitutive (Bonefeld, 2014, 64), and the state is the political form of the class struggle that is constitutive of capitalism (Clarke, 1991b). Capitalist social relations comprise a complex, contradictory, and crisis-prone totality (Clarke, 1992, 149). Law, state, production, and exchange are moments in this totality, the reproduction of which is mediated by struggle. Put differently, capital

and state are historically specific social forms (*cf.* Murray, 2016) arising from a single “set of social relations” (Smith, 2017, 190). The capitalist state appears to be independent from class relations; that is, the political and the economic appear to be separate from one another, such that the latter is depoliticized (and the former is restricted in scope) (Murray, 1988, 32). But while it is true that the capitalist state’s policies are historically contingent and indeterminate, that indeterminacy is bounded (Smith, 2017, 190). Policies that erode the “real appearance” (Wood, 1995, 23) of a separation between the political and the economic in capitalism—for example, policies that threaten private control of production—are achievable only through the abolition of the form of the capitalist state itself (Smith, 2017, 190–191).

Liberal social thought obscures the mutual constitution of state and capital, imagining capitalist production as a sphere of economic rationality—rather than apprehending it as historically specific, constituted through social relations, and reproduced through struggle (Clarke, 1991a; Wood, 1995, 22–23; Murray, 2016, 1–51). The liberal view rests on two faulty claims: first, that law and the state are autonomous from other social relations (*cf.* Tomlins, 2007); and second, that capitalist production is an economic engine installed in our society, one that may be removed and replaced—with a greener, hybrid model, of course. Liberal social thought naturalizes the separation of the state and civil society, but this separation must be understood in its historical specificity. It possesses an operative validity within and for capitalist social relations, but it must be remembered that “Marx’s point is that the enforced separation of state and civil society is an institutionalized illusion” (Murray, 1988, 32; Smith, 2017, 189). The apparent separation of the political from the economic is consequential and socially constitutive, but the full sweep of social relations—including those of production and exchange—is thoroughly and essentially political (Smith, 2017, 187–189). The state qua political form of capitalist society persists through the depoliticization of the social relations of production and exchange. The persistence of the contradictory “separation of political society from the hidden abode of production and reproduction” (Mann and Wainwright, 2018, 83) is contingent, historically specific, and subject to contestation. Such contestation is essential to climate politics, which remains vulnerable to institutional capture or ineffectiveness unless it politicizes the social relations constitutive of capitalism.

The capitalist state’s persistence may depend upon revenues originating in the production of value, but that does not entail that the capitalist state is secondary (or subordinate) to capitalist production (*cf.* Roberts, 2017, 217–219). Capitalist production’s consolidation was predicated on legislation, judicial decision-making, and the production of bourgeois subjectivities, such that the conditions for value production and capital accumulation could be stabilized and generalized (Wood, 1995, 31–44; Steinberg, 2010, 177–180).

Law and legislation are not just residues of such processes; they continue to shape and be shaped by the accumulation of capital. Value production and capital accumulation are impossible without the legal constitution of commodities, property, contract, and labor relations. Law and the state, just like money and commodities, number among capitalism's essential social forms. This poses an obstacle to popular struggles whose scope of engagement is defined by the depoliticizing form of the capitalist state.

The Politics of Climate Struggle

Wide-ranging struggle is necessary for any decarbonizing transition to succeed. Incremental transition programs may be necessary first steps as a matter of political strategy, but they will remain insufficient to the extent that they remain bounded by the capitalist state. Policies for decarbonizing transitions and environmental remediation must either fall short or else breach the depoliticizing boundary between the political and the economic. Such policies cannot be realized within the delimited sphere of formal parliamentary politics; their enduring success requires struggles intensified to such a point that the form of the capitalist state is fundamentally challenged. Overcoming capitalist production and escaping the worst ravages of climatic catastrophe are only possible when pursued in tandem. Catastrophic climate change is not a consequence of an expansion of undifferentiated human activity; it is a consequence of capitalism (Altwater, 2016; Malm, 2016a). In other words, particular class relations conduce to environmental catastrophe, not a general human tendency to overconsume or over-extract. World-spanning agri-, eco-, and microbiological crises are not inseparable from capitalism's contradictions; they are consequences of the imperative to valorize capital (*cf.* Wallace, et al., 2020). Ongoing, interacting, and worsening climate crises do not just threaten the possibility of a transition beyond capitalism. They also threaten the bare possibility of continued reproduction of social relations in their present disposition. Catastrophic climate change and ecological degradation are experienced as intensified struggles over the course of social reproduction (*cf.* Davis, 2010, 38; Wallace, et al., 2020, 9); the social consequences of climate change are "the outcome of relations shaped in struggle" (Malm, 2016b, 131). Climate change, in turn, acts as an accelerant on such struggle. Conflicts over production and access to the social product are constitutive of capitalism (and must for that reason be regarded as political); they assume greater salience in a collapsing biosphere. Foregrounding this question also highlights the need for strategies for mass struggle challenging law and the state's constitution of capitalist social relations. The scope of such conflict can be charted in the uneven distribution of catastrophic climate change itself—socially, in terms of class, race, and

gender; and spatially, between core and periphery (*cf.* Malm, 2016b). The geographies of pollution and environmental degradation are charted through the violent reproduction of domination, marginalization, and exclusion. The many forms of climate change, environmental degradation, and biospherical collapse nevertheless constitute a single global catastrophe. Catastrophic ecological collapse does not manifest in intra-state legal and political emergencies; like the crises of over-accumulation that inhere in capitalism, it is necessarily global. States are embedded in the world market; they are both sensitive and conducive to the transnational movement of capital (Bonefeld, 2014, 147–160). The contradiction between the unity of the world market and the fragmentation of the world into territorialized states presents a profound barrier to collective climate struggles on an adequately global scale (Mann and Wainwright, 2018, 101, 125). These considerations are strategically consequential for any conception of a programmatic transition away from carbon-intensive extraction and production. Moreover, within capitalist social relations, reform proposals for the redistribution of an expanded social product presuppose the continued expansion of value through extraction and pollution. A policy predicated on carbon-intensive economic growth cannot mitigate the waste, pollution, and environmental degradation upon which it depends (Smith, 2017, 208–209). Such contradictions are not limited to the Keynesian management programs of yesteryear. Many contemporary decarbonization proposals themselves come with substantial social and ecological costs. For example, a transition to renewable fuel sources may require the intensified extraction of necessary resources in the Global South (*cf.* Aronoff, et al., 2019, 139–169) in order to reproduce existing social relations in the capitalist core, seeing as “there is no constituency for green austerity” (Battistoni and Britton-Purdy, 2020, 57).¹ It is difficult to envision such programs developing into forms of politicized and internationalized climate struggle in which mass movements contest the form of the state and its insulation of production and exchange from political contestation. Internationalist solidarity—across global supply chains, across multiple jurisdictions and sovereignties, and across movements and collectivities—is not optional in climate struggle; it is essential.

For any given transitional program there is also the problem of effective social coordination. Recall Malm’s question about the prospects for climate politics (Malm, 2016b, 139). It may seem as though the mediation of social activity by the state is the only adequate means of achieving the level of social coordination necessary to respond to climatic crises—but those same state capacities presuppose specific regimes of accumulation;

¹Recent *New Left Review* essays provide a useful survey of debates about transitional programs and ecosocialism (Pollin, 2018; Vettese, 2018; Somerville and Burton, 2019; Seaton, 2019).

they have been formed through specific histories of struggle over the reproduction of capitalist social relations (*cf.* Mann and Wainwright, 2018, 124–128, 173–197). As such, capitalist states’ sensitivities to climate change are, simply as a matter of how they are constituted, rather weak. Ecological crises have the habit of disrespecting national boundaries and their costs are not expressible in terms of value. Such crises are likely to be legible as worthy of state attention only to the extent that they disrupt the movement and accumulation of capital, rather than to the extent that they amplify the ongoing and continual violence that capitalist social relations unleash upon marginalized and excluded populations.

To engage in climate politics without confronting capitalist depoliticization (the insulation of production and exchange relations from political contestation) is a self-limiting enterprise. Climate struggle that is not articulated with class struggle is incoherent. Environmental catastrophe is social catastrophe, as is demonstrated by the intensified immiseration, exploitation, and dispossession of populations affected by environmental disasters and climate change. In order to confront capitalism’s depoliticizing separation of the political from the economic, the capitalist state must not simply be harnessed; it must be transformed such that it is no longer recognizable in its present form.

Conclusion

A mass movement cannot be manifested outside of the totality of capitalist social relations, but the contradictions immanent to those relations present challenges to efficacious—let alone emancipatory—climate politics. This is not to say that ongoing environmental organizing, resistance, education, and research are fruitless because they obtain within social relations as we currently know them. We can only face, rather than ignore, the contradictions that attend the struggle to secure our collective survival. One of those contradictions is that capitalist production and exchange relations are essentially political in character, and yet they are depoliticized through the apparent separation of the political from the economic. Efforts to survive catastrophic climate change must be undertaken in tandem with political struggles to transform—that is, to efface the form of—the state. To put the point more precisely, surviving catastrophic climate change requires overcoming the separation of the economic from the political, through an intensification of struggles over the reproduction of capitalist society. Carried to their limits, emancipatory struggles aim not at democratizing the state but transcending it, just as they aim not at rationalizing capitalist production but abolishing it. The state cannot be democratized and still remain the state.

Climate struggle must proceed on the basis of contesting the social constitution of the capitalist state, not the contest to lead the capitalist state. That prospect may seem daunting, but daunting prospects have animated climate politics for decades. The forms and strategies of contestation will necessarily be multiple and varied, and cannot be prescribed in advance or at a distance. But the need for such contestation can and should be acknowledged. The state is a moment in the totality of capitalist social relations, formed and reproduced in struggle. For so long as it persists, its preponderant tendency will be to delimit and constrain the scope of political conflict. In the current moment, it is far easier to imagine the state as a tool for authoritarian and violently exclusionary forms of responding to climate change than as a means for emancipatory politics and environmental stewardship. The capitalist state is neither an adequate tool nor a reliable ally for collective projects for conservation, environmental stewardship, and the management of land, sea, and air for the good of all. The future demands better.

References

- Altwater, Elmar. 2016. "The Capitalocene, or, Geoengineering against Capitalism's Planetary Boundaries." Pp. 138–152 in J. W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, California: PM Press.
- Aronoff, Kate, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos. 2019. *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*. London: Verso Books.
- Battistoni, Alyssa, and Jedediah Britton-Purdy. 2020. "After Carbon Democracy." *Dissent*, 67:1, 51–60.
- Bonefeld, Werner. 2014. *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Clarke, Simon. 1991a. *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- . 1991b. "State, Class Struggle, and the Reproduction of Capital." Pp. 183–203 in S. Clarke, ed., *The State Debate*. Houndmills, UK: Macmillan.
- . 1992. "The Global Accumulation of Capital and the Periodisation of the Capitalist State Form." Pp. 133–150 in W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn, and K. Psychopedis, eds., *Open Marxism 1: Dialectics and History*. London: Pluto Press.
- Copley, Jack, and Alexis B. Moraitis. 2020. "Beyond the Mutual Constitution of States and Markets: On the Governance of Alienation." *New Political Economy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2020.1766430>
- Davis, Mike. 2010. "Who Will Build the Ark?" *New Left Review*, 61 (January/February), 29–46.

- Malm, Andreas. 2016a. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. London: Verso Books.
- . 2016b. “Revolution in a Warming World: Lessons from the Syrian and Russian Revolutions.” *Socialist Register*, 53, 120–142.
- Mann, Geoff, and Joel Wainwright. 2018. *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*. London: Verso Books.
- Murray, Patrick. 1988. *Marx’s Theory of Scientific Knowledge*. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press.
- . 2016. *The Mismeasure of Wealth: Essays on Marx and Social Form*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Pollin, Robert. 2018. “De-Growth vs. a Green New Deal.” *New Left Review*, 112 (July/August), 5–25.
- Roberts, William Clare. 2017. *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Saito, Kohei. 2017. *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*. New York: New York University Press.
- Seaton, Lola. 2019. “Green Questions.” *New Left Review*, 115 (January–February), 105–29.
- Smith, Tony. 2017. *Beyond Liberal Egalitarianism: Marx and Normative Social Theory in the Twenty-First Century*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Somerville, Peter, and Mark Burton. 2019. “Degrowth: A Defence.” *New Left Review*, 115, 95–104.
- Steinberg, Marc W. 2010. “Marx, Formal Subsumption and the Law.” *Theory & Society*, 39:2, 173–202.
- Stoner, Alexander M., and Andony Melathopoulos. 2015. *Freedom in the Anthropocene: Twentieth-Century Helplessness in the Face of Climate Change*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tomlins, Christopher. 2007. “How Autonomous Is Law?” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 3, 45–68.
- Vettese, Troy. 2018. “To Freeze the Thames.” *New Left Review*, 111 (May–June), 63–86.
- Wallace, Rob, Alex Liebman, Luis Fernando Chavez, and Rodrick Wallace. 2020. “COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital.” *Monthly Review*, 72:1, 1–15.
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 1995. *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.