

# Political Imaginary of a Postcapitalist Climate

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*Fredric Jameson's oft-repeated remark that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" captures the mentality of the present conjuncture. The climate crisis is accompanied by a crisis of imagination in which it is difficult to conceive an alternative to carbon-emitting capitalism. In Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future, Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann envision the planetary future by examining the possible ways political and economic institutions may respond to climate change. For Wainwright and Mann, addressing climate change requires replacing liberal capitalism with a critical conception of the world that they label as Climate X, a postcapitalist, nonplanetary sovereign social formation.*

**Key Words:** Climate Change, Conceptions of the World, Fredric Jameson, Political Imaginary, Postcapitalism

It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.

—Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*

Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.

—Fredric Jameson, "Future City"

Fredric Jameson's (1994, xii; 2003, 76) remarks concerning the state of our imaginations capture something essential about the present conjuncture. The capitalist mode of life is so deeply internalized into our consciousness that it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to imagine an alternative to it (Fisher 2009). Given the precipitous and ever-increasing impact of climate change, as atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations continue to rise, the "weakness in our imaginations" has provoked a genuine crisis. The fate of the Earth and of human life are tied to our collective inability to conceive a world beyond capitalism.

In *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*, Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann envision the planetary future by examining the possible ways political and economic institutions may respond to climate change. In a work of speculative imagination, Wainwright and Mann hypothesize how different political-economic orders may emerge in response to the conditions of the current conjuncture. Their starting assumption is that capitalism will continue to exist in the foreseeable future and planetary climate change will become much more severe, contributing to death, destruction, and economic disruption on a global scale. Under such conditions, the authors argue, we should expect an upheaval of political instability and social disorder, presenting a crisis of authority and opening the prospect for reconceiving the foundations of sovereignty and the political. They envision four possible scenarios, along the lines of economic formation and sovereignty, that they identify with four heuristic labels: Climate Leviathan, Climate Behemoth, Climate Mao, and Climate X.

The authors draw upon Thomas Hobbes's ([1651] 1996, [1682] 1990) *Leviathan* and *Behemoth* to speculate how new forms of sovereignty may emerge in the capitalist response to climate change. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes developed a theory of absolute sovereignty in response to the mass upheaval and disorder that emerged during the English Civil War. Hobbes ([1651] 1996, chap. 14) argued that humans' fear of death, the necessity of self-preservation, and the desire for peace would propel them to mutually transfer their right to all things to a common coercive power with the express purpose of maintaining order. Such a power, Hobbes argued, requires absolute sovereignty, a Leviathan. Drawing on Hobbes, Wainwright and Mann (2018) argue that Climate Leviathan, a planetary sovereign, may emerge to address the disorders created by climate change. In their view, "The drive to defend capitalist social relations will push the world toward 'Climate Leviathan,' namely, adaptation projects to allow capitalist elites to stabilize their position amidst planetary crises" (15). Global agreements, such as those moved by the UN Conference of the Parties (COP), point to Leviathan-like structures, with a shift from state to planetary sovereignty in which a capitalist global order monitors life, coordinates adaptation, and mitigates carbon.

Wainwright and Mann posit the notion of Climate Behemoth in contrast to Leviathan. In *Behemoth*, written after the Restoration, Hobbes documents the events of the Civil War, illustrating how sectarianism and the corruption of religion and the people contributed to sedition, rebellion, and the undermining of political authority. Hobbes thereby posits the figure of Leviathan (order) against Behemoth (disorder). Though Wainwright and Mann (2018, 44) see Climate Leviathan as the most likely path on the political horizon, they acknowledge that elements of Climate Behemoth—the current situation of nonplanetary sovereignty organized through capitalist nation-states—are fighting against the emergence of Leviathan, as characterized in the politics of "reactionary populism and revolutionary anti-state democracy." Such elements appear in the elections of Donald Trump in the United States, Narendra Modi in India, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, among others.

Opposed to both Leviathan and Behemoth, Wainwright and Mann (2018) posit two noncapitalist paths: Climate Mao and Climate X. Climate Mao represents a socialist or communist model of planetary sovereignty that wields its power against capital, determining “who may and may not emit carbon—at the expense of unjust wastefulness, unnecessary emissions, and conspicuous consumption” (38–9). Variants of such a regime, which the authors document, has appeal among some on the left today. The normative implications of the first three heuristic scenarios raise the question of how radicals should envision the planetary future. To open the discussion, Wainwright and Mann present Climate X as a revolutionary figure in the form of an anticapitalist and antisovereign social formation. To confront the limits of our imagination, Wainwright and Mann use “Climate X” as a placeholder for the articulation of a postcapitalist conception of the climate. The formation of Climate X requires a critique of competing conceptions of the world and the formulation of its own. Specifically, Climate X necessitates overcoming the limits of liberal capitalism, theoretically and politically, and reconceiving the terms of the political. To this end, the authors point to the climate-justice movement as a way to identify the preliminary basis of Climate X. They identify the principles of equality, inclusion, dignity for all, and solidarity as the emergent values of Climate X. In the book’s last chapter, they point to indigenous and anticolonial critiques of sovereignty as a way to conceive alternative visions of the political and to undermine the hegemony of the liberal tradition.

In positing the possible paths of the planetary future, *Climate Leviathan* brings into relief the challenges of developing a radical ecological-political imagination. Wainwright and Mann (2018) refrain from drawing upon hyperbolic headlines of environmental destruction and the frightening outcomes of climate models to induce a state of critical reflection. The challenge is not simply delivering science and data to the masses. “Our challenge,” they write, “is closer to a crisis of imagination and ideology; people do not change their conception of the world just because they are presented with new data” (7). Indeed, as the chapter on the “The Politics of Adaptation” illustrates, data is not a substitute for political imagination. For instance, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which is dedicated to providing scientific information on climate change, frames the response to the climate crisis in terms of “mitigation” (reducing carbon emissions) and “adaptation” (adjusting to a warmer world) without critically confronting the risks created by the current capitalist order. In practical terms, mitigation and adaptation are both fundamental questions of political economy, and as Wainwright and Mann argue, the IPCC is ill equipped to address them. In effect, the IPCC depoliticizes capitalism, uncritically accepting it as a natural order. For instance, the discourse of “adaptation” often follows universal bourgeois notions that everyone will suffer from the effects of global warming, notions that do not address the specificity of who is responsible for producing climate change or how those with the fewest resources will be able to sufficiently adapt. Real adaptation, the authors argue, would require the redistribution of wealth, the end of

fossil-fuel use, the reorganization of the world system, and forcing those who are responsible for creating climate change to pay for the cost of alleviating the suffering of billions of people (73–4). In this sense, even the most well-intentioned climatologists who are committed to producing and communicating objective scientific data on the effects of climate change are limited by their liberal conception of the world.

If science and data alone are incapable of challenging the liberal capitalist conception of the world, what can? To address this question, Wainwright and Mann (2018) draw from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. For Gramsci, developing a critical conception of the world requires confronting traditional ways of thinking and ways of conceiving the world, which are often absorbed into popular mentality as common sense. Thus, radically addressing climate change requires confronting the liberal capitalist conception of the world. As the authors point out, most contemporary liberal literature is restricted to a narrow group of intellectuals (82), and they draw upon the work of Domenico Losurdo, Carl Schmitt, and Michel Foucault to illustrate some of liberalism's inherent contradictions. Though Hobbes is sometimes portrayed as a protoliberal or as providing a liberal philosophy (natural rights and equality) with absolutist politics, his views of human nature and sovereignty continue to undergird traditional liberal ways of thinking. In addition to Gramsci, Wainwright and Mann refer to a number of indigenous and anticolonial theorists (Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, Glen Coulthard, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Patricia Monture, and Audra Simpson) who have challenged such traditional notions (194–6).

However, much of the depoliticized conceptions of liberal capitalism that have been absorbed by popular consciousness stem not from Hobbes but from John Locke, who is mentioned only once in the book. In the *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke ([1690] 1980) naturalizes the basic concepts of private property, wage labor, exploitation, patriarchal authority, inequality, colonialism, and the "improvement" of uncultivated land. Following a Lockean conception of the world, people not only have a natural right to "life, liberty, and property" but the right to exploit, expand, and colonize the world in the name of improvement. Without such conceptions, capitalism would be incapable of existence. For Locke, and also for Hobbes, the insecurity and instability in the so-called state of nature, which threatens life, liberty, and property, presented the necessity to found a civil government with the purpose of protecting people's *natural* rights, in effect rendering such rights nonpolitical. To utilize Gramsci's insights to engender a conception of the world capable of producing Climate X thus requires demonstrating that the basic concepts of liberal capitalism are not only not natural but are also political in their foundation and that their continued operation will proceed to transform the climate, producing a new realm of insecurity and instability.

A critique of dominant conceptions of the world is necessary for imagining Climate X, but such a critique alone will certainly not produce Climate X. As

Wainwright and Mann (2018, 167) argue, building a postcapitalist, nonplanetary sovereign climate will require “a movement of many movements,” drawing from the Zapatista slogan, and also a bundling together of “the most radical strategies of the climate justice movement—mass boycott, divestment, strike, blockade, reciprocity” (197). At its critical point, creating Climate X will require the intrusion of the multitude into the political realm, which, if done effectively, runs the risk of threatening ruling-class institutions, similar to the conditions that arose in 1640s England, which prompted Hobbes’s intervention. In other words, if and when Climate X emerges as a real practical possibility, Climate Leviathan will threaten its existence and seek to destroy it, allowing us to “imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (Jameson 2003, 76).

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