

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Responses to Wainwright and Mann's 'Climate Leviathan', July 2012

Beyond Behemoth

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Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann's (2012) speculation on the political consequences of climate change—the political consequences of the responses to the threats of climate change—is an important contribution to the climate debate because it challenges the left to imagine possible political futures different from the ones designed by transnational elites. It is important because it dares to speculate, not for the mere sake of cerebral pleasure but to engage in the politics of climate change on terms other than the ones determined by power. The most important aspect of Wainwright and Mann's essay is that it immediately poses the question of climate change as a political question: from the beginning it goes beyond identifying the socioecological consequences of climate change (and the techno-regulatory responses to mitigate their effects) and addresses the political perils that might unfold from the responses to climate change if the current hegemonic order and the reactionary forces that challenge it are not defeated. I say defeated because Wainwright and Mann's essay is also an emphatic invitation to intervene in an ongoing war; yet, whether intervening in this war is the only way for the left to transcend the current twin-predicament of climate change and the prospect of planetary capitalist sovereignty—or worse—is not self-evident and remains to be vindicated by the analysis laid out in Wainwright and Mann's paper. One thing is certainly evident, however: Wainwright and Mann's positing of a radical counter-response to climate change is at once a refusal to accept the

finality of the hegemonic and reactionary responses to climate change and an affirmation of possibility—indeed, an affirmation of the necessity to struggle for a just society in the face of impossibility. The very attempt at articulating Climate X, the authors’ name for the unnamed “possibility of a just climate revolution” that challenges and defeats the hegemonic and reactionary futures as well as the state-centered revolutionary alternative, is itself an ethico-political challenge to the hegemonic project of capitalist planetary government and, simultaneously, to the debilitating resignation to this hegemony as the only “practical” response to climate change despite the belief in its certain failure.

Climate X is inspired by Kōjin Karatani’s reconstruction of marxian theory by way of Kant. Karatani’s schema of the “four relations of exchange in the world” furnishes the basic framework underlying the heuristic that animates Wainwright and Mann’s analysis, namely the generation of a matrix of four components in which X, the fourth component, derives its meaning from its (negative) logical and historical relation to the other three. Although Wainwright and Mann’s analysis of X is “indebted” to Karatani, as they note, I shall argue that it deviates from Karatani’s in significant ways although it does not entirely resolve the contradictions inherent in Karatani’s analysis of X. For this, it is necessary to delve into Karatani’s schema, albeit briefly, in order to point to the limitations and the possibilities of Climate X.

Karatani’s reinterpretation of the marxian critique of capitalism as a mode of exchange (intercourse) rather than a mode of production, and his schema of four different modes of intercourse with different and independent—though often related—historical origins and development, are intended as an alternative to the well-worn architectural metaphor of base and superstructure. It is a double move that underlines at once the failure of political practice based on the base-superstructure metaphor and points to other ways of thinking political practice that combine elements of kantian ethics (and aesthetics) with marxian critique and experiments in producer/consumer cooperatives. Thus Karatani brings together the historical, analytical and practical into an apparatus that generates four “fundamental forms of exchange” from two variables, each with two values: reciprocity (equality) and freedom (see Karatani 2003; Karatani 2008; Karatani and Wainwright 2012). Each mode of intercourse is the product of a combination of free/unfree and reciprocal/non-reciprocal exchange, material and symbolic, and each concrete social formation is a variation and a combination of the four modes of intercourse. Social

formations vary according to how the modes of intercourse are combined and which mode of intercourse is dominant. The three concrete modes of intercourse that have existed in history have “corresponding institutional forms” that derive from them: nation derives from a mode of intercourse A, which is reciprocal but not free—it creates the community, hence solidarity but also subordination and exclusion; state derives from mode B: plunder, which is neither reciprocal nor free; the capitalist economy is created from mode C: commodity exchange, which is free but not reciprocal (equal). The fourth mode of intercourse D derives from free and reciprocal (equal) exchange—“the reciprocity of freedom”. It is a mode of intercourse in which the kantian moral imperative is realized: a “republic of ends” in which people treat humanity, in their person and in others’ persons, “as an end, and never merely as means” (Karatani 2008, p. 576). Although in an earlier formulation Karatani (2003, p. 276) had designated this mode of intercourse as association, supported with examples from actually existing experiments, in its later formulation he has kept it more open, designating it as X to “eschew the historical connotations” of names that have been given to “Societies in which the reciprocity of freedom has been realized... socialist, communist, anarchist, associationist...” (Karatani 2008, p. 576). In the present concrete social formation, mode C dominates in an arrangement that subordinates modes A and B to it.

The political significance of Karatani’s schema is in that it separates nation and state from capital and derives them from separate modes of intercourse that have their own history, rather than posit them as superstructural elements erected on top of the base of (capitalist) commodity exchange. Accordingly, effective political struggle must target the trinity capital–nation–state at once rather than attempt to destroy the economic base and expect the rest of the edifice to crumble and make way to communism—a practice historically proven to have been disastrous especially when the act of destroying the economic base was carried by state or nation, the one yielding Stalinism, the other fascism. Revolutionary practice involves overthrowing, transcending capital–nation–state and X has an important role to play in this struggle. Unlike the other three social formations (and formations of social formations), Karatani argues that “X does not exist in reality. It exists only as an idea (*Idée*)” (Karatani 2008, p. 576; also Karatani and Wainwright 2012, p. 39). Yet, X is neither abstract nor ahistorical: it is a kantian “regulative idea” that “radically intervenes in the society constituted by modes A, B, and C”, always functioning as “an index for humans gradually to approximate as closely as possible”, “an index for us to gradually approach, despite its not being fully realizable” (Karatani 2008, pp. 576, 577,

593). Thus, X cannot be fully realized but it compels us to overthrow capital–nation–state. This is the antinomic character of X that Wainwright expresses succinctly as “X must exist; X cannot exist” (Karatani and Wainwright 2012, p. 39).

The corollary of this antinomy, however, is politically problematic and deserves more critical scrutiny: capital–nation–state must be overthrown to “recover” communism (more on this below); capital–nation–state cannot be overthrown. This antinomy is already present in the kantian moral imperative, as Karatani points out, in that in the “republic of ends” people do not *merely* treat each others as means—they will continue to do so “inevitably” as long as they have to exchange their labor and the products of their labor. But they will *also* treat each other as ends. Thus, X intervenes in C, but X does not abolish C. Here we can glimpse the religious character of X—and Karatani reinforces this character every time he invokes “universal religion” to illustrate the return of mode A as mode D. In Karatani’s mode of intercourse D people lead a double life not unlike that of “religious man” in the political state that has emancipated itself from religion by banishing it to civil society, “the sphere of egoism and the *bellum omnium contra omnes*”: “he lives in the *political community*, where he regards himself as a *communal being*, and in *civil society*, where he is active as a *private individual*, regards other men as means, debases himself to a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers” (Marx 1975, p. 220). Through X Karatani transforms communism into private belief which is freely practiced in the capitalist nation-state.

The antinomy of X is reproduced in the diachronic relation between X and capital–nation–state. For Karatani mode of intercourse D, from which X derives, is a *recovery* of mode A, a return of a repressed mode of intercourse on a higher dimension and in different form. Karatani is keen on stressing that what is involved is not a “romantic recovery” of the past that “affirms the status quo” but a return “from the future” that “radically changes the status quo”. Karatani however does not identify the process by which A returns in a different form—the process that prevents A from returning simply as A, the process that produces difference rather than repetition. Yet, even if we accept that such recovery is possible, it remains shrouded in contradiction on two levels. On one level, “reciprocity in a higher dimension” does not exist in reality—it is an idea. Yet, at the same time, it is a “recovery” and a “return” of an ethical element present in primitive communism (Karatani and Wainwright 2012) or universal religion (Karatani 2008), variants of mode of intercourse D that have actually existed historically. (Indeed, for

Karatani (2008, p. 577) socialism's loss of "the splendor and fascination it once carried" has resulted from the loss of the ethical element caused by socialism's divorce from religion since the middle of the nineteenth century—since Marx, the revolutions of 1848 and the *Manifesto*?) On another level, X "will keep coming back no matter how much it is repressed and conceded"; yet, X persists because the three other modes of intercourse persist: "We cannot clear them out" (Karatani and Wainwright 2012, p. 39). X persists so long as capital–nation–state persist: "although the mode of exchange D will never be realized [despite the fact that it has already existed], it will never disappear. So long as the modes of exchange A, B, and C persist in reality, mode D will also persist as a source of negativity against modes A, B and C" (Karatani 2008, p. 577; also 593–594). So, mode D does not exist in reality but it has existed historically; mode D is not fully realizable but it is recoverable; we cannot recover mode D without transcending capital–nation–state, yet "we cannot clear them out"; mode D exists so long as capital–nation–state exist, yet it cannot be realized until we succeed in superseding capital–nation–state; but mode D can never be realized; ... etc.¹

The condition for the existence of X is the persistence of its opposite: capital–nation–state. Or, our struggle against capital–nation–state will cease only when X is realized, but X cannot be realized. This leads at least to two conclusions: first, the depressing prospect that our struggles to transcend capital–nation–state are futile; this trinity will "remain persistently" and its persistence is the condition for the persistence of the (unrealizable) idea of communism. The second conclusion is more suggestive: *communism is not the result of transcending capital–nation–state; instead, it resides in the struggle to transcend capital–nation–state; we realize X in the very process of striving to realize X*. It seems to me that this is a reasonable interpretation of Karatani's analysis of X and Wainwright (2012, p. 74) seems to point precisely to that when he affirms that: "this is the point of X: to articulate a conception of practical ethics so that we may live as if it were possible to transcend capital–nation–state, knowing that such transcendence is effectively impossible. This is part of what it means to treat X as a regulative idea" (Wainwright 2012, p. 74). But then the question arises concerning the certainty about this impossibility: why

¹ E.g. "communism is a regulative idea... which would never be realized" but which "keeps compelling us to supersede capital–nation–state... against our own will. This will not cease until it is truly realized" (Karatani and Wainwright 2012, p. 40).

is it “effectively impossible” to transcend capital–nation–state? And how do we *know* that transcending capital–nation–state is “effectively impossible”?

Climate X is not mired in such contradictions. Despite its indebtedness to Karatani’s X and apparent formal homology, Climate X deviates from it significantly, in form and political implications. Like Karatani’s X, Wainwright and Mann’s Climate X is the fourth component of a quadruple matrix generated from two variables with two values, in this case a matrix of four political futures deriving from potential responses to climate change determined by whether capitalism will prevail or not and whether a planetary sovereign will emerge or not. Climate Leviathan, Climate Behemoth and Climate Mao correspond very loosely and roughly to Karatani’s modes of intercourse, but here the resemblance ends. First, the four modes of intercourse in Karatani’s schema are the (analytical) products of historical development—Karatani’s schema is a historical reinterpretation that aims to separate the historical development of the modes of intercourse that have created capital, nation and state. Wainwright and Mann’s schema, in contrast, is a projection into the future of potential developments that are taking place in the present. It is an explorative exercise rather than simply an interpretive one in which the possible development of any and all the matrix’s components is in question—nothing guarantees that any of the components of the matrix will be realized and this furnishes the real conditions for the possibility of realizing X as Climate X. The condition of existence of Climate X is the defeat of the other three, not their persistence. Neither defeat nor persistence is given; either is a matter of political practice.

Yet, in Wainwright and Mann’s schema Climate X does not oppose a trinity of Climates Leviathan–Behemoth–Mao. Rather, Climates Leviathan, Behemoth, Mao, and X, are all already engaged in a struggle among each other in which Leviathan’s hegemony is challenged by both Behemoth and Mao as well as X. In contrast to Karatani’s opposition of X to capital–nation–state, Wainwright and Mann advance a scheme that pits Leviathan against Behemoth, Mao, and X (“Behemoth reaction, Mao and X are competing revolutionary figures in the worldly drama”) in which Behemoth appears as “Leviathan’s greatest immediate threat”. (Perhaps this is why the title of this paper is “Climate Leviathan” and not “Climate X”, or “Beyond Leviathan Behemoth Mao”). The war between Climate Leviathan and Climate Behemoth dominates the conflict among the four scenarios. This is an expression of a symmetry in Wainwright and Mann’s schema—a symmetry not immediately found in Karatani’s schema, but latent nevertheless—that

reduces its representation of the “worldly drama” to a binary struggle between Climate Leviathan and Climate Behemoth: Climate Mao is one of “two forms” that Climate Leviathan could take, and Climate X is one of the many forms that Climate Behemoth could take: “Insofar as Behemoth is always not-Leviathan, it of course contains within itself more than one possibility. ... Behemoth provides at least two possible mass-based responses to Leviathan: the reactionary populism and the revolutionary anti-state democracy”. X is therefore “another Behemoth haunting the world”. Unlike Karatani’s matrix, Wainwright and Mann’s is composed of two layers, giving the vertical line in the middle more weight, which presents a further obstacle to the full development of Climate X.

Although Karatani’s schema seems to transcend the binary straitjacket in positing four modes of intercourse with independent historical development, and positing the fourth as an opposite to a trinity composed of the other three, it nevertheless contains this limitation in the idea that X is a recovery of mode A. Karatani looks for the possibility of X—revolution, communism, association, etc.—not in the contradictory development of capitalism that involuntarily produces its own grave-diggers, but in the recovery of community. Sans surprise Karatani refers repeatedly to universal religion as the form of return of repressed reciprocity, until it was presumably repressed again by “scientific socialism”. Similarly in Wainwright and Mann’s explication of “political Islam” as one of the current challenges to Climate Leviathan in Asia, in its two variants as reaction and revolution, i.e. as “potentially, a version of X”. What determines which direction “Islamism” takes, however, and if such a bifurcation is indeed tenable, is not explained (and why other variants of “political Islam” that align it closer to Leviathan are not considered). Certainly, Wainwright and Mann are emphatic about the exclusionary nature of “all attempts to counter climate Leviathan in the name of religion” and the version of X they advance “is worldly and structurally open: a movement of the community of the excluded that affirms climate justice and popular freedoms against capital and planetary sovereignty”. But then it is not evident how the X in Climate X, as an irreligious, inclusive “movement of the community of the excluded” stands in relation to X as the exclusionary theological opposition to Climate Leviathan—let alone draw political inspiration from it—if indeed we are willing to accept religious movements, or as Karatani would put it, social movements “clothed with the form of universal religion”, as valid “versions of X”? As much as Behemoth proper “hates Mao for its faith in secular revolution”, Behemoth qua “political Islam”

hates Behemoth qua secular revolution for the same reasons: look at present day Tunis, for example.

The symmetry between Climates Leviathan/Mao and Climates Behemoth/X stands as an obstacle to the development of a radical conception of X, and this partly derives from the choice to base the derivation of Climate X, as “another Behemoth” from the binary culled from Carl Schmitt’s reading of Hobbes. Granted, Wainwright and Mann want to rescue a “more complex” Behemoth from Hobbes and from Schmitt—but is there a revolutionary, anti-state democratic Behemoth in Hobbes or Schmitt? Behemoth, for Hobbes, does not represent revolution per se but the Puritan and Presbyterian Revolution of 1640. That revolution was not simply a religious revolution, however; nor was it a movement of the people; it was a bourgeois movement that carried within it the aversion to radical democratic revolution. It needed the support of the people yet it feared them—it feared that the appeal to the people against the monarchy would unleash the dangerous forces of real democracy (see Hill 1955). The figure of the Behemoth symbolized for Hobbes the anarchy brought about by the civil war as much as religious fanaticism, the disorder and lawlessness of the non-state. It is for Schmitt that Behemoth appears as the “revolutionary people”, hence the justification of Leviathan as the police state. Regardless how hateful and fearful Schmitt was of communism, however, his Behemoth is nothing but the liberal constitutional state which emerged from the destruction of the “original unity” of secular and spiritual power to undermine the sovereign’s monopoly of political power by recognizing a source of right external to the “mortal god”. It is the same democratic state that emancipated itself from religion by banishing religion to the province of private law, by allowing people to continue being shackled to religious belief in private (Marx 1975). Interestingly, Schmitt does see a “mythical prototype of some communist theory of state”, of statelessness, precisely in the Jewish cabalistic depictions he rejects in defense of Leviathan: world history as an incessant battle between Leviathan and Behemoth that leads to their mutual destruction. Instead of looking for revolutionary possibilities in some form of Behemoth, and for their realization by intervening in the war raging between Leviathan (Mao) and Behemoth, perhaps we can reinterpret in a radical manner the figure of the mythical Jew who stands by and watches Leviathan and Behemoth fight each other to the death.

But then, what does climate change (global warming) have to do with all this, apart from imposing an “ecological deadline” on the problems that have “tormented the left for centuries”?

In a very interesting passage discussing the environmental problem at the end of *Transcritique*, Karatani (2003, p. 283) proposes that “the way out [of the circuit] is only through association”, i.e. mode of intercourse D. The circuit that Karatani refers to is the circuit of capital and environmental catastrophe: industrial capitalism → environmental problems → imperialist conflicts involving capitals and states in a struggle for survival engulfing “peoples of all nations” → major catastrophe → etc. We cannot act against this cycle “because we’re living as part of the capitalist nation-state” so we have to find a way out of it. Can Climate X be the way out of this circuit? It seems to me the answer should be yes but, whereas in the case of Climate Leviathan and Climate Mao, and Climate Behemoth to a lesser extent, Wainwright and Mann make it clear how particular responses to climate change will bring about specific political outcomes, this is not the case with Climate X. There is an ambiguity in the status of Climate X that derives both from the ambiguity in the position of X and the ambiguous relation of X, as revolutionary practice, to climate justice:

climate X is a world which has defeated the emerging climate Leviathan and its compulsion for planetary sovereignty, while also transcending capitalism. In other words, we argue that only in a world that is no longer organized by the value form, and only where sovereignty has become so deformed that the political can no longer be organized by the sovereign exception, is it possible to imagine a just response to climate change.

On the one level Climate X is posited as the outcome of a radical counter-response to climate change in the name of justice—in the same way that Climate Leviathan, Climate Behemoth and Climate Mao are outcomes of hegemonic and reactionary responses to climate change in the name of the capitalist nation-state. But then Climate X is formulated as a world in which it finally becomes “possible to imagine a just response to climate change”, after Climate X has already defeated Climate Leviathan (and shouldn’t we include Climate Behemoth and Climate Mao in this defeat?) Does Climate X intervene, in the way of X as regulative idea, compelling us “against our own will” to realize the republic of ends in the name of climate justice? Or is Climate X that republic of ends in which we can achieve climate justice—a world that can be attained without, and before, we articulate “a theory for revolution in the name of climate justice”? Does the “just response to climate change”, a “just climate revolution”, play any part in

realizing Climate X as the republic of ends—a world which has defeated planetary sovereignty and transcended capitalism—or is the realization of the latter the condition for carrying revolution in the name of justice? Is Climate X the revolutionary movement that defeats Climate Leviathan (the world organized by the value form and managed by planetary sovereignty), or is it the outcome of such defeat? By defeating Climate Leviathan, shouldn't Climate X accordingly expire?

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