
REVIEW ESSAY

RESPONSES TO THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: PLANETARY HEALTH, CLIMATE CHANGE AND COVID-19

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The world system and many of the nation-states within it are in the midst of a socio-ecological crisis. It is presently manifesting itself in many ways: climate crises of various sorts (heat waves, droughts, wildfires, torrential rains, floods, and polar vortexes); environmental degradation, including pollution of the air and seas; increasing concentration of wealth alongside on-going poverty; armed conflicts and refugees; the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine nationalism; and signs of a new cold war, with the US, UK and China, perhaps Australia, being the principal actors. While the seven books reviewed in this review essay do not touch upon all these points, they address a broadly common theme, namely redressing the deepening global ecological and social crisis.

The essay juxtaposes two books written by iconic global celebrities with two others by international political economic contributors. The two celebrities' books are *Life on Our Planet* by naturalist David Attenborough and *What Can I Do?* by film star Jane Fonda. The more explicitly political economic works are *Climate Crisis and the Green New Deal* by Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin and *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency* by Andreas Malm. Having considered these, attention then turns to three books by Australian authors – Marian Wilkinson's *The Climate Club*,

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Rebecca Huntley's *How to Talk about Climate Change*, and John Wiseman's *Hope and Courage in the Climate Crisis*. All have appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic; and all address the climate crisis, albeit in markedly different ways.

Let's begin with David Attenborough because of his unparalleled status as a public advocate for the environment. Part One of his book presents a 'witness statement', reflecting the on state of life on Earth at various points during his life. He observes that, when he was age eleven in 1937, world population was 2.3 billion, carbon in the atmosphere stood at 280 parts per million, and remaining wilderness constituted 66 percent of the world's land area. In 2020 at age 94, the environmentally relevant data are strikingly different: world population has more than trebled to 7.8 billion, carbon in the atmosphere has risen to 415 parts per million, and remaining wilderness has shrunk to just 35 percent of the world. Attenborough, who has criss-crossed the planet with his film crews seemingly countless numbers of time – ironically, emitting considerable greenhouse gases in the process – argues that the natural world is fading due to human activities, exacerbated by 'runaway' economic growth. He observes that the first view of Earth from Apollo 8 altered the way that humans perceive their planet and themselves, although not necessarily always for the better.

In Part Two of the book on 'What lies ahead', Attenborough states: 'When the global ecological breakdown does finally settle and we reach a new equilibrium, humankind for as long it continues to exist on this Earth might be living on a permanently poorer planet' (p.105). I could not agree more. So, what is to be done? In Part Three on 'A vision for the future: how to rewild the world', Attenborough makes a statement that for a moment made me think that he might be a closet eco-socialist. He boldly argues that humanity 'must learn not only to live within the Earth's finite resources, but also how to share them more evenly too' (p.128). His solutions include moving beyond growth, switching to clean energy, engaging in regenerative agriculture, rewilding the seas, taking up less space, rewilding the land, and drastically reducing population. How Attenborough plans to achieve these aims within the parameters of global capitalism mystifies me and I doubt it can be achieved, despite his best intentions, especially not by teaming up in the Earthshot project with Prince William who, as a royal, must have a huge ecological footprint.

Jane Fonda's book focuses specifically on climate change and its personal implications, as it's *What Can I Do?* title signals. She says that, given that gravity of the climate change crisis, she has had a strong urge to transform herself once again, going beyond the efforts she had made since the 1970s to be an environmental activist, having installed a windmill at her ranch in 1978, solar heating and electricity at her Santa Monica house in 1981, and reduced her consumption of red meat. While it entailed a fair amount of jetting back and forth across the United States – which Fonda admits was not a particularly environmentally sustainable activity – she decided to join forces with the likes of Greenpeace once again, teaming up with Bill McKibben, Naomi Klein, and others in several 'Fire Drill Fridays' rallies and teach-ins during 2019 in Washington, DC. The 'Fire Drill Fridays' movement supports a Green New Deal, opposes new fossil fuel extraction, and calls for the phasing out existing fossil fuels with a just transition to clean renewable energy. Fonda's book has numerous pictures, including one of her being arrested, along with crisp, short statements from various celebrities and climate activists on the need to take climate action.

For people who still have not quite wrapped their heads around the seriousness of the socio-ecological crisis, Fonda's book incorporates many facts about the impact of climate change on the oceans, water resources, health, forests, migration, and women. It also considers the relationship between militarism, agriculture, and excessive plastic consumption and the ecological and climate crises. Moreover, it engages with concepts such as environmental justice and a just transition for workers being displaced from fossil fuel industries to renewable energy industries. The final chapter of the book urges people, particularly Americans, to speak to others about the gravity of climate change, vote for climate leaders, and organise 'Fire Drill Fridays' rallies. Fonda's political positioning, like Greenpeace and the 'Fire Drill Fridays' movement, is in the mainstream of the climate movement with its emphasis on tweaking capitalism by making it more socially just and environmentally friendly. It does not join with the climate justice activists' more radical call for 'system change, not climate change' that seeks to transcend capitalism by trying to shift to an alternative political economy based upon a blending of eco-socialist and eco-anarchist principles.

The third book under review is by the renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky, writing in tandem with Robert Pollin, political economist at the

University of Massachusetts. Prior to writing his sections of *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal*, Chomsky had only fleetingly touched upon climate change in short commentaries, but this new book engages more deeply with the topic. Chomsky's co-author Pollin is particularly critical of William Nordhaus, who received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2018 for his research on the economics of climate change, describing his approach as being 'utterly sanguine about accepting the risks we would face allowing the global mean temperature to rise by 4°C by 2150' (p. 23). Indeed, many climate scientists are now arguing that, if the world does not rapidly reduce greenhouse emissions, a four-degree warmer world would be reached in 2100, not 2150.

In commenting on the Australian bushfires in late 2019 and early 2020, Chomsky observes in the book that, after the Australian prime minister 'returned grudgingly from a vacation to assure his constituents that he felt their pain', the 'opposition labor leader toured the coal plants, calling for expansion of Australia's role as world champion coal exporter and assuring the country that this was quite consistent with Australia's serious comment to combating global warming' (p.12). Chomsky argues that a revival of the labour movement is essential for a variety of reasons, including addressing the environmental crisis, noting that Tony Mazzocchi, head of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, had been a 'harsh critic of capitalism as well as committed environmentalist' (p.50). However, while sympathetic to efforts to transcend capitalism, Chomsky asserts that the immediacy of the climate crisis requires addressing it within the 'framework of state-capitalist systems' (p.58): hence his endorsement of a Green New Deal as an interim strategy. Pollin argues that a viable Green New Deal would require large-scale public investment, public ownership, and stringent regulation of emissions.

On the question of eco-socialism, Chomsky does not view it as a viable political project at the present time, seeing it rather as providing a forum for 'sharpening ideas' about what a future society might look like. Differently, his co-author Pollin asserts that 'eco-socialism and the Green New Deal are fundamentally the same project' (p.146). Contrasting with the relative dynamism of climate movements in advanced capitalist societies, he argues that the movements in most low- and middle-income

countries operate at more modest levels, although conceding that this situation could quickly change.

How does the COVID-19 pandemic fit into the picture? Chomsky fleetingly remarks that the pandemic is ‘virtually all-consuming’ but believes that ‘it will pass, perhaps at horrendous cost, and there will be recovery’ (p.139). It is a position that contrasts significantly with that taken by Andreas Malm, the author of the fourth book under review here. Indeed, Malm’s *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency* differs from each of the three books already reviewed because it addresses the pandemic front and centre, analysing the complex interaction of global capitalism, climate change, and COVID-19. Malm observes that, of the ten countries with the most deaths from COVID-19 as of late March 2020 (the USA, Italy, China, Spain, Germany, France, Iran, UK, Switzerland, and Netherlands), only Iran and Switzerland were not among the countries most responsible for the cumulative CO₂ emissions that have occurred since the middle of the 18th century.

Moreover, capitalist-driven deforestation and food production has resulted in zoonotic spill-over from animals to humans, in many cases starting with bats and intervening wild animals, such as pangolins sold in ‘wet markets’ such as the one in Wuhan, China. Initially, the major epicentres of COVID-19 were generally rich cities, such as New York, London, and Hong Kong, but megacities in the Global South, including in India, Brazil, Peru, and Mexico, subsequently became epicentres of the pandemic, a scenario that is still playing itself out before our eyes. Dependence on food from other regions and countries also varies enormously internationally: EU countries source over half of their land-based consumption from other regions of the world – over 80 percent in the case of Germany. At the high end of capitalist developed countries, Japan sources 92 percent of its land-based consumption from other regions; while, at the low end, the USA sources only 33 percent of its land-based consumption from other regions, largely because of its enormous land mass.

Transport arrangements are also significant influences on the spread of diseases and environmental impacts. Whereas during the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, steam-powered trains and ships diffused infectious diseases around the world, aeroplanes have become the principal transport modes doing so, as happened with the SARS epidemic

in 2003 and with COVID-19. In the case of the latter, cargo ships and cruises ships have played a pivotal role in disseminating COVID-19, with some infected passengers completing their journeys home on airplanes. As Malm observes, 'By late January 2020, the virus had become an unstoppable sponger on the global aviation network' (p.74). Prior to the lockdowns of most aeroplane flights around the world, aviation was contributing 5-6 percent of greenhouse gases and increasing at roughly five percent per annum (Baer 2020). Of course, flying is an activity that affluent people, particularly businesspeople, politicians, celebrities, and even high-status academics, do more than most others.

Malm argues that the three coronavirus epidemics might be the by-products of climate change. SARS appeared in the wake of a drought in Guangdong; MERS first appeared in rain-free Jeddah; and SARS-COV-2 erupted amid the worst drought in Wuhan area in 40 years. The combination of infectious disease epidemics and climate change suggests humanity has entered an era of chronic emergency. In contrast to COVID's impact on conventional aviation, Malm observes: 'One form of aviation boomed; by mid-March, bookings with private jet operators in the US had increased tenfold, as clients took their families and private doctors to vacation houses secluded far from contagious masses' (p.92). Conversely, self-isolation and social distancing is impossible to achieve in slums.

Malm posits that humanity faces two options, the first flowing 'deeper into catastrophe' and the second entailing transformation into 'another form of socialism, one that recognises that time is up and another decade or even year of this status quo is intolerable' (p.121). He acknowledges that social democratic approaches, such as those unsuccessfully promoted by Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, can play a role in addressing the socio-ecological crisis, but sees the need for more systemic change and more immediate solutions. Malm advises moving away from meat consumption, arguing that a shift toward global veganism 'would give some room back to wild nature and disengage the human economy from the pathogen pools' (p.130). He adds that ending wildlife trade is not only the responsibility of China but many more nations around the world. Malm does not simply call for some sort of eco-socialism but for an *ecological Leninism* that would 'subject the regions of the economy working towards catastrophe to direct public control' (p.151). He distances himself from classical Marxists who have viewed socialism as a social

formation of unlimited abundance. Invoking Lenin's passion for wild nature, Malm calls for, in a figurative sense, 'ecological war communism' that would require 'learning to live without fossil fuels in no time, breaking the resistance of dominant classes, transforming the economy for the duration, refusing to give up even if all the worst-case scenarios come true, rising out of the ruins with the force and compromises required, organising the transitional period of restoration, staying with the dilemma' (p.167). He leaves it to others to figure out how humanity might transition from the existing capitalist world system that exploits both people and nature to the required situation of this ecological war communism.

As well as these four contrasting books, three others by Australian authors warrant attention, especially from local readers. These have been written by investigative journalist Marian Wilkinson, social researcher Rebecca Huntley and social scientist John Wiseman. All three books provide illuminating insights into the topsy-turvy world of Australian climate politics.

Wilkinson's contribution is *The Climate Club*, a highly readable book that discusses in detail the machinations of the self-designated Greenhouse Mafia. Its origins hark back to the days of Prime Minister John Howard, but it has continued to exert major influence through the decade of Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison governments. As Wilkinson shows, an alliance of climate sceptics, politicians, business leaders, particularly from the mining and fossil fuels industries, and think tanks such as the Institute of Public Affairs collaborated to ensure only a minimalist response to climate change. It undermined efforts of the ALP governments led by Rudd and Gillard to take effective climate action; and has since reinforced the party's reluctance to challenge the coal mining industry. Such inactions or minimalist actions on climate change have earned Australia the dubious status of a 'climate laggard' compared to various other countries, such as Germany, the UK, and particularly the European Union. Wilkinson pays less attention to the politics of dissent. While her book discusses Greenpeace and the climate action advocacy work of actors such as Al Gore and his collaborative work with Don Henry, the former director of the Australian Conservation Foundation, it does not give much consideration to the disparate climate movement, often operating 'under the radar' of mainstream climate politics but still influential in shaping the views and actions of many Australians concerned about climate change.

Nevertheless, as a study of the insidious uses of political economic power, her book makes for a captivating and enlightening read.

Rebecca Huntley, a social researcher who has done work for various environmental NGOs, decided to become a climate activist when prompted by her children's concern about climate change and moved by the likes of Greta Thunberg and the school climate strikers. She attended Al Gore's Climate Reality Project in Brisbane in 2019 and subsequently completed her book *How to Talk About Climate Change in a Way That Makes a Difference*. For what it is worth, in my role as a climate scholar-activist, I did the CRP training, which was co-sponsored by the Australian Conversation Foundation, in Melbourne in 2014; and I came away convinced that Gore is the ultimate green capitalist, believing that climate change simply can be contained by turning to renewable energy sources and carbon pricing of some sort. In an engaging manner as a climate communicator, Huntley explores the emotional resistance among her fellow Australians to discussing climate change. However, while referring to various drivers of climate change, such as fossil fuels, meat production, the internal combustion engine, consumption, and lifestyle, nowhere in her book does she mention the 'elephant in the room', the overarching driver of climate change, namely global capitalism. The closest she gets is a fleeting mention of the need to 'encourage the countless venal politicians and greedy corporations to make decisions based not on short-term profits and self-interest but on the long-term interests of "ordinary people"' (p.159). While more progressive politicians are indeed capable of acting in this manner, corporations merely act according to the dictates of capitalist logic in their profit-making activities, notwithstanding much hype about corporate social responsibility.

Huntley seems to be aware of social justice issues emanating from climate change, such as when she notes that: 'If you live in Zambia or Kiribati, and you know your country contributes almost nothing to global CO₂ emissions, you have nothing to feel bad about. In contrast, people living in wealthy countries know that their much valued way of life is under scrutiny because of climate change' (p.75). Unfortunately, like her mentor Al Gore, she does not elaborate upon such contradictions. Discussing the need for replacing capitalism with an alternative that is not systemically geared to the exploitation of nature is extremely difficult, of course. It is a problem that I have not fathomed how to resolve, resulting in the

frustration and even anger that I often feel because of my limited ability to crack this nut, other than writing about it and presenting guest addresses in various venues. Perhaps there is a need for someone to pen a how-to-do it book along the lines of *How to Talk About Capitalism as a Driver of Climate Change in a Way That Makes a Difference*.

That thought leads into consideration of the last, but certainly not least, recent book to be reviewed in this essay. This is John Wiseman's *Hope and Courage in the Climate Crisis: Wisdom and Action in the Long Emergency* (Wiseman 2021). As a scholar and climate activist, Wiseman adopts an eclectic approach to grappling with the climate crisis, not only in Australia but world-wide. He draws upon Indigenous peoples' and First Nations' knowledge in caring for country; Greek and Enlightenment philosophy in the search for a just society and highlighting the virtues of moderation; critical theory in illuminating the patterns of domination and reconnecting with the world and the Earth; the Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions in seeking love and care for humanity and the planet; the Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions in learning to cope with suffering and impermanence, overcoming ignorance, violence, and greed, and developing compassion and generosity; and the ecology of mind approach of Gregory Bateson and deep ecology of Arne Naess. Not surprisingly, in some places in his book there are epistemological difficulties in seeking to blend so many voices.

What about a strategy for finding a way forward? Wiseman is quite aware that various ecological Marxists, such as John Bellamy Foster, argue that, following Marx and Engels, capitalism is in a metabolic rift with nature and thus ultimately needs to be transcended by means of an ecological revolution of some sort, although there are a variety of visions of what this might entail. Wiseman asserts that the 'awkward and confronting reality is however that the speed with which the climate crisis is unfolding will probably require a timetable for emissions reduction far shorter than that required to radically transform capitalist economic, social and political relationships' (p.97). While cognisant of the limitations of the 2015 UN Paris Agreement, he has opted to place his energies in promoting a post-carbon pathway or a program of ecological modernisation, while refraining from promoting post-growth and post-capitalist pathways. Ironically, he does cite the work of Donella Meadows who, along with her Club of Rome colleagues, called attention to the limits to growth

almost a half a century ago (Meadows *et al.* 1972). Wiseman is in good company with many climate activists, including those in Green parties around the world and in the fossil fuels divestment movement, who seek to tweak capitalism by supposedly making it more socially just and environmentally sustainable. However, for eco-socialists, eco-anarchists and many Indigenous peoples and parties in the Global South - some of whom he mentions, including Vandana Shiva in India and Evo Morales in Bolivia - the struggles against capitalism and for a socially just and an ecologically sustainable alternative are one and the same. While Wiseman advocates climate justice, the call that many climate justice activists make for 'system change, not climate change' means moving beyond capitalism. The sad reality is that notion of climate justice has been domesticated by many operating within the parameters of the Framework Convention on Climate Change process which met for the 26th time in Glasgow in November 2021.

Presenting a timeline of transition from the existing capitalist world system to an alternative based on social justice, deep democracy, environmental sustainability, and safe climate is extremely difficult, probably impossible. However, the stabilisation of the Earth's eco-system needs to occur within the next two or three decades, lest large swathes of land become uninhabitable for human as well as nonhuman beings. Such a dystopian scenario is not out of the realm of possibility. Hopefully, as humanity finds itself in an increasingly critical situation, whether taking the form of gross social inequality, authoritarianism, environmental degradation, climate turmoil and raging pandemics - perhaps all of these - counter-hegemonic voices will receive a better reception than they do now and will inspire radical action.

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