

Review Essay

Can Climate Change Us?

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David Ciptet, J. Timmons Roberts and Mizan R. Khan, *Power in a Warming World: The New Global Politics of Climate Change and the Remaking of Environmental Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015. 344 pp. £ 41.78 hardcover.

John B. Cobb, Jr. and Ignacio Castuera (eds), *For Our Common Home: Process-Relational Responses to Laudato Sí*. Anoka, MN: Process Century Press, 2015. 492 pp. £ 12.99 hardcover.

Stephane Hallegatte et al., *Shock Waves: Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty*. Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2015. 224 pp. £ 24.50 paperback.

Humberto Llavador, John E. Roemer and Joaquim Silvestre, *Sustainability for a Warming Planet*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. 366 pp. £ 33.95 hardcover.

Wen Stephenson, *What We're Fighting for Now is Each Other: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Climate Justice*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015. 256 pp. £ 12.31 hardcover.

INTRODUCTION

According to Google Scholar, something like 350,000 books, articles and reports about climate change have been published since 2012. Amazon lists more than 100,000 books under the keywords ‘climate change’. Googling the same term yields almost 97 million hits. Something is happening here — but what is it? Is it that we face a threat unprecedented in human history? That we don’t know how to deal with climate change? Or that we don’t know how to motivate meaningful political mobilization and social action to address

climate change? If the books under review here tell us anything, it is that we know a great deal about the first two questions, but very little about the third. This is more than merely an academic issue: the future and well-being of billions of the world's people, especially those living on a few dollars or less per day, depend on such a strategy. It is especially discouraging, therefore, that after more than a quarter-century of 'climate politics', so little has actually been accomplished in addressing climate change (Gross, 2015). The deficit lies not in a paucity of ideas, schemes, practices or technologies; rather, no one knows how to get from 'here' to 'there'. Most of the well-off in the global North would prefer to get 'there' with little or no disruption to their daily lives. A far smaller number are prepared for revolutionary action (albeit without considering at which end of the gun they might find themselves should revolution succeed). What we need is a concrete plan for a 'social transition', one driven not by technology or history or markets but, rather, by deliberate and directed political action. The real problem is that we really do not understand how social transitions happen, and understand even less about how they might be motivated or helped along. And we need to be realists.

Much of the vast and burgeoning literature on climate change, including these five books, is characterized by a misplaced idealism, which stands as an obstacle to action. By this, I mean that writers on climate change imagine future worlds rid of what Anna Tsing (2005) calls 'friction'. They assume that the goals specified by scientists and policy makers, and any policies put in place, can and will be carried out successfully without resistance, opposition or failure. That this assumption is problematic even over the short term, let alone 50 or 100 years, rarely enters anyone's thoughts or calculations. These books are therefore revealing not so much for their originality or insights as for their recapitulation of long-standing social and political struggles over rationality, justice and morality. That so much time, energy and ink are expended on idealistic proposals and scenarios ought to be of concern to those who seek to act on the causes and consequences of climate change.

Naomi Klein (2014) and others have argued that climate change 'changes everything'. But what, exactly, is changed by climate change? Does it merely change the biogeophysical condition of the Earth, or does it also change us? Will this change effect a wholesale structural transformation of human civilization that will save humanity and the planet from degradation and suffering? Or will only technologies and institutions be changed, so that, naturally and in the fullness of time, we will achieve an ideal future in relatively painless fashion? In all likelihood, Humanity will 'muddle through', in Charles Lindblom's (1959) famous formulation. Still, we can be fairly certain that some people — mostly the billion or more very poor — will suffer considerable pain, while others — mostly the well-off one billion or so — will be buffered from the worst. But must we wait for the climate to change in order to alleviate that suffering? All five books have something to say about this question.

WHO WILL SAVE US FROM CLIMATE CHANGE? THE TRANSCENDENCE OPTION

In May 2015, Pope Francis issued an encyclical, ‘Laudato Sí — On Care for Our Common Home’, calling upon the people of the world to cease their ‘irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed’ the Earth (Pope Francis, 2015: §1), and urging a spiritual and practical ‘ecological conversion’ in response to the present ‘ecological crisis’ (Pope Francis, 2015: §217). The document is deeply infused with theological claims and arguments even as it offers a secular critique of the beliefs and lifestyles that, he argues, have led us to the current impasse. In particular, Francis challenges the dominance of both the paradigm of technological ‘progress’ and today’s profit-driven, highly individualist market system, and calls for socially just responses to the crisis (e.g., Pope Francis, 2015: §60). Francis condemns overconsumption in the global North and impoverishment in the global South, proposing an ‘integral ecology’ that recognizes the need for balance and reform (Pope Francis, 2015: §137–46). Judging from the many sources cited in the footnotes, these are not new sentiments among the leaders of the Catholic Church. What is unclear, however, is how far the implicit indictment of capitalism — nowhere named explicitly in the document — extends.

Perhaps it was coincidence, but the release of the encyclical came only a week after the 10th Whitehead International Conference at Pomona College, in Claremont, California, a meeting of 1,600 people organized by the Center for Process Studies at the Claremont School of Theology. For those not familiar with ‘process thought’ — including your humble correspondent — it ‘seeks to integrate and reconcile the diverse facets of human experience (i.e. ethical, religious, aesthetic, and scientific intuitions) into one coherent explanatory scheme’ (Center for Process Studies, n.d.). It is further described in the following:

Process metaphysics, in general, seeks to elucidate the *developmental* nature of reality, emphasizing *becoming* rather than static existence or being. It also stresses the inter-relatedness of all entities. Process describes reality as ultimately made up of experiential events rather than enduring inert substances. The particular character of every event, and consequently the world, is the result of a selective process where the relevant past is creatively brought together to become that new event (ibid.; emphasis in original).

John Cobb, Jr. and Ignacio Castuera, editors of *For Our Common Home*, have solicited thoughts about Pope Francis’s encyclical from more than 50 conference participants, among them Vandana Shiva, Bill McKibben, Herman Daly, Holmes Rolston III and Catherine Keller, all well known in environmentalist circles. As might be expected, they are quite laudatory — except to bemoan the Pope’s opposition to abortion and homosexuality — but, in the end, very repetitive. One might do better to read (or skim) the encyclical and leave it at that (as I did after slogging through this book).

WHAT ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY?

Sustainability is often touted as the ‘solution’ to the climate dilemma, especially if it is designed and implemented to address the vast differences in wealth and consumption across the world. Sustainability is, however, an essentially-contested concept, in that it means different things to different people. According to W.B. Gallie (1955–6: 169), an ‘essentially-contested concept’ is one ‘the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users’. The term ‘sustainability’ appears to date back at least to the 1930s (Lipschutz, 2009); it was canonized as ‘sustainable development’ in 1987, when the Brundtland Commission proposed its definition in *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987; see also Lipschutz, 1991). Since then, many, often contradictory variations of ‘sustainability’ have been offered, including ‘sustainable economic growth’, which seems oxymoronic in the extreme, and a ‘sustainable military’, which seems nightmarish.

Sustainability for a Warming Planet offers its own peculiar conception. Humberto Llavador, John E. Roemer and Joaquim Silvestre, all three ecological economists and, in their words, ‘sustainabilityarians’, seek to articulate an economic context and the requirements for a definitive conceptualization of sustainability and how to achieve it in a fair and just manner. They define a ‘*purely sustainable practice* as one that will maintain human welfare, of all generations now and into the indefinite future, at the highest possible base level or greater . . .’ (2015: 2; emphasis in original). From a purely ethical perspective, who can argue with this goal? From a purely practical perspective, is there any hope for achieving it? That depends.

As philosophers tell us, what *should be* from a cosmopolitan ethical perspective always runs up against *what can be*. For this reason, others who have tried to assess the costs and impacts of climate change over the coming century, such as William Nordhaus and Joseph Boyer (2000) and the authors of the ‘Stern Review’ (2007), have adopted what they regard as a utilitarian approach and eschewed much, if any, discussion of ethics and justice. Llavador, Roemer and Silvestre are highly critical of such studies — especially insofar as utilitarian action is likely to encounter stiff political resistance from the global South, because it looks to optimal outcomes for the whole, rather than its parts. As contrary sustainabilityarians, the three economists take instead an ‘egalitarian’ approach, based on the Rawlsian ‘difference principle’ according to which one’s time and place of birth are morally arbitrary and should not determine one’s life conditions.¹ In their

1. This is one of Rawls’s Principles of Justice which, Rawls argues, would be formulated by people in the ‘original position’ behind a ‘veil of ignorance’. Since the three authors are not arguing from behind the veil, it is not evident that they are actually articulating the most egalitarian approach to sustainability (Rawls, 1971).

view, true sustainability requires the elimination of differences across the world in welfare and well-being.

What development trajectory might fulfill this condition? Llavador, Roemer and Silvestre offer a combination of discount and growth rates that will (i) meet the stipulation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that carbon emissions be reduced by 80 per cent by 2075 in order to keep the global temperature increase to 2°C; (ii) ensure that everyone in the world will have roughly the same standard of living by 2075; and (iii) do this in a way that has minimal environmental impact. Their proposal relies heavily on contributions to income and welfare beyond pure consumption, such as increasing the stock of knowledge, improving environmental quality, achieving better health and offering more education-adjusted leisure. These are assumed to increase wealth and well-being without requiring significant material inputs or continued massive burning of fossil fuels. To ensure intergenerational equity, the authors require a low discount rate that values the distant future almost as much as today, combined with growth rates much lower than current targets in both the global North and South.

To illustrate their approach, the authors offer a ‘two-country model’ based on the United States and China, which assumes that convergence in living standards can take place in 75 years — the same date as it would under current high-growth scenarios — at the same time limiting atmospheric carbon dioxide levels to 450 ppm. While such low growth levels may prove difficult to accept and adjust to, their model nonetheless increases human welfare and well-being without requiring substantial material or fossil fuel inputs. If this approach could be applied to the rest of the world, it would become possible to greatly reduce, if not eliminate, poverty. Moreover, claim the authors, this arrangement is indefinitely sustainable. Yet, theirs are pretty heroic assumptions. And pretty unrealistic, too, in this reviewer’s opinion. Ethical or not, *Sustainability for a Warming Planet* once again tells us what should be done but provides no instructions on *how* it could be accomplished.

AND THE WORLD’S POOR?

The poor are often accused of abusing the environment: lacking income, it is sometimes argued, they exploit and abuse the natural resources on which they depend. That the poor consume so much less per capita than those issuing the critique is balanced against their much greater numbers — although this gainsays the observation that it is possible to live much more frugally than many of us do today. But why bring climate change into discussions of poverty? Surely no one can deny that the impacts and effects of climate change will be unevenly distributed across the world, and lousy weather affects the poor much more than the well-off, since the former may lose everything from one inopportune disaster (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) while

the latter are likely to possess at least some resilience in the face of adversity (e.g., Hurricane Katrina). But casting the poor as especially susceptible to climate impacts begins to suggest that we must do something about poverty *because* of climate change. This seems to absolve us of concern about other causes of global poverty, especially current economic practices.

To put the point bluntly: the world's poor are not poor because of a changing climate; ameliorating climate change is not going to lift them out of poverty. It is the structure of global and national economies that is largely responsible for poverty, although few (economists) are ready to acknowledge this. Thus, to focus purely on *Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty*, which is what Stephane Hallegatte and his eight colleagues attempt in *Shockwaves*, is to ignore the terrible job we have done to date in addressing poverty across the global South. Climate change will surely add insult to injury but, in the new language of 'resilience' (Davoudi and Porter, 2012), were people not so poor to begin with they would not be so threatened by climate change.

Shockwaves begins with the observation that '[c]limate change threatens the objective of sustainably eradicating poverty' (p. 1). This sentence packs a great deal in its nine words, suggesting that, were it not for climate change, the 'objective of sustainably eradicating poverty' would not be 'threatened' — a doubtful proposition. Note, however, that it is not *people* who are under threat here; rather, it is the project of 'eradicating poverty' that is threatened. But this raises some problematic questions. A number of recent reports and studies (e.g., World Bank, 2016) observe that economic growth in India and China has, over the past couple of decades, lifted more people out of extreme poverty than any programmes or projects implemented by do-gooders, international financial agencies or UN institutions. The Brookings Institution reports (Chandy and Gertz, 2011) that the worldwide number of people in extreme poverty has declined from 1.3 billion in 2005 (it peaked in 1970 at 2.2 billion) and is likely to decline below 700 million over the next few years.

But this good news may be more an artefact of statistics than a real decline. The current definition of 'extreme poverty' includes those who live on US\$ 1.90 or less (in PPP, or purchasing power parity) per day. Whether it is possible for a family of, say, four to live on the local equivalent of US\$ 3,000 per year implied by US\$ 1.90 per day depends on local factors. But how little is this? Global median income is in the range of US\$ 3–4 per person per day (US \$ 1,200–1,600 pc; Kenny, 2013), a good deal less than the US\$ 10 per day per capita that some economists (e.g., Nancy Birdsall, 2012) suggest is the absolute minimum income needed to belong to the 'middle class'. To put the numbers another way, half of the world's people, or 3.7 billion, live on less than about US\$ 3.50 per day, which is not that much more than the US\$ 1.90 that marks extreme poverty.

Hallegatte et al. are less concerned with absolute income, however, than the effects of climate change on incomes, inasmuch as it does not take much

in the way of adversity to fall from the US\$ 3.50 to the US\$ 1.90 level. To assess these effects, they model social and climate impact variations in two development scenarios, one called *Prosperity* — under which ‘development is rapid and inclusive’ and the other, *Poverty* — in which development is ‘slow and noninclusive’ (p. 12). They find that the impact of climate change on absolute numbers of global poor is relatively small, and that the number of people driven into extreme poverty as a result of climate change varies quite widely — from around three million to over 100 million — depending on which assumptions and variables are inserted into the many different scenarios they model. But here is the kicker: through 2030, ‘the difference across reference scenarios due to socioeconomic trends and policies [as opposed to merely climate change] . . . is almost 800 million people’ (p. 189). The authors acknowledge the shortcomings of their modeling, but argue that it is meant to influence poverty reduction policy rather than predict the future of poverty or pinpoint regions of particular concern. Still shouldn’t we strive to reduce global poverty because it is the ethical thing to do? Why invoke climate change at all?

At the end of the day, *Shockwaves* is not much different from hundreds of other World Bank publications, although it might differ in some of its warnings and recommendations. What’s more, in the face of donor country reluctance to make the required funding commitments to a broad range of global crises, there is little reason to think that findings such as those that appear in this publication will change the practices of governments and international financial institutions. We cannot ignore the fact, noted above, that based on income alone, economic growth seems the quickest and most effective way to provide vulnerable people with the means to reduce their exposure to environmental externalities such as climate change. However, economic growth eventually leads to industrialism and rising rates of energy consumption which, unless the global South is willing to jump straight into renewables and all that entails, are most definitely not going to reduce the impacts of future climate change on the poor (or the rest of us).

CONFERENCING TO DEATH

What can we do? Perhaps we need to turn to public policy for strategies and solutions, especially international policy. Alas, the news is not good there, either. Nor is bad news anything new. Since the ratification of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1995, the annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) have been the site of continuous debate, disagreement and conflict. The Kyoto Protocol has expired and, notwithstanding US President Obama’s sunny reading of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, grounds for great optimism are limited.² Of continuing concern to COP members are

2. The advent of the Trump Administration is only grounds for greater pessimism.

the distribution of responsibility for carbon emissions, the financing and technology that the North is willing to provide the South as a quid pro quo for a new climate protocol, and how the allocation of carbon emission permits under a cap-and-trade system will take place. These are arguably all matters of ethics and ‘climate justice’, although they are cast mostly in terms of gigatons of emissions, carbon prices and economic efficiency.

Power in a Warming World, by David Ciplet, J. Timmons Roberts and Mizan R. Khan, tries to inject some optimism into the endless saga of climate change conferencing. They begin with the failure of the much-ballyhooed COP-15 in Copenhagen in 2010, which produced little of consequence and dashed widespread hopes for action. But why did it fail? As illustrated by the June 2016 Brexit vote, national governments and electorates show little inclination to give up sovereignty and authority, lest they be given a rotten deal in the negotiations and bargaining that characterize the COP and other international processes and agreements. Ciplet and colleagues argue that, consequently, today’s state-centric approach to climate governance not only is failing but also fails to address the ‘climate injustices’ arising from the historical domination of the global South by the global North. But things are changing: they believe the era of international climate diplomacy is over, and that effective action to address climate change will only emerge from below. Yet, if not climate diplomacy, is another approach possible and more promising?

The authors offer an unequivocal ‘maybe’. They argue that purveyors of the most common models of world order — realism, liberalism, institutionalism³ — all fail to fully comprehend or explain the contemporary disorder around climate change policy. In place of the canonical approaches, they apply a ‘Gramscian’ framework, based on the proposition that ‘recent shifts in [global] power dynamics’, (p. 17) especially the [rise of] BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), have made it impossible for the global North to impose its will on the global South or disregard for any longer the latter’s demand for ‘climate justice’. Power, in their analysis, is not merely military or financial; it is also manifest through hegemony and counter-hegemonic movements. Drawing on the work of Robert Cox (1983), who first applied Antonio Gramsci’s arguments about Italian politics to international political economy, Ciplet, Roberts and Khan offer a framework with ‘three main components: a strategic view of how hybrid coalitions (state, market and civil society actors) mobilize to shift the balance of forces on a given issue, a layered view that considers the fragmented governance institutions on which such coalitions engage, and the historical dimensions of world order within which struggles are embedded’ (p. 23).

3. This is a common trope in international relations dissertations: show why the conventional models cannot account for a phenomenon and then offer a new model that can.

To this conversation, Gramsci brings the concept of ‘hegemony’ which, the authors tell us, ‘rests on certain, albeit limited, material concessions to the economic-corporate interests of the subordinate class. Such concessions, which have been largely ignored in various strains of cooperation theory, are essential to maintain cohesion in a class-divided society, giving the appearance that the forms of governance promote the general interest and are thus legitimate’ (p. 78; see also p. 27).

For this proposition to be useful, there must be (i) a dominant transnational class (a ‘historic bloc’) that has been able, through various concessions to poorer, less-powerful parties, to shape the global liberal order; and (ii) an opposing movement of class-based, counter-hegemony (a new ‘historic bloc’) which has emerged in the political and social interstices to offer a new ideology that could displace the dominant one, via a ‘long march through the institutions’ (see, for example, Schelsky, 1974).

Ciplet, Roberts and Khan suggest that such a counter-hegemonic historic bloc is emerging, consisting of ‘a managerial elite from multinational corporations, professionals from NGOs and academia, and governmental agencies’ (p. 27) who seek climate justice. According to the authors, ‘these actors engage in strategic efforts — often in coalitions with well-defined identities — to leverage material, discursive, and organizations resources in what Gramsci refers to as the “war of position” to challenge, establish, or maintain hegemonic rule’ (p. 27).

They are less clear about whether this particular ‘bloc’ exists or could truly be the status quo challenger dreamed of by activists and subalterns. In the book’s concluding chapter, the authors express hope for ‘a broad and powerful coalition of civil society, state and market actors with the capability to advance a radically different development vision and pathway . . . the main catalyst and vision for such a historic bloc will have to come from civil society’ (pp. 247, 248). We are left wondering exactly who these actors might be.

The authors are also somewhat confused on ‘hegemony’, mixing together the ‘theory of hegemonic decline’ with ‘historic bloc’. Hegemonic stability theory draws on Gramsci’s observations but, beyond the notion of purchased concessions, there is little resemblance between the two frameworks. Hegemonic decline posits the need for a well-endowed state to overcome the collective action problem in international relations through the strategic disbursement of resources to putative allies, and is based on the historical rise and fall of dominant powers over the past half-millennium (e.g., Gilpin, 1983). At some point, according to this model, hegemonic powers over-extend themselves and come under challenge from ‘rising powers’, at which point wars of succession are highly likely. As a hegemon in ‘decline’, and challenged by the BASIC countries, especially China, the United States no longer possesses the material resources required to buy the cooperation of subordinate states, making this an especially fluid and uncertain time in global politics.

More to the point, a Gramscian approach to politics requires really-existing transnational classes (van der Pijl, 1998), and not just hegemonic and rising countries. Moreover, control of material resources is paramount in both domination and challenge. Do such classes exist? I think so although as is often noted, classes are rarely, if ever, ‘in themselves’ or actors in History. If the coalitions observed in the climate arena are anything like true classes, they are more probably ‘for themselves’, more concerned about the impact of climate change on their interests and their children’s prospects. But this is really beside the point: looking to civil society as a potential Redeemer in the face of Doom misconstrues its role in liberal capitalist society. Indeed, the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’, which is so important to civil society and so fetishized, is a wholly artificial one that makes possible the very hegemony criticized by Ciplet, Roberts and Khan.

How is this? The tripartite distinction among states, markets and civil society is a fiction that makes possible private property and puts limits on the state’s authority to take or abolish such property (see, e.g., Steinberger, 1999). But the state is necessary to liberalism, since it defines and legitimates the private property held by market and civil society actors as well as the capital accumulation that arises from the rents and benefits from such property. Consequently, ‘civil society’ is more than just non-governmental organizations, social movements and coalitions; it is composed of all of those groups, organizations, tendencies and lobbies that rely on state and market to maintain their individual and group interests. Looking to some concatenation of these three sectors for a ‘radically different development vision and pathway’ (p. 248) is as likely as flying pigs and whistling shrimp. It is why another world can be imagined even as there is no strategy or map for getting there. No map, no justice.

INTO THE STREETS (AND OUT OF HISTORY)

So far, nothing seems very promising. Nonetheless, there are millions of people out there, doing their thing, hoping to save the world. Perhaps we need to shift our attention to them. Wen Stephenson tries to do precisely this with *What We’re Fighting for Now is Each Other: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Climate Justice*. Stephenson is a journalist who quit his day job when he recognized that an impending ‘climate catastrophe’ represented a mortal threat to humanity and future generations (i.e., his kids). Rather than writing about the threat, however, Stephenson decided to hit the road, meet with climate activists, and document what they were thinking and doing about that threat. As he puts it, ‘I’ve merely written from my own experience, my own personal journey into the climate movement in the United States’ (p. xv).

Going out to seek these activists, Stephenson invokes *Walden* and the spirit of Henry David Thoreau to lionize (and individualize) those with whom he speaks, including Bill McKibben, Robert Bullard, Beverly Wright, Tim

DeChristopher and a number of lesser-known media figures. Their stories and activities are interesting but hardly arresting — figuratively or literally. Stephenson compares climate activists to the Abolitionists but fails to substantiate this claim in any substantial way. Bill McKibben may be a hero to many (he refuses to fly anywhere), but he is no John Brown. Nor are climate activists the contemporary equivalent of British and American Abolitionists during the 19th century. Stephenson's subjects may feel mortally threatened by fossil fuels, but they are hardly enslaved, on the one hand, or engaged in literal battle with the fossil fuel machine, on the other. To be sure, the struggle for Abolition was, in part, aimed at changing people's ideas and minds about the morality of slavery (Hochschild, 2005), but it took bloody wars (Napoleonic and Civil) to abolish slavery in Britain and the United States.

As is true of all wars, while individuals played a central role in its prosecution, the American Civil War, in particular, was a vast collective endeavour. Mass mobilization (impressment) and a fairly catastrophic material event were required to achieve the British Abolitionists' idealist visions. By contrast, Stephenson eschews such collectivism. His heroes are individuals, and not a movement, and he writes that 'the climate struggle . . . is essentially a *spiritual* struggle — it forces us to confront the deepest most difficult questions about ourselves . . . and it confronts us with . . . a moral necessity' (p. xv). Hoping for individual and spiritual transformation — like Pope Francis — he also compares the activists with those engaged in the religious 'Great Awakenings' that shake the United States every generation or two (McLoughlin, 1978). Stephenson is, like his interlocutors, an idealist, but his war is no more than a 'moral equivalent', to be fought by spiritually-awakened individuals rather than a politically-mobilized society. Eventually, he hopes, everyone will come to realize the Truth and change their minds and practices. If some scholars and strategists are to be believed, climate change might trigger wars, but they will almost certainly not be wars against climate change or its causes.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

As suggested at the outset of this essay, if the books under review here are characteristic of the other 99,995 books on climate change out there, we are in deep trouble, whatever scientists and engineers might do to extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere or modify Earth's climate. Moreover, if the past 25 years of climate diplomacy are any indication of what might happen in the next 25, there is little reason to continue with the idealism that characterizes so many of these books. The simple fact is that we know 'what is to be done', we just don't know how to make it happen. Political will or economic rationality are not key here; the first is one more form of idealism, while the second imagines the 'perfectly spherical human being',

who does not exist (Harte, 1988). While we may be ‘slaves’ to fossil fuels, as Wen Stephenson seems to imply, we do this by choice rather than coercion — some might dispute this point, but our lives and carbon production are not subject to the whims of slaveholders or the Constitution. Moreover, humanity’s ‘liberation’ from carbon will almost certainly not take place through war.

A more critical question is whether climate change is the unique, mortal threat to humanity that it is so often made out to be: has humanity ever faced a comparable situation? There exist many scenarios that could lead to the extinction of humanity — for example, a runaway greenhouse effect or asteroid impact — but these are, so far, judged to be highly unlikely. Climate change is sometimes compared to the threat of an atomic exchange during the Cold War but, unlike the ubiquity of carbon burning, nuclear weapons exist(ed) in a space that is not part of the fabric of the everyday. Is climate change like the plague pandemics that swept repeatedly across Europe and Asia between the 6th and 19th centuries, killing hundreds of millions in the process, yet eventually becoming less malign and, eventually, subject to human control? It is almost certainly not like World War II. Perhaps it is unprecedented.

Finally, what of the paradox that the world’s poor, whose reliance on commercial fossil fuels, on both an aggregate and per capita basis, are much smaller contributors to greenhouse gas emissions than the better-off in the global North and the growing middle class? Is there not a considerable irony in the fact that, if we do manage to improve the lives of the world’s poor, their consumption of fossil fuels is likely to increase and impose an even greater burden on the Earth’s climate (which is not an excuse not to improve their lives)? Insofar as we have ethical obligations to ameliorate world poverty now, which should include a wide-scale transition to renewable resources, tackling this problem might also provide the world with a path away from carbon burning. Even that will not be an easy path to follow, since it will involve more of the same social organization rather than something new or different. Most societal transformations come about as the result of a complex combination of social practices, political action, economic forces and technological change; dreaming is important, but it is only dreaming. We need to stop dreaming and get to work.

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