

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6843>



Book review

Global Fever

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Tuesday 13 October 2020

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century by Andreas Malm, Verso, 2020.

What can a virus tell us about climate breakdown, in its causation and in humanity's response? And what can both tell us about capitalism and communism? These are the questions that Andreas Malm addresses in his new book forthcoming next month. It is a remarkable work, a tour de force. It portrays capitalism not simply in metaphorical colors as a meta-virus run by parasites, but as the godfather of actual viruses, the patron of parasites. Written at whirlwind pace, one of its leitmotifs is tempo: the varying velocities of climate collapse, locust swarms, zoonotic pathogenic leaps, and the dynamics and gear changes of political response and strategy. While others were hesitantly piecing together analyses of COVID-19 and its links to climate change [and the capitalist system](#), as the familiar coordinates heaved all around in April 2020, Malm seems to have summoned the energies of the crisis and guided them onto the page. The prose crackles—this is an urgent book.

Malm aims to demonstrate that Covid-19 and climate breakdown are “interlaced aspects of what is now one chronic emergency,” where in tracing the interconnections we're not following random patterns (even cheese and chalk—CaCO₃—have calcium in common, but such associations are contingent) but tracing deeper connections and shared causes. This is the topic of the second chapter, on which more below. In the first, Malm compares states' responses to the twin threats. At first sight, they appear entirely different. In the case of COVID-19, governments came to recognize its seriousness. They forced businesses to close, distinguishing essential from nonessential occupations. Where they laid down rules, even draconian ones, citizens generally adhered. Much of the rhetoric figured it as an existential fight: “We are at war” (French president Emmanuel Macron); “we're at war and ventilators are our ammunition” (mayor of New York City Bill de Blasio). “Parallels with World War II imposed themselves,” notes Malm. He quotes the Los Angeles Times' “Call it war mobilization”—a reference to President Trump's instruction to auto firms to produce ventilators. In Europe meanwhile the Spanish state nationalized its private clinics, Italy took over Alitalia, and Britain “all but nationalized” its railway system, leading Malm to effuse that “the fences around private property blew away like a thatched hut in a hurricane,” and that the COVID crisis “suspended capitalist relations.” This is hyperbole. Capitalism is not “suspended” through nationalizations today any more than it was, say, during the war economies of the 1910s or 1940s, and indeed many of the titans of fossil capital are state-owned: Saudi Aramco, Gazprom, Sinopec Group, et cetera. The basic point, however, is incontrovertible. States, up against a virus, took measures of a force and on a scale and with an alacrity for which climate activists have been clamouring for decades—without success.

Why, then, have governments responded in antithetical ways to global heating and global pandemic? Malm deals briskly with some red herrings. It cannot be that COVID is a greater threat; it's obviously less. It cannot be that it benefits from greater scientific certainty; the science of climate breakdown is far more robust than the pathology and epidemiology of this still-mysterious virus. Nor is it that the pathogen's threat spells death today whereas that from heating imperils only a hazy future; the WHO has been counting “more than 150,000 annual deaths from climate change for four decades running,” and the trend is upward. Any superficial appeal that such explanations may have is rooted in ideology alone, and so too are the laments one sometimes hears, in response to the acknowledged inaction on climate change, that the future will be relentlessly bleak regardless of what steps we now take. Such doomist determinism, like any determinism, breeds passivity and helplessness, yet the despair on which it feeds is not inevitable but reflects political decisions. Consider the sentiment “With Covid, unlike climate breakdown, it feels as though today's preventive measures will have real consequences.” It appears to relate to unshakeable realities, but this is only because governments are taking action on Covid and not on climate. If they had acted decisively to cut carbon emissions, notes Malm, we would be facing the climate challenge with hope. Conversely, “if they had let the virus run amok, surely despair would have set in.”

On what basis, then, should the difference be understood? Part of it is that the war on Covid-19 “fits into the overarching paradigm that has taken hold of Northern politics in recent years: nationalism.” In border control, repression in the name of public health cuts with the well-worn grooves of xenophobic repression. Each nation for itself, with little prospect of, say, helping Uganda or Bangladesh bring their number of intensive care unit beds (0.1 and 0.7 per 100,000 residents, respectively) up to the Italian level (12.5). If, by contrast, you cut emissions, the benefits spread out on the wind, around the world. A war on global heating would benefit all, and above all the poor, without prioritizing the nation that invests the most. Another part is that, with the virus, well-heeled old white people were among the first into the ICUs. When Malm was writing, the ten countries in which COVID had brought the highest fatalities were the US, Italy, China, Spain, Germany, France, Iran, Britain, Switzerland and the Netherlands. As it happens, eight of these were also among the top ten territorial units responsible for the most cumulative CO2 emissions since the Industrial Revolution, even as the poor nations disproportionately suffer the consequences. “The timeline of victimhood” placed rich and poor at opposite ends for climate and COVID, at least in the early stages of the latter. Humankind, quips Malm, should perhaps “thank Covid-19 for taking the early route through Europe.”

Capitalism, in Dr. Malm’s compelling diagnosis, is the virus that is inducing the global fever. Yet in the absence of any obvious pill to quench it, what is the appropriate prescription?

Yet there must be more to it than that. After all, if rich white communities are relatively well girded against hurricanes and heatwaves, their defences are not indestructible and will increasingly fray. So, what other factors are in play? Some will point to the gradualism of climate change. That is doubtless important—but not in any immediate sense. Climate change is not ‘gradual’ per se; it runs the repertoire of tempi, from the glacial pace (literally) of rising seas all the way through to heat waves, hurricanes, floods and bushfire. Instead, Malm looks to sociopolitical factors. If states responded to COVID with alacrity this was not due to inherent properties of the virus; it was that, unlike climate change, it struck so suddenly “that no capitalist interests had the time to build up apparatuses for resisting the suspension of business-as-usual.” This takes us straight to the final difference. The virus is not an “effluent from profit.” It did not “emanate directly from the chimneys of accumulation.” Few fractions of capital, excepting perhaps the pharmaceutical, digital, and private jet industries, stand to gain much from viral outbreaks. CO₂, CH₄, and N₂O, on the other hand, are exhaust gases from surplus value production and its infrastructures; they are “a coefficient of power.” The interests with a stake in their continued release are mighty.

Global Sickening

In the first chapter the lens is trained on differences. Governments have acted to contain the virus while dragging their heels on carbon emissions. But now, in a neat about-turn, we look through the window from the other side. Most governments haven’t done nearly enough to counter the pandemic, even though they knew of and, at least formally, had planned for its inevitable arrival. Equally, they do of course respond to global heating—but mainly with half-measures and palliatives. Wildfires burn, a state of emergency is declared, firefighters move in. And indeed, the same goes for the virus. Neither with the virus nor with climate change are governments addressing the drivers. And by the virus, here, I mean not just COVID-19 but the multiplication of pathogens over the last few decades that reflects increasing rates of zoonotic spillover. Malm calls this “global sickening.” His titular “chronic emergency” is of global heating and sickening—a global fever, you might say.

In this, perhaps the most brilliant chapter, Malm, drawing on Mike Davis and Rob Wallace, discusses the increase and epidemic reach of viruses as the product of capitalist forces. These include industrial agriculture, deforestation, the luxury trade in wild animals, and aviation. Most of these are also drivers of climate breakdown.

To virus creation, the razing of forests is especially germinal. As the bulldozers and paid arsonists encroach, fauna are squeezed into ever smaller islands of habitation. As contact zones multiply, normally secluded creatures are

hurled into close contact with farm animals and humans, proliferating the pathways along which pathogens recombine and spread. The capitalist drivers that Malm is describing refer not simply to demand for delicacies such as pangolin flesh (“the extinction market is part of how the one per cent lives”) but to the organization of global demand as a whole, organized through “ecologically unequal exchange.” Demand from the North, he writes, and increasingly, I would add, from East Asia, “is a deep driver of deforestation, hence of biodiversity loss, hence of zoonotic spillover.” Fully one third of all the existential threats to animal species are directly attributable to rich-country demand for such goods as coffee, beef, tea, sugar and palm oil. It’s as if capitalist society had decided to “lift up the container of coronaviruses and other pathogens and pour the load over itself.” Or, to switch metaphor (and I can’t emphasize enough, Malm is a pleasure to read), we can see Covid-19 as “the first boomerang from the sixth mass extinction to hit humanity in the forehead.”

To illustrate the process of unequal ecological exchange, Malm gives an example from the Amazon: a drilling location where “the Brazilian oil company Petrobras pumps up oil and gas and feeds them into pipelines built by the Swedish company Skanska, now operated by the French multinational Engie.” This and many similar fossil fuel extraction operations combine “the drivers of climate change and zoonotic spillover in one bulldozer.” We should also ask, who owns the bulldozer? Up to the 1990s, Malm suggests, most were owned by states. The Brazilian military regime, for example, “bisected the Amazon with a mega-highway and dispatched pioneers to stake out their own land claims along feeder roads.” From the 1990s, in contrast, deforestation has become “enterprise-driven.” It has since then been “the production of commodities” that has chewed up the forests: commodities such as beef, cocoa and coffee now come “gushing” from tracts of Ghana, Indonesia and the Amazon that had once been forest. On this point I would suggest that, although convincing in its broad contours, Malm is overplaying the 1990s transition and understating the role of private enterprise and commodity production in previous decades and centuries. More accurate would be to see tropical deforestation as driven by alliances of states and capitals throughout the modern era. In some phases private capital has been more prominent; in others, state capital. In the latter we would include Brazil from the 1940s to the 1970s, a period of breakneck Amazon deforestation, pushed not only through highways and colonists but by state-owned commodity-producing corporations such as Vale—and Petrobras itself. Even in those étatiste times, capital accumulation and commodity production were fundamental determinants of deforestation, and state enterprises comprised a leading fraction of ‘fossil capital’—as they still do today.

Not only are some of the major drivers of pathogen proliferation and climate change shared, as Malm shows, but global heating is exacerbating global sickening. Rising temperatures impose stresses on animals, forcing them into uncomfortable behavioural patterns and migrations—much to the delight of the viruses. “For pathogens long inured to a relatively monogamous lifestyle, these will be moments of promiscuous licence: flocks of new animals filing past, like a meat market restocked every morning—so many opportunities to jump.” Bats in particular are being forced to flee, generating a peculiarly high potential for zoonotic spillover. The Nipah virus is a case in point. When it broke out among Malaysian pig farmers in 1999 some bats that drifted to the pig farms and dumped their Nipah load were escaping the wildfires of 1997–98; these, in turn, had been kindled by drought from the chronic El Niño Southern Oscillation of 1990-95—the longest on record. Could some of the bats that carried COVID to Wuhan, Malm asks, have likewise been “runaways from the heat?” We don’t know for sure. But all three coronavirus epidemics so far this millennium have been linked to aridity: SARS to an epic drought in Guangdong, MERS in rain-free Jeddah, while SARS-CoV-2 “erupted amid the worst drought in the Wuhan area in forty years.”

War Capitalism, War Communism

Capitalism, in Dr. Malm’s compelling diagnosis, is the virus that is inducing the global fever. Yet in the absence of any obvious pill to quench it, what is the appropriate prescription? Malm takes cautious heart from the response to Covid by the more far-sighted governments. In face of catastrophic climate change and global sickening, a phalanx of draconian control measures is needed: “rationing, reallocating, requisitioning, sanctioning” on a vast scale. To take one example: if states wish to wind down humanity’s war against wild nature while keeping a growing population well

nourished, they could begin by banning the import of meat and soy from countries in the tropics. Such control measures would have to be state-led, for “no mutual aid group in Bristol could even hypothetically initiate a programme of this kind.” In Marx’s communist society people would be free to hunt, fish and rear cattle all day long; not so in Malm’s. “The endpoint most salutary for all” would be mandatory global veganism. This is not on ethical or aesthetic grounds, but for food efficiency and forest conservation—thus, vegetable products such as palm oil stand similarly condemned.

How might we imagine states enacting meaningful control measures, something to which they’ve long been adamantly opposed? “No capitalist state,” Malm admits, “is likely ever to do anything like this of its own accord. It would have to be forced into doing it, through application of the whole spectrum of popular leverage, from electoral campaigns to mass sabotage.” This is a common motif on the socialist left, and the go-to historical analogy—referring to a transitional period in which business and governments, pushed from below and steered by its more enlightened spirits, act forcefully on climate mitigation—is war-economic mobilization in the early 1940s. The US war economy was not entrusted to market forces. Planning played a central part, enabling a rapid response. In a popular move, government ordered big business to produce equipment for the war front, just as it could today on the ‘climate front’: refit the car plants to make wind turbines and solar panels, just as they had been retooled, eighty years ago, for B-24 bombers. The US government also suppressed entire industries, such as house construction, much as governments could today with fossil fuels, aviation and automobiles.

Although not mentioned by Malm, an inspirational transformation also occurred on the home front (or ‘social-reproduction front’). There, as Mike Davis describes, we saw “the most important and broadly participatory green experiment in U.S. history.” In the 1940s, “my parents, their neighbors, and millions of others left cars at home to ride bikes to work, tore up their front yards to plant cabbage, recycled toothpaste tubes and cooking grease, volunteered at daycare centers, shared their houses and dinners with strangers, and conscientiously attempted to reduce unnecessary consumption and waste[...] Victory gardening transcended the need to supplement the wartime food supply and grew into a spontaneous vision of urban greenness and self-reliance[...] The war also temporarily dethroned the automobile as the icon of the American standard of living [and] the bicycle made a huge comeback.” One could imagine just such a ‘People’s War’ reprised in a climate-concerned future—the conversion of suburbia’s lawns and golf courses to agro-ecological cultivation, for example.

Malm is broadly supportive of the WWII analogy and the programs to which it provides inspiration today, but he notes its shortcomings. In the war, capital readily mobilized behind Roosevelt’s program. Big corporations were keen to participate in the war-economic transition. They stood to gain from the gargantuan boost in domestic demand and from the devaluation and takeover of foreign rivals. The latter was a gamble predicated on martial success, but with the US entering only in 1943 it was a sound bet. Victory promised further enrichment to US capital through Washington’s domination of much of the world, as previously protected markets were cracked open and control gained over global hydrocarbon supplies. Indeed, America’s oil grab in the Middle East, which entrenched US and world capitalism’s reliance on fossil fuels, began during the war, under Roosevelt, while his VP, Henry Wallace, oversaw the opening of the Amazon as a resource pipeline to the US war machine. A state mobilizing against climate breakdown, by contrast, would have to enforce demand reductions in many more sectors (at least in the North), and global domination could not be the goal. On the contrary, success would require unequivocal internationalism and an end to imperial extractivism. When compared with war mobilization, therefore, incomparably greater resistance from capital is a certainty.

With this in mind, Malm invites us to complement the US-WWII analogy with another: Russia’s War Communism of 1918-21. The analogy’s appeal is not simply the obvious—the Bolsheviks were committed socialists, in contrast to the corporate capitalism, the elitism and racism, of Roosevelt and the Democrats—but, more germane to Malm’s case, here was a government forced to confront catastrophe. Russia had been battered in WWI, and was almost immediately plunged into civil war, resulting in famine, industrial collapse, territorial loss and the incineration of the social fabric. The catastrophic analogy helps orient us to the world we’re increasingly coming to face and, Malm

adds, we should recall “just how central the category of catastrophe was to the evolution of revolutionary Marxism.” While the social democrats, reflecting their self-perception as prospective state managers and their view of states as instruments of community organization not organs of class oppression, cast their votes in favor of the cataclysm, the 1914-18 war, the Bolsheviks sought to turn opposition to war into opposition to its drivers. That can be an inspiration for activists today.

The War Communism analogy offers the perfect canvas for Malm to paint his argument. It evokes a time when a radical government converted the economy by necessity and post haste away from fossil fuels, broke the resistance of the ruling classes, refused to give up even when “all the worst-case scenarios” came true, and rose “out of the ruins with the force and the compromises required.” Inevitably in such a vast and complex canvas there’ll be wrinkles, of which I noticed three. First, although Malm makes clear the analogy is not designed to suggest “that we should have summary executions, send food detachments into the countryside or militarize labor, just as no one who looks at World War II as a model for climate mobilization wants to drop another atomic bomb on Hiroshima,” he does overstate the degree to which the revolution was radicalized not by class struggle but by the exigencies of war. (I discuss this problem in more detail here.) Secondly and relatedly, War Communism is introduced with nary a mention of the revolution from which it issued, let alone those who made it (Lenin and Trotsky apart). This omission of ‘October’ is carefully weighed. Malm is imploring that radical action is needed right now, an imperative that is dictated by the escalating catastrophes we’re undoubtedly heading towards and which cannot wait patiently for stirred workers to recognize the emergency and repeat the tasks of 1917, on a global scale. In war communism he identifies a radicalizing dynamic in the conditions of catastrophe which Russia faced before and after October.

This is why his narrative arc begins prior to revolution, with war capitalism: the warring states were in a sense providing an answer to the catastrophe that they had occasioned, namely, to forestall a collapse in food provisioning they intervened energetically in the market sphere. Lenin’s wager, outlined in ‘The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It’ (September 1917), was to take measures of the same sort, “step them up a notch and deploy them against the drivers of catastrophe.” Those measures were to pull out of the war, seize control of grain supplies, and nationalize banks and other major industries: “a revolution, as Lenin constantly agitated in these months, to stave off the worst catastrophe.” From September we then hop to the next emergency, in mid-1918, when “a new war was thrown at them.” This war, significantly for Malm’s story, deprived Bolshevik Russia of all fossil fuels and forced its energy systems to rapidly convert to biomass—and yet the Red Army, with no fossil fuels, beat the Whites and all the other armies, despite their access to “all the reserves in the world.” It’s neatly done, but the hop leaves in darkness both the mass collective action that was decisive to the actual transfusion of anti-war resistance into anti-capitalist revolution and indeed the years of organizing and agitating that preceded and enabled it.

The irony of taking inspiration from Lenin’s Russia in our non-revolutionary times is wearily familiar to Leninists of all stripes but in this book it takes a fresh form. Malm hints at the enigma in his commentary on a passage from Adorno. The threat of “the most extreme, total disaster” can only be averted “if a self-conscious global subject” arises and intervenes. Who and where is that global subject? “Merely asking such questions is to weigh up the void in which we fumble. So is bringing in Lenin or speaking of war communism: they would never be needed if it weren’t for them serving as indexes of the gravity of our ordeal.” The crux of the issue for Malm is that the Bolsheviks, having “stumbled from one emergency into another,” were spurred “to radicalise” their approach, at least in respect of the nationalization of private property, and following this and a raft of other control measures, the capitalist and landlord classes “evaporated.”

Here we have the tragic paradox at the heart of revolutionary climate politics. As Malm puts it, the capitalist state “is constitutionally incapable” of taking the necessary steps, and yet “there is no other form of state on offer. No workers’ state based on soviets will be miraculously born in the night. No dual power of the democratic organs of the proletariat seems likely to materialise anytime soon, if ever. Waiting for it would be delusional and criminal, and so all we have to work with is the dreary bourgeois state, tethered to the circuits of capital as always.” All that can be done is put pressure on the state, shift “the balance of forces condensed in it, forcing apparatuses to cut the tethers and

begin to move.” This would of course be a striking departure from the historical Leninist programme of resisting the capitalist state in order to build forces that could ultimately dismantle it—a prospectus that is, for Malm, “one of several elements of Leninism that seem ripe (or overripe) for their own obituaries.”

The final wrinkle in the War Communist canvas is the suggestion that there exists a counterposition: to either wait passively and pointlessly for the formation of soviets or to work with the existing capitalist state. Lenin’s own approach suggests this dichotomy is empty. “Wait for October” was never his slogan; and this despite the fact that for most of his life he held that no socialist revolution in Russia would be feasible in his lifetime. Likewise, Russia’s revolutionaries did not orient to the state but organized to wrest reforms from it, as a means to win meaningful changes while building movements and consciousness for the longer haul. These movements were of multifarious types: socialist organizations, campaigns, and broader movement structures, most famously the soviets. These latter evolved in conditions of catastrophe, from organizations “working with the dreary bourgeois state” into radical structures that overthrew that same institution. They didn’t begin as powerful organs but as coordinating organs of resistance, which then, in a period of catastrophic crisis, WWI, were reworked as organs of democratic insurgency. Malm is of course right that we cannot bank on soviet-like bodies ever being founded again, and he may be right that they never will be, but it seems hasty to dismiss the prospect out of hand. Indeed, is its likelihood any less than Malm’s own best-case scenarios? These would require capitalist states to take drastic and far-reaching climate mitigation measures, which, to be meaningful in ‘Mauna Loa’ terms, would require a radical volte face in, I’d imagine, several of the big CO2 emitters (USA, China, India, Russia, Japan, Germany) and/or the big CO2 ‘importers’ (Britain, Italy) and/or the big deforesters (Brazil, Indonesia). If such scenarios came to pass, world politics would be roiling, and it would be hasty to rule out the formation of councils of popular power—which is to say, the institutional basis of the dual power which Malm has pronounced dead and buried. Historically, such bodies spring from a variety of sources, for example from interfactory strike committees. But one source I believe speaks to Malm’s own position. That is, when they arise as organizations of popular self-defense and collective self-provisioning at moments of radical social dislocation or ‘catastrophe.’ To take an (at best) embryonic example, think of the Antifa committees and works councils in Germany and elsewhere in Central Europe as WWII was coming to an end. The former took over tasks normally overseen by state and capital (food distribution, rebuilding infrastructure); they sacked former leading Nazis and redistributed their property. The latter restarted production and organized systems of inter-factory and industry-agriculture exchange. This is a minor case, yet serves nonetheless as a reminder of the potential for the coordinates of society to rapidly change when ‘ordinary folk’ press their claims and organize. (It’s a point that, several decades earlier, Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin made much of in their arguments against their contemporaries who were penning obituaries for revolutionary change.)

Eco-Lenin

In this book and in other publications, Malm describes his project as Leninist—but which of the umpteen Lenins is his? I’ll briefly sketch a few variants, before returning to the book at hand. We can call the first ‘Lord Lenin.’ It’s the object of the hagiographers, widespread in the last century, who sing of the great leader’s personal attributes. Albeit less common nowadays, it retains a presence. A memorable recent instance came from the pen of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle, whose terms of approbation echo those one might otherwise find in, say, furniture showroom catalogues or amateur erotica. “The time has come to celebrate Lenin’s virtues. The first is the virtue of hardness[...] The second is his firmness[...] The qualities of hardness and firmness account for Lenin’s solidity.” A second is ‘Jacobin Lenin.’ [\[1\]](#) He appears in the costume of Robespierre or Napoleon. This reading singles out Lenin’s realism, tactical flexibility, decisiveness and “ability to grasp the key contradiction,” as well as his willingness to “reinvent emancipatory terror.” The Jacobin Lenin is he who injects partisanship into politics, he who takes sides, “the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old reference points proved useless.” Both these readings tend to obscure the radically democratic elements of Lenin’s political and theoretical activity: the centrality of class struggle and the wager on initiative ‘from below’; the obsession with learning from workers and coordinating local struggles; the commitment to the role of activist

organizations; the belief that effective socialist practice requires uniting the struggles of workers and other oppressed groups; and the insistence that Marxism is a theory of proletarian revolution rather than a handbook for would-be managers of capitalist states. A third is 'Lenin of the Party.' This was the Lenin who theorized the centrality of the communist party to fomenting and shaping collective action and revolution. It, Lenin's party, is an organ of activists; it gathers the comrades into a disciplined, courageous and enthusiastic force. It acts as the conduit for the masses' struggles, channelling their demands for justice onto the terrain of politics. Its ultimate goal is to seize "political control of the state." [2]

Malm's 'Ecological Lenin' is distinct from these, even if with Jacobin Lenin he shares a concern for strategic speed and flexibility, and with Lenin of the Party he shares a language of seizing (rather than smashing) the capitalist state. The actual Lenin, Malm reminds us, was environmentally connected: he was deeply acquainted with natural lore, felt comfortable in the wilderness, delighted in long country walks, established nature conservation areas, and promoted the study of conservation and the environment in Russia's schools. As to his strategic thought, Malm highlights three commitments. One is to "speed as paramount virtue." Be ready for sharp, even improbable, turns! The second, discussed above, is to turning "the crises of symptoms into crises of the causes." The third is to leap "at any opportunity to wrest the state" in a social-ecological direction, by breaking "with business-as usual" and bringing fossil capital and other planet-cooking industries into public ownership.

This book is, then, a Leninist call to arms, a rallying of activists. But around what should they organize? The "central transitional demand for the coming years," our author advises, should be "the demand for nationalizing fossil fuel companies and turning them into direct air capture utilities." This is a reference to the technique pioneered by the Swiss firm Climeworks in Iceland: to scrub CO₂ from the air, mineralize it in calcium-rich waters, and bury it underground as CaCO₃. Clearly there's a critical need for some sort of CO₂ capture and I wish this project luck, yet doubts hover. The Iceland plant captures one tonne of CO₂ per week (that's 360 US gallons of gasoline) and we don't yet know whether the technology is scalable to climate-meaningful levels. If it were, it would require colossal energy inputs. (To scrub and bury a ton of CO₂ takes at least 0.5 gigajoules of energy and perhaps as much as 12.) I wonder, too, whether raising one central transitional demand across the world makes sound strategic sense, and if it did, it should surely relate to actual movements and proven, rapidly scalable technologies. In the dawning age of mass unemployment, climate jobs campaigns appear a plausible candidate: they link the labour and environmental movements, they unite activists in communities and workplaces as well those in state-supporting political parties, and they are 'transitional,' in that existing states could conceivably begin these tasks—boosting renewable energy supply and taking measures to slash demand (by expanding public transport, buildings insulation, and the like)—even if it is hard to envisage the requisite radicalism in capitalist conditions.

At time of writing, such talk seems fanciful—and particularly post-COVID, the response to which has pulled the rug from under the most inspiring climate movements of 2019, notably the youth strikes, in which a generation of children taught themselves the basic repertoire of industrial action. Yet the same period has seen a reminder of the force with which the political landscape can shake when popular rebellion wells up. The BLM protests burst onto the streets and squares, engaging "the state" in multiple ways, not least "from without." Politicians scrambled to keep up, lest heads other than the statues' begin to roll. The upshot: race politics in the USA could make greater gains under President Trump than at any time since the 1960s, a possibility that would have been laughed out of court even a few months ago when politics appeared to be a space reserved for the state-supporting parties. What the uprising has perhaps lacked is the intervention of revolutionaries on a scale sufficient to drive it beyond the already impressive victories attained. For the upcoming movements around COVID and climate, such 'Leninist' interventions will be indispensable, and those involved will learn much, and gain great inspiration, from this electrifying book.

Source [Spectre journal](#).

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of *International Viewpoint*. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] This is a different Jacobinism to that which Neil Harding identified in an earlier and anti-Leninist scholarship. Its distinguishing feature was the presentation of Lenin as a practitioner and not a theorist.

[2] The quotation is from Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2018). After completing this review, I came across her essay co-authored with Kai Heron, which introduces a "[Climate Lenin](#)". It contains the remarkable claim that, for Lenin, the capitalist state apparatus "must not, and should not, be smashed." As warrant, they cite his essay '[Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?](#)'. Puzzled readers who actually consult the text discover that it makes precisely the opposite case: the state machine must indeed be "smashed" and a new one constructed. Dean and Heron pull off this stunt by pretending that Lenin, when speaking of a small state bureaucracy (involved with "accounting and registration work") was in fact speaking of the state itself.