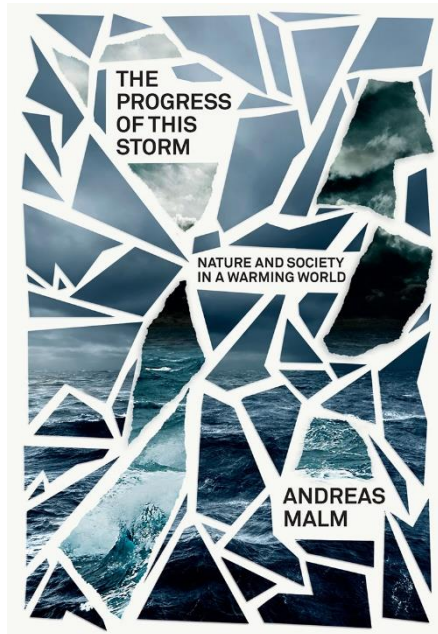


Review of *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*

by Andreas Malm (London: Verso, 2018)



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published in *Monthly Review* (March 2018)

In his prize-winning book *Fossil Capital*¹, Andreas Malm traces the history of climate change from 19th century Britain to 21st century China, emphasizing the connection between carbon-driven development and capitalist accumulation and demonstrating how it has led to the catastrophic implications of climate change. In his latest book, *The Progress of This Storm*, he turns his attention to an array of theories undermining our capacity to understand and act on climate change.

Malm opens by characterizing the postmodern condition with its obliteration of history and nature. Referencing Jameson on postmodernity², he observes that “we are stranded in the mega-city where glass surfaces mirror each other, where images and simulacra rule over night and day, where the free play of masks and roles goes on and on without any real, material substance. But towards this city a storm is on the move.” (2)

Malm speaks of the age of the omnipresent screen as an ever-expanding house of mirrors, free of any outside, shadow, memory or long-term expectation. The experience on the streets of summer 2016 as the Pokemon Go fad invaded our public space was the epitome

¹ Andreas Malm *The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* London: Verso, 2016

² Fredric Jameson *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* London: Verso, 1991

of digital life as a sphere without history or nature. Quoting Kate Tempest “Staring at our screen so / we don’t have to watch the planet die”³ While I am on side with the thrust of this, I want to remind him that much of the research and communication about climate change also goes on in this digital world. Indeed, it is within this world of screens that I am receiving, reading and reviewing his book. This more grounded participation in cyber life needs to be integrated into our conception of the digital world, however tempting it is to go the way of hyperbole, especially when we behold the madness of such phenomena as Pokemon Go. I agree with him about that. It might be called “augmented reality”, but it is the opposite. Even adults without children to justify their juvenile behaviour got carried away in the self-infantilizing unreality of it.

Such nonsense, and the market generates it in mega-quantities, is not innocent, as some might argue. Malm is right in arguing that climate change supercharges our moment of time. Postmodernity, penetrating our psychic condition, is being confronted by its antithesis. Yet denial is still the hallmark of the present.

He cites the Ben Lerner novel *10:04*⁴, which I read in parallel with this book, as depicting life in New York City, during this time in which climate change is making super-storms the new normal. The novel is as much meta-fiction as fiction, as it details much of the author’s actual life as he is living it. There is a memorable sequence where the author is traversing the city from the Upper East Side to Brooklyn passing through an eerily darkened downtown and experiencing the radical divide between those with power and those without it and seeing it as the shape of things to come.

Malm asserts that these storms bring back time. The fires lit in the past generate questions of what can be done in the present to prevent catastrophe in the future. Every sentence of this book is suffused with urgency about understanding and acting in relation to climate change.

To this end, he explores the terrain of contemporary theory, zeroing in on conceptualizations of nature and society. He scrutinizes various theories and asks if any of them provide a map of the path of the storm and our options in the face of it. It is those cluttering the space where that map should be that draw his attention and ire.

Subsequent chapters focus on various currents: constructionism, hybridism, post-humanism, actor network theory, new materialism. He confronts a host of theorists: Castree, Haraway, Wapner, Trexler and many more with a useful survey of this literature. Chief among his opponents is Bruno Latour, a personification of the postmodernization of science studies, but also of the celebrification of intellectuals who embody the seductions and deceptions of our time. When Latour came to Ireland, I beheld the deference and bluff surrounding this star appearance and its attendant obfuscation.

³ Kate Tempest *Let Them Eat Chaos* London: Picador, 2016

⁴ Ben Lerner *10:04* New York: Faber and Faber, 2014

These chapters are closely argued polemics with blistering conclusions. As the biosphere began to catch fire, social theory retreated further from sooty matter into airy text. He takes issue with theories that dissolve all distinctions between the natural and the human in assemblages of actants, none of which are more central or determinant than any other. After all, Latour observes, hammers hit nails and kettles boil water. Beasts, clouds, acids, rivers, trees then are the co-creators of history.

Contra Latour et al, Malm insists that intentionality is essential to agency. If all has agency, the concept is not enhanced but eviscerated. It allows no contrastive effect and shuts down responsibility for human activity. An analytic distinction between nature and society is necessary to deal with ecological crisis – indeed, to make any sense of many things. Yes, there is one substance – matter – but it gives rise to emergent properties, which are connected and interactive, while not reducible to each other.

There is something qualitatively different between rotation of the planet and gentrification of a neighborhood, between photosynthesis and UN climate negotiations. Latour, master of the genre of dissolution of distinctions, ends up with a prose evacuated of meaning and producing “an orgy in the mud”. (187) This phrase brought a knowing smile to my face, because it well captures the discourse of that Latour seminar in Dublin.

Malm shows how theories, such as idealist constructionism and new materialism, which might seem opposite, actually converge. Both collapse nature and society. If idealism posits that we can do anything, new materialism means we can do nothing. Both are dissimulating and disempowering.

The epistemological nihilism of constructionism has undermined scientific knowledge and provided the justification for climate denialism. After all, if we slide “down the slope where everything and nothing is true and false at the same time” (173), where is the grounding for seeing things one way rather than another? If there is no climate change, only stories about climate change, where is the imperative to do something rather than nothing?

Global warming urgently presents us with the necessity to break with both epistemological anti-realism and political neo-liberalism. Turning from his list of theoretical dead-ends, he makes the case for Marxism, which, he claims, outshines all contenders in the realm of both theory and practice, demonstrating its superiority in conceptualizing our environment in epistemological, historical, sociological, political and economic terms and providing the justification for urgent action. He cites the work of John Bellamy Foster, Ian Angus, Kate Soper and others for making the most persuasive case about both the nature of the problem and the path to a solution. Any analysis of climate not connected to an analysis of capitalism is uncomprehending and ineffectual.

Malm believes that countering the threat of climate change demands the total de-carbonization of the global economy and the expropriation of the top 1 to 10%. Instead of

progressing in this direction, the present era seems to be a time of regression, both ecologically and politically. The warming condition will not only intensify extreme weather events but deepen and multiply social fractures. Those most at risk in climate change are the world's poorest people, those most marginal to circuits of capital. The wealthiest in their fortified towers and gated communities with their reserve generators (the cover of Lerner's novel shows the lights of the Goldman Sachs building blazing from the darkened skyline) may be able to shield themselves to a point, but ultimately not even they can escape it.

Malm concedes that theories can only play a limited part in tackling the vast injustices of our times, but at least they should not be obstacles to seeing and doing what is required. This book maps the obstacles and proposes a trail through them. I hope it will be read by readers in need of such clarity and direction, particularly those who have come under the unfortunate influence of anti-science science studies and anti-systemic social theory.

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