

## Against Parasitic Capital: Ending the Coronavirus Pandemic and Climate Wartime Mobilization

Fabrício Belsoff

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Fabricio.Belsoff@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

### Abstract:

In *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in The Twenty-First Century*, Andreas Malm carries the thesis that climate change interlaces with zoonotic spillovers in a self-perpetuating system that is likely to deliver new pandemics, constituting our current situation as a 'chronic emergency.' In this sense, the author defends the idea that state-led emergency measures must be taken against the mechanism of 'parasitic capital' on a global scale and in a synchronic manner, drawing from the ecological lessons of 'war communism.'

### Gegen das parasitäre Kapital: Vom Ende der Corona-Pandemie und der Mobilisierung des Klimakrieges

#### German Abstract:

In *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in The Twenty-First Century* vertritt Andreas Malm die These, dass der Klimawandel mit zoonotischen Ausbrüchen in einem sich selbst aufrechterhaltenden System verflochten ist, das wahrscheinlich neue Pandemien auslösen wird und bezeichnet unsere gegenwärtige Situation als ‚chronischen Notfall‘. In diesem Sinne verteidigt der Autor, dass staatlich geführte Sofortmaßnahmen gegen den Mechanismus des ‚parasitären Kapitals‘ auf globaler Ebene und synchron ergriffen werden müssen, wobei auf die ökologischen Lehren des ‚Kriegskommunismus‘ zurückgegriffen wird.

### How to cite:

Belsoff, Fabrício: "Against Parasitic Capital: Ending the Coronavirus Pandemic and Climate Wartime Mobilization [Review of: Malm, Andreas: *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in The Twenty-First Century*. London/New York: Verso, 2020.]." In: KULT\_online 63 (2021).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2021.1092>



## Against Parasitic Capital: Ending the Coronavirus Pandemic and Climate Wartime Mobilization

Fabrício Belsoff

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Malm, Andreas. *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency. War Communism in The Twenty-First Century*. London/New York: Verso, 2020. 224 pages, 7,69 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-83976-215-4.

How does the corona pandemic differ from anthropogenic climate change? What explains the discrepancy in action to control the spread of the virus and the reluctance to combat the increase of global temperatures? Are these emergencies at all that different? And what can be done to prevent their mutual development towards global catastrophe? These questions are the entry point of Swedish political ecologist Andreas Malm's recent book *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (2020), published by Verso Books. With the support of the Humanities and Social Change Center at Humboldt University, Malm presents extensive secondary research, involving the analysis of peer-reviewed literature on COVID-19 available at the time of his writing, in close connection with research reports on anthropogenic climate change from a variety of expert journals. Interdisciplinary by default, its framework encompasses critical voices in the disciplinary fields of epidemiology, virology, ecology, and meteorology while persevering the tradition of Marxist critical theory. The goals of such a tour-de-force of academic writing are threefold: first, it compares the corona pandemic and climate change, highlighting their differences and commonalities. Second, it defines how both problems are interlaced aspects of a single phenomenon: a 'chronic emergency.' Finally, it outlines a political intervention analog to war communism to combat 'parasitic capital.' Divided into three chapters, each focuses on one of the previous goals while building on the other.

The first chapter analyzes how control measures adopted by rich countries during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic were accompanied by a rhetoric of war. From the Defense Production Act invoked by the Trump Administration to Emmanuel Macron and Boris Johnson, urgency in action was coupled with war mobilization, drawing parallels with World War II. However, Malm inquires why the same Western governments have been reluctant to act on

climate change as "[...] an emergency on a par with war" (p. 10). In this regard, Malm considers their distinct 'timelines of victimhood' as the key divergence between climate change and the corona pandemic. Drawing on Bill McKibben, Malm characterizes climate change as a war that "reaps its first victims among 'those who have done the least to cause the crisis' – poor people in the global South, that is" (p. 20). By contrast, the corona pandemic represents a threat to rich countries in the Global North that is inversely proportional to how they experience the effects of global heating: the rich are the first to pass away. For this reason, Malm concludes that the kind of war that is waged on coronavirus is a classical one, invoking the rhetoric of patriotism and national protection, while the war against climate would have to be "a war for the benefit of one's own aid and foreign others. First of all, it would be a war for the poor" (p. 26).

In the second chapter, instead of contrasting the corona pandemic and climate change, Malm aims at their common root: parasitic capital. A large section of the chapter is dedicated to explaining scientific research on 'zoonotic spillover': a term "[...] referring to an infection that first sits in an animal and then jumps into a human" (p. 31). Then, following the flow of 'ecologically unequal exchange,' Malm tracks foreign capital as a primary cause of global sickening. Just as deforestation, and hence biodiversity loss, is a deep-driver of zoonotic spillover, deforestation itself is driven by the production of commodities in tropical forests: beef, soybeans, palm oil, etc. (p. 50-55). Against what looks like revamped colonialism, Malm draws a theory of parasitic capital from the work of Alf Hornborg and David Harvey, as follow: 'time-space appropriation (the exploitation of biophysical resources along with local labour) plus 'time-space-compression' (the overcoming of spatial barriers by ever-faster technologies) equals high chances of zoonotic spillover (p.78-80). Furthermore, rather than forming parallel trends, Malm claims that the corona pandemic and climate change are interlaced aspects of a single 'chronic emergency,' borrowing the term from virologist Brian Bird (p. 82). Not only would they share drivers, but also climate breakdown would tend to intensify zoonotic spillovers. In other words, parasitic capital pushes infectious disease events and climate breakdown to a self-perpetuating system with a domino effect, with each one delineating "its own arc of misery" (p. 84).

In the third and last chapter, Malm seeks to outline a politics of conscious intervention against the chronic emergency caused by parasitic capital. Drawing an analogy between the current situation and the October Russian Revolution, Malm defends "ecological Leninism" as a set of

radical control measures that turns "the crises of symptoms into crises of the causes" (p. 148). Hence, instead of World War II metaphors, the early years of War Communism between 1918 and 1920 serve as inspiration for waging war against fossil capital via a radicalization of politics towards renewable energies. Nevertheless, Malm recognizes that 'ecological War Communism' should not be mistaken for a glorification of militarized labor and imposition of duties. Instead, it would have to be counter-balanced with the negative lesson of war communism: "[...] state-led emergency action is always bound to derail into totalitarianism and should therefore be *a priori* excluded" (p.165). Finally, Malm regards 'ecological War Communism' as "[...] 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 [...]" (p. 167).

Written only two months after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, much of Malm's work's relevance comes from his academic rigor in providing critical analysis of the pandemic in line with the tradition of historical materialism. His general thesis is thought-provoking regarding the interconnectedness of the corona pandemic and climate change, especially the notions of chronic emergency and parasitic capital. Readers familiar with the author's work might benefit from previous knowledge on his thesis on 'fossil capital' and the notion of 'Capitalocene,' as they form a genealogy of the current work. Less clear, however, is his conclusion, especially the argument in favor of radicalized forms of political intervention based on the Russian revolution, drawing parallels between the current situation and war communism. Though Malm is careful enough to stress that his proposal should not necessarily entail a sacrifice of democracy during climate wartime mobilization, it remains unclear how 'ecological War Communism' means "to stay with the dilemma of [executing] control measures in an emergency without trampling on democratic rights, but rather by securing, building on and drawing force from them" (p. 165). If, in practice, ecological Leninism might ever look like social mobilization in the rich countries to bring down the EU-Mercosur agreement or support and finance vaccines' distribution to developing countries while obliging the Bolsonaros of the world to abide by strict control measures, then war decolonialism could be a better term. Nevertheless, Malm's book should be regarded as crucial literature for anyone interested in political ecology, critical biology, and social science. Furthermore, it provides scholars with remarkable insights on global concerns and provokes citizens of rich countries in the Global

North to perceive the present crisis's primary cause and reroute their energy towards mobilization against parasitic capital.