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Book Review: Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018), 248 pp.



After the linguistic turn lost its glamour two decades ago, when the cheering fans of the anti-theory camp eagerly expected conventional realism to return to academia, the material turn came instead. The new materialism sought to bridge the gap between ontology and epistemology so as to overthrow dualisms of all kinds that have informed Western thought for centuries. Integrating the material and the discursive, the material turn radically reconfigured the conceptualizations of materiality, claiming that matter in every form is agentic and capable of producing meanings. Andreas Malm's *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* is a full-frontal attack not only on this school of thought, but on the entire spectrum of theoretical approaches that have emerged in recent decades to tackle the complexities of the current ecological condition. Taking their basic premises to the extreme, Malm polemically challenges postmodernism, new materialism, posthumanism, actor-network theory, and hybridism, arguing that they lack intellectual rigor and coherence, and ultimately fail to provide practical guidance in our current ecological predicament.

Malm subverts the conceptual labyrinths of contemporary thought through a series of intellectual maneuvers. In a compelling argument about super storms and typhoons (such as Sandy, which hit New York city in October 2012, and Haiyan, which struck the Philippines in November 2013) becoming the new normal, Malm claims that "the planet is already doomed" (9). A close look at the current CO₂ levels is sufficient to forecast this impending fate. "Now more than ever," he reminds us in his introduction, "we inhabit the diachronic, the discordant, the inchoate" (11). If our "daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural responses, even our politics show signs of being sucked back by planetary forces into the hole of time" (11), he continues, how then are we going to respond and find sustainable solutions? How are we going to come to grips with the alarming scientific data presented on climate change? Although Malm dismisses them, the new materialists do have a convincing answer: if the social interpenetrates the natural so profoundly, our environmental problems cannot be disentangled from cultural, social, economic, and political practices, and if we understand how discursive practices and material phenomena are mutually constitutive in the entwined zones of natural processes and social systems, it is possible to free knowledge structures from anthropocentric moorings, to rethink our being-in-the-world and our relations to other species in more

ecologically responsible ways. But Malm is not convinced, asking instead if any of these theories have been able to generate effective resistance against the “fossil fuel economy” which continues to exacerbate cataclysmic climate change. Did they provoke any practical change, demolish human hubris, or offer any point of reference for action? No, argues Malm; they remained locked within complex conceptualizations. He presents a different perspective, not a new “cultural logic” in Jameson’s sense, but a thoroughly activist agenda that would build collective resistance and contribute palpable solutions to the new normal, which is quite disheartening: the rise in the Earth’s average temperature since pre-industrial times reached the landmark of 1.5°C in 2016; the increasing possibility of the West Antarctic ice sheet sliding into the oceans during our lifetime, raising sea levels by several meters; and, more generally, the possibility of our daily lives being upended by planetary forces. “Postmodernity,” he says, “seems to be visited by its antithesis: a condition of time and nature conquering ever more space” which he calls “*the warming condition*” (11). He claims that “climate change is overshadowed” (12) by a new postmodern condition in our digital age that mentally alienates people from grasping the truth of the physical and thus helps anchor the discourse of denial. In Malm’s understanding, prioritizing virtual reality as a substitute for the real world removes the ecological urgencies from the purview of human concern. The postmodern condition today, he proclaims, is in fact “locked in struggle with a formidable enemy” (13): climate change and the biogeochemical forces of nature.

Andreas Malm’s main point is that while global warming and other environmental catastrophes escalate, contemporary theory is strangely absorbed in “interpreting” what constitutes nature, how it is entangled with culture, and who the agents of biocide are (forces of matter or humanity, or a mix of both). Constructionism, new materialisms, post-humanism, actor-network theory, hybridism, and other theoretical schools predicated on similar conceptualizations, are wrestling with “the imbroglio between the social and the natural” (16). If these theories are of no use in making any change, Malm contends, then they are part of the problem. In his view, the main task of theory for the warming condition should be “to clear up space for action and resistance” (18). The book’s seven chapters engage this idea from a fundamentally critical vista: contemporary theories have all failed in dismantling the “fossil fuel economy,” the main culprit of environmental transformations. The three chapters that follow the introduction are each written sharply “against” one of these theories: “Against Constructivism,” “Against Hybridism,” and “Against New Materialism.” Chapter four, however, is titled “For Climate Realism,” and the remaining four chapters reiterate and expand on previous contentions. Since it is the opening chapters which pack most of the polemical punch, it is on these that I will focus in the following.

The major argument of chapter one, “Against Constructivism,” is that, being deeply preoccupied with cultural constructions of nature, postmodernism refused to recognize extra-discursive reality. Malm blames postmodernism for its interest in

the textual, the self-referential, the metaphorical, and the invented. As his representative example, he chooses Noel Castree's *Making Sense of Nature: Representation, Politics and Democracy* (2013), which recommends a kind of postmodernism that sees nature (and, for that matter, all that is physical) to be nothing but a discursive construct. Castree's statements that nature "doesn't 'exist' out there" and "global warming is an *idea*" (24) are juxtaposed with Donna Haraway's pronouncement in 1992 that nature is "a powerful discursive construction" (25). All of these passages are cherry-picked to support Malm's critique, as if they represented the predominant form of postmodernism.

Attacking postmodernism by such carefully selected quotes is, of course, nothing new, and Malm reiterates some of the evergreens of anti-postmodernist polemics, such as Kate Soper's assertion that "it is not language that has a hole in the ozone layer" (qtd. in Malm 27). Although not quoted by Malm, let me add David Mazel's rhetorical question to the chorus of anti-postmodern voices here: "If 'nature' is 'merely' a text, what about environmental destruction?" But this view of postmodernism—as a meaningless celebration of the play of language which disregards everything external—rests on a fundamental misunderstanding. The absurd assumption that nature is nothing but a verbal construct is a schizophrenic feature of the linguistic turn, not the defining characteristic of postmodernism that Malm wants it to be. Associating postmodernism with extremist forms of constructionism is misguided, because postmodernism does not aim to erase the referent itself. So why all the confusion? By questioning the conviction that there could be an unmediated access to reality, postmodernism challenged the realist notion of representation which presumes a natural link between word and world. Malm confuses this denaturalization of realism's assumed transparency with a reduction of reality to linguistic construction. Even if it has not initiated sufficient political and social resistance against declining ecological conditions, postmodernism hardly deserves to be caricatured in this fashion. After all, were the anthropocentric conceptions which underwrote the destruction of nature not formulated on the basis of realist epistemologies much like those Malm champions? He also criticizes the literal reading of the metaphor of construction with reference to Steven Vogel's work, which basically claims that all landscapes are now built landscapes. Malm objects: when coal formed "some 286-360 million years ago, no humans could possibly have assisted in the process" (36). This is rhetorical point-scoring, not serious engagement with his intellectual opponents.

In the second chapter, "Against Hybridism," Malm moves his critical lens to hybridism, defining it in terms of a reality "made up of hybrids of the social and the natural" (46). Hybridism, he also argues in chapter four, comes in two flavors: "constructionism and new materialism. If the former collapses nature into society, the latter does the reverse" (149). According to Malm, the blurring of the nature/culture divide is the "cardinal principle of hybridism" (46). Here, too, his tone is playfully ironic, especially when he draws attention to the political

consequences of hybridism. If the ways in which the social and the natural are interwoven renders the categorical distinction between them moot, Trotsky should also have concluded that “capitalism” was essentially the same as “Tsarism” (49); likewise, Platonism and Shiism, air and cigarette smoke, Zionists and Palestinians (49), and oil and water (61) would all have to be considered as identical! Can such a rhetorical admixture of categorically incompatible things be considered as hybridism to prove the point that nature and society are not “self-contained galaxies” (50)? Of course not, because rather than promoting the absurd idea that “society was made of the same substance as nature” (53), as Malm claims it does, hybridism basically indicates the mutual permeability of nature and culture. Examples for how the social interpenetrates the natural abound – one may think of plastic pollution in the oceans, toxic chemicals released into the soil and air, or mineral extraction, and of their drastic effects on ecosystems and biotic communities. Surely Malm agrees when he quotes Alfred Hornung that the vital theoretical task should be “to tease out how the properties of society intermingle with those of nature” (61). His emphasis on fossil fuel economy as the driver of climate change (76) attests to this.

In the third chapter, “Against New Materialism,” Malm challenges the new materialist theorists who “aim to sober up theory” (78). Having provided a very detailed outline of the new materialist thought with references to Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Samantha Frost, Diana Coole, and others, Malm proceeds to criticize them for “erasing the boundaries between the human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate matter” (88). He disapproves of their reconceptualization of agency which, he claims, eviscerates the concept of meaning. In Malm’s view, agency cannot be separated from human intentionality: it is, he argues, implausible to ascribe *goals* to nonhuman entities, such as rivers and mountains. In making this argument, however, Malm mischaracterizes the views of the those he critiques. For the new materialists, that nonhumans have agency need not imply that they have goals. To claim, as Malm does, that attributing agency to nonhumans means downplaying human responsibility for climate change (93) is a downright distortion of new materialist thought. Much like in the preceding chapters, Malm’s preferred mode of argument is the *reductio ad absurdum*: for him the new materialist thinking implies that “coal *itself* bears responsibility” for climate change (93); in chapter six, he approvingly quotes Rebecca Clausen and Brett Clark’s statement that “the oceans are not polluting themselves; humans are doing it” (178). If such a nonsensical line of reasoning were taken seriously, climate talks would indeed be stalled: “It was not us who initiated coal consumption or emitted the CO₂; it was the swarm of actants that caught us in their whirlwind” (111). Never mind that no serious new materialist ever questioned the fact that humans are the primary agents of ecological destruction. Malm’s conclusion—that the “only sensible thing to do now is to put a stop to the extension of agency” (112)—is premised on a misunderstanding of the

new materialists' central claims, and he ends up reinscribing the anthropocentric logic they have worked so hard to dismantle.

The following chapters reiterate his critique of constructionism and new materialisms, but they also offer compelling arguments about the twists of climate change, how we are to deal with its consequences and find meaningful ways to resist the exploitative systems which produced it. In chapter five, Malm argues in favor of historical materialism as an alternative to the theoretical frameworks he rejected in the preceding chapters; chapter six elaborates on metabolic rift theory, chapter seven on ecological autonomism. These approaches, Malm contends, allow for the kind of concrete analysis that would “feed into resistance or, preferably, revolutionary ecological practice” (174). He observes that “climate activists have so far been indifferent to constructionism, Latourianism, new materialism, posthumanism and the rest of it” (175). Yet, while all these theories at least brought about a paradigm change in the social sciences and humanities, were the activists able to effect any tangible change in the world to put an end to the fossil fuel economy? One wonders if climate activists will instead embrace Malm’s alternative theories to initiate a change of mindset. Will subscribing to Malm’s counsel—“Negativity is our only chance” (223) to avert the worst—bring us closer to an actual solution? Malm concludes with the idea that theory “can only play a very limited part in this project” (231). That the question whether negativity can bring about positive change is itself one which only theory can tackle, is an irony which seems to escape him.