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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. ISBN-13: 978-1-78663-415-3

After the linguistic turn lost its glamour two decades ago, when the cheering fans of anti-theory camp eagerly expected conventional realism to return to academia, the material turn came instead. The new materialism emerged as the only theory that could conflate ontology and epistemology to successfully contest and 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 its meanings. In Andreas Malm’s *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*, this is precisely the reason why the new materialism (or the intertwined set of related theories) is disputed. But not only. All contemporary theories are monumentalized into an ironically regressive reading from their rigor and systematically made incoherent. Taking their basic premises to the extreme, Malm polemically challenges postmodernism, new materialism, posthumanism, actor-network theory, and hybridism from within the complexities of the current ecological condition.

Disclosing a profound crisis in the current ecological predicament from the mental and material dimensions of a warming world facing serious risks of environmental transformations, and with climate change puncturing its very metabolism, 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 Phillippines in November 2013) becoming the new normal, Malm claims, “the planet is already doomed” (9). Even a close look at the current CO2 levels would be 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 had a convincing answer. They argued that 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 would be possible to free knowledge structures from anthropocentric moorings, to rethink our being-in-the-world and other species in more ecologically responsible ways. But Malm is not convinced, asking instead if any of these theories decisively initiate any effective resistance against “fossil economy” that continues to exacerbate the cataclysmic climate change. Did they provoke any practical change in demolishing human hubris, or offer any point of reference for action? No, writes Andreas 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 with palpable solutions to the new normal, which is quite disheartening: the average temperature of the Earth reaching the landmark of 1.5°C in 2016; the possibility of West Antarctic ice sheet plunging several meters into the oceans during our lifetime; the real threat of rising seas; and the possibility of our daily lives being sucked by planetary forces. “Postmodernity,” he says, “seems to be visited by its antithesis: a condition of time and nature conquering ever more space”—something 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 removes the ecological urgencies from the purview of human concern and from reality. 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). So, constructionism, new materialisms, posthumanism, actor-network theory, hybridism, and others 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, offer tangible solutions, and are all immersed in foggy thinking, Malm contends, then they are part of the problem. In his view, the priority and the main task of an acceptable 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 fundamental critical vista: contemporary theories have all failed in dismantling “fossil fuel economy,” the main culprit of environmental transformations. The three chapters that follow the introduction are 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 chapters from four to eight (the concluding chapter) reiterate and expand on previous contentions. Since what makes Malm’s book highly provocative are the three chapters in which he condemns postmodernism, hybridism, and the new materialisms, their substantive polemics attract more attention.

The major argument of chapter one, “Against Constructivism,” is that, being deeply preoccupied with cultural constructions of nature, postmodernism refused to recognize the extra-discursive reality. Malm blames postmodernism for its interest in the textual, the self-referential, the metaphorical, and the invented reality. He provocatively choses Noel Castree’s *Making Sense of Nature: Representation, Politics and Democracy,* 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 coupled with Donna Haraway’s pronouncement in 1992 that nature is “a powerful discursive construction” (25), which are strategically hand-picked to serve Malm’s criticism *as if* they represent the predominant form of postmodernism.

Attacking postmodernism by such carefully selected quotes is not new. Thinking that postmodernism turned nature into a construct in the social world, Kate Soper (Malm also cites her famous words) said: “it is not language that has a hole in the ozone layer” (27). These are unfortunately clichés of misunderstandings launched against postmodernism. Let me add another quotation to the chorus of anti-postmodern voices here from David Mazel who asks: “If ‘nature’ is ‘merely’ a text, what about environmental destruction?” Joining them, Andreas Malm assumes that postmodernism is a meaningless celebration of the play of language which disregards everything external. The absurd assumption that nature is just a verbal construct is a schizophrenic feature of the linguistic turn, not the defining characteristics of postmodernism as Malm thinks. Hence, associating postmodernism with the extremist notion of constructionism is a misguided approach, because postmodernism does not claim to erase the referent itself. Then, why is this confusion? By questioning the conviction that there can be an unmediated access to reality, postmodernism challenged the realist notion of representation that presumes a natural link between word and world. The strong reaction we see in Malm’s book is premised on this denaturalization of realism’s assumed transparency which is often confused with reducing reality to linguistic constructivism. Even if it has not initiated sufficient political and social resistance against declining ecological conditions, it is not fair to blame it all on postmodernism by pointing fingers at its false version. After all, weren’t the anthropocentric conceptions of nature formulated through epistemological realism? Malm also criticizes the literal reading of the metaphor of construction with reference to Steven Vogel’s work, which basically claims that all landscapes are built landscapes. Giving coal as an example of disproof, Malm objects. When coal formed “some 286-360 million years ago, he notes, “no humans could possibly have assisted in the process” (36). He wins many points with this sentence.

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). In chapter four he even carries his claim further by mixing constructionism and new materialism: “Contemporary hybridism comes in two main forms: constructionism and new materialism. If the former collapses nature into society, the latter does the reverse (149). Hence, the claims in these chapters require a particular attention. According to Malm, the blurring of nature/culture divide is the “cardinal principle of hybridism” (46) without any referents. His playfully ironic tone pervades this chapter, especially when he draws attention to the political consequences of hybridism; and in that case, he exclaims, Trotsky could have “inferred that “capitalism was now so deeply enmeshed in Tsarism” (49). His other examples are equally sardonic: Platonism and Shiism, air and cigarette smoke, Zionists and Palestinians (49), and oil and water (61) must be 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)? If this rhetoric is taken seriously, hybridism would indeed be a “commitment to *substance monism*” (53), but declaring that in hybridism “society was made of the same substance as nature” (53) sounds rather incredulous. How can hybridism be associated with substance dualism when it basically indicates the permeability of nature and culture and how the social interpenetrates the natural with plastic pollution in the oceans, toxic chemicals released into the soil and air, mineral extraction, and the like with drastic effects on the ecosystems and biotic communities? Surely Malm agrees when he quotes Alfred Hornung. The vital theoretical task then 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.

The third chapter, “Against New Materialism,” is perhaps the most provocative one, challenging the new materialist theorists who “aim to sober up theory” (78). Giving a very detailed outline of the new materialist thought with references to Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Samantha Frost, Diana Coole, and others, Malm criticizes it for “erasing the boundaries between the human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate matter” (88). He disapproves of the reconceptualization of agency, which he thinks eviscerate its meaningful frame. Malm’s examples are from an anthropocentric perspective which conceive agency in terms of human intentionality that the new materialists have contested. It is, Malm claims, implausible to ascribe *goals* to nonhuman entities, such as rivers and mountains. In so doing, however, he misses the point that, as agentic entities, nonhumans do not have goals. Claiming that, if nonhumans have agency, then it is incorrect to see humans as the only agents behind climate change (93), is a downright distortion of new materialist thought. Taking the new materialist argument to absurd extremes, such as “coal *itself* bears responsibility” (93), is to create unnecessary polemics. Or, Malm’s reference in chapter six to Rebecca Clausen and Brett Clark’s statement that “the oceans are not polluting themselves; humans are doing it” (178) is to frame the new materialist conceptualization of nonhuman agency in sham logic. In such a nonsensical line of reasoning, as Malm believes the new materialists are engaged in, climate talks would 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). This is absurdity at its best and Malm should have refrained from such a risible but equally vitriolic attack on the material turn. Malm’s critique of posthumanism –“a sibling of new materialism” (114) for him – follows the same logic when he says, “The only sensible thing do now is to put a stop to the extension of agency” (112). He considers the decentering of the human rather “banal” (115), because he ties his reasoning to the fact that humans are the central agents of ecological destruction.

Although he reiterates his critique of constructionism and new materialism, the following chapters offer compelling arguments about the twists of climate change and how we are to deal with its conditions, and find meaningful ways to resist the exploitative systems. He suggests historical materialism as an alternative in chapter five, metabolic rift theory in chapter six, and ecological autonomism in chapter seven. As such, Malm makes a call for a 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 affected a paradigm change at least in social sciences and the humanities, were the activists able to bring about any tangible change in the world to put an end to fossil fuel economy? One wonders if the climate activists will instead embrace Malm’s alternative theories to initiate a mindset change? Or, would subscribing to Malm’s counsel –“Negativity is our only chance now”(223) to avert the worst! – be a reasonable solution? The book concludes with the idea that theory “can only play a very limited part in this project” (231). Ironically enough, whether negativity in any sense can bring about positive change is a difficult question only theory can tackle!