

## Book Review

**Matthew T. Huber (2022) *Climate Change as Class War. Building Socialism on a Warming Planet*. London: Verso. 312 pp.**

**ISBN 9781788733885. Softcover US\$ 24.95**

*Reviewed by*

*Simon Schaupp, University of Basel, Switzerland*

In *Climate Change as Class War* Matthew Huber aims to provide a concrete socialist strategy for fighting climate change. He begins his book by arguing that the reason for the lack of success of the climate movement is its focus on the realm of individual consumption. In the introduction, he identifies the concept of carbon footprints and the underlying ideology of consumer sovereignty as the central expression of this focus. The carbon footprint model assumes that all emissions can be traced back to individual consumption choices. This implies that power over economic decisions is located solely on the side of demand, and responsibility for climate change is therefore diffused to “all of us”. Huber counters that supply severely restricts consumption choices and that the question of which commodities are produced (and how) is decided by the very small group of owners and managers of the means of production (p. 25). While the concept of carbon footprints can demonstrate the extremely unequal distribution of emissions between rich and poor, Huber argues that this model cannot grasp the most important dimension of class: control over the means of production. As production is the place where the absolute majority of global emissions take place – 54.8 per cent in the industrial sector alone (p. 62) – Huber argues that understanding the causes of climate change requires a focus on production. Accordingly, the book is organised as a class analysis of climate politics. Part I analyses the role of the capitalist class. Part II identifies the professional class as the core of the current climate movement. Part III introduces the working class as a potentially powerful agent in the struggle for decarbonisation.

Huber begins his analysis of the role of the capitalist class with the assertion that climate politics is already very much about class for the political right. The argument that environmental policies cost jobs has been a more important factor for the failure of politicians in the United States (US) to come up with effective legislation than any form of climate denialism (p. 73). However, contrary to the narrative of diffuse attribution, Huber argues that responsibility for climate change lies with those capitalists who decide how commodities are produced. Drawing on the case study of a nitrogen fertiliser production plant, he shows how managers systematically neglect the environmentally destructive effects of their companies because their task is simply to ensure the production of surplus value. Huber draws on Marx, who suggested that the value of any commodity coming from the land is set by the socially necessary labour time it takes to produce on the least fertile land. Those producing on more fertile lands enjoy extra profits. This contribution of nature is paid, although incompletely, as rent to landlords; this in turn ensures that resources that are cheap to produce turn into cheap commodities (p. 86). Thus, the cheapening of food and thereby of labour power is due to the capitalist pursuit of achieving relative surplus value by raising labour productivity through technical innovations. The Haber-Bosch process of synthesising nitrogen

fertiliser is an example of such an innovation, which dramatically increased the availability of cheap food but also became one of the largest sources of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Part II traces the climate movement's focus on consumption back to the movement's class basis. According to Huber, this consists predominantly of the professional class (people whose favourable position in the labour market results from academic degrees and other credentials). This class position often translates to a very specific form of environmentalism driven by guilt, resulting from the knowledge that one's own relative material affluence means complicity in a destructive economy. The central role of knowledge in the work of the professional class contributes to the idea that knowledge about climate change is the key to fighting it. Yet, Huber maintains, "no amount of knowledge or information can overcome power itself" (p. 128). Moreover, professional-class environmentalism avoids antagonistic politics and instead tries to develop technocratic policy solutions that create economic incentives by putting prices on environmental externalities:

Professional-class technocrats *like* the idea of paying more for energy because they like the idea of consuming less. Yet, the majority of society was dealing with decades of wage stagnation, austerity and debt. The right was able to seize on this contradiction by simply equating all forms of environmental policy with costs to you and your family (p. 137).

The most provocative part of Huber's analysis of professional-class environmentalism is his critique of the degrowth movement. First, he argues that degrowth's politics of less are fundamentally unattractive to working-class people who struggle every day to secure basic necessities. Second, he accuses degrowthers of actually reinforcing the growth fetish by focusing only on the aggregate level of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and neglecting the fact that capitalism does not require aggregate social growth but only growth for capital (p. 168). Third, Huber argues that degrowth's political practice is restricted to local-level replacement of energy-intensive lifestyles to labour-intensive ones (for example, subsistence gardening), which is neither attractive to workers with several jobs nor adequate in terms of the global nature of the climate crisis.

Part III posits the working class as a key actor in achieving decarbonisation because its members comprise the absolute majority of the global population (63 per cent in the US) and have the economic power – through strikes and so on – to enforce demands from below. The dominant view in climate activism is that those people who directly experience threats from climate change will develop a material interest in stopping it. Huber, however, argues that this applies only to a very small group of people, while the experience of the overwhelming majority of the working class is one of *separation* from nature and the means of subsistence. Accordingly, the working class must secure life via the market, which creates high levels of insecurity. Therefore, a proletarian environmentalism must focus on ecological interests "that aim to simultaneously deliver more secure access to the basics of survival and restructure production to ensure the survival of all life on the planet" (p. 182). Yet, Huber argues, the domination of the climate movement by the professional class makes it difficult for workers to participate as they often experience professionals as antagonists in their everyday lives. This is because professionals are often in a relationship of control over workers – be it as teachers and examiners or as managers. Therefore, he argues for a decidedly proletarian movement that aims at conquering state power through electoral campaigns backed up by workplace organising. While the group that Huber calls "anti-system radicals" aims at transforming all aspects of life, he argues that the urgency of the climate crisis requires a more pragmatic strategy. He calls this strategy "socialism in one sector" (p. 264), with the designated sector being electricity. This sector is obviously important to climate change, and at the same time

electric utilities enjoy a relatively high degree of unionisation, even in the US. These union should mobilise towards nationalisation of the electricity industry, aimed both at providing a basic level of energy to everybody as a human right and decarbonising the industry. Corresponding to his Leninist political stance, Huber argues for centralised energy infrastructure, including nuclear, and opposes “anarchist” or “neoliberal” visions of a decentralised energy system.

The book impresses with a very lucid and straightforward style, referring to academic debates only insofar as they are relevant to strategic questions. This strategy in turn is based on a thorough, materialist class analysis of climate politics, which is highly relevant politically but also an important contribution to scholarly discussions of the climate movement. This is especially true for Huber’s critical analysis of professional-class politics. The explicit focus of the analysis on objective material conditions enables some of the core insights of the book, but also comes at a cost: Huber seems to assume that any strategy that is based on the objective interests of workers will be successful. This is clearly too optimistic and neglects the political and theoretical relevance of ideology. For example, it remains unclear how exactly the business unionism that characterises most energy unions could be overcome. Nevertheless, the book is a milestone of socialist thought on the topic and essential reading for academics as well as environmentalist and socialist activists.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

SIMON SCHAUPP is visiting professor at the Center for Cultural and General Studies (ZAK), Karlsruhe Institute of Technology. His research focus is on work, digitalisation and the ecological crisis. [Email: [simon.schaupp@partner.kit.edu](mailto:simon.schaupp@partner.kit.edu)]