Michael Mason

Book review: critical salvoes in the corporate greenhouse

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FEATURED BOOK REVIEW

Critical salvoes in the corporate greenhouse

The corporate greenhouse: climate change policy in a globalizing world by Yda Schreuder, London, Zed Books, 2009, viii þ 256 pp., index, £70.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84277-957-6; £18.99 (paperback), 978-1-84277-958-3

Urban sprawl, global warming, and the empire of capital by George A. Gonzalez, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2009, vii þ 162 pp., index, $60.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7914-9389-2

We . . . have a poodle puppy. We called him Marx to remind us that we had never read Marx and now we have read a little and taken so strong a personal dislike to the man that we can't look the dog in the face when we speak to him. (letter from Eileen Blair to a friend, January 1st 1938, in Davison 2006: 72)

At least in the Anglo-American critical tradition, non-communist Leftists have long had an ambivalent relationship with Marx. For the above letter writer and her husband, George Orwell, the aversion to Marx was personal, borne out of recent experience of Marxist sectarianism during the Spanish Civil War and bitter exchanges with intellectual apologists for Stalin's Russia. Orwell's subsequent novels – Animal Farm and 1984 – would of course do much to undermine the moral credibility of Marxism, yet as a democratic socialist he conceded that a Marxist perspective was necessary to understanding social change and conflict. Sixty years after this letter, the philosopher Richard Rorty cited Orwell approvingly in a book upbraiding the American New Left for indulging in sterile 'Foucauldian-Marxist' theorising rather than engaging politically with the damaging consequences of globalisation (Rorty 1998). At the same time, he acknowledged the political courage of that Left in opposing the Vietnam War and other US military ventures.

American academics Yda Schreuder and George Gonzalez both adopt neo- Marxist perspectives to examine arguably the most serious environmental impact of economic globalisation – human-induced climate change. And it is from these original, penetrating studies that we can gauge something of the explanatory value of critical political economy for understanding climate politics in the twenty-first century. Both are highly insightful volumes, carefully substantiating their arguments from multiple sources, while their clear, considered prose is a refreshing contrast to the obscurantism common in Marxist-inspired cultural theory.

The conceptual starting-point for Schreuder's study is globalisation theory, notably that critical variant (she cites Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein as representative authors) which contends that power in the global economy has shifted from national governments to transnational corporations and investors. Through foreign direct investment (FDI) and international trade, economic globalisation is claimed by Schreuder to be the main driver of the worldwide increase in fossil fuel consumption and CO_2 emissions. The first half of her book interprets the international treaty negotiations on climate change – the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and Kyoto Protocol – in the political and economic context of the social and environmental impacts of globalisation. As with other critics of market-led globalisation, Schreuder suggests that neoliberalism and the 'Washington Consensus' provided pivotal ideological support for its spread to developing countries. Chapter 3 shows convincingly how the expansion of foreign trade and (especially) FDI has locked developing countries into a fossil-fuel-based infrastructure: these countries effectively have no scope to avoid carbon-intensive development paths, even though this weakens further the international prospects for reducing greenhouse gas emissions to safe levels.

The core climate contradiction Schreuder attributes to economic globalisation is that its relentless market expansion, driven by intense competition around transnational corporations and international production networks, renders national emission reductions (such as those under the Kyoto Protocol) ineffective in halting or reversing global warming (p. 31). It is at this point, I think, that her image of the 'corporate greenhouse' is particularly useful in highlighting the responsibility deficit of international governance responses to climate change. The second half of her book interrogates how the leading examples of two Kyoto Protocol implementation strategies – the EU Emissions Trading Scheme and the Clean Development Mechanism – are hampered by the mismatch between national regulatory responsibilities under Kyoto and the ability of transnational corporations to escape effective emissions control. Thus, in Chapter 5 Schreuder details the myriad 'carbon leakages' arising from the geographical displacement of emissions as a result of CO_2 emissions reductions in Kyoto Protocol Annex I countries, while in Chapter 6 she shows how major oil and energy companies can manipulate the Clean Development Mechanism to earn emissions reduction credits whilst simultaneously undertaking energy-intensive development in developing countries and economies in transition.

While sharing Schreuder's critical intent, George Gonzalez is sceptical of the explanatory reach of globalisation theory. His conceptual frame of reference is the 'empire of capital' argument formulated by Ellen Meiksins Wood (2003). Wood subscribes to Marx's foundational theory of surplus value, and the related claim that states uphold and enforce property relations that facilitate the alienation of workers from the means of production. Moreover, she maintains that this role for states in reproducing capitalism still holds in the era of global economic integration, although the most powerful states ensure that capital flows above all to the core centres of corporate wealth and private consumption. In his book, Gonzalez extends this analysis in a revealing direction by arguing that the long-standing commitment of the US state to urban sprawl – that is, highly diffuse urban development – is a requisite feature of modern global capitalism. Facilitated by historical access to abundant sources of oil, and the political capture of state agencies by local growth coalitions, urban sprawl fostered an energy intensive mode of development – one still promoted by the US government by means of land use policies, road building projects, mortgage protection schemes and policies to minimise oil prices. The global ecological upshot of this strategy, Gonzalez claims, is the acceleration of climate change and a substantial alliance of US political and economic interests against any international climate regulation with demanding reduction targets for greenhouse gas emissions.

At the heart of Gonzalez's book is a revealing historical analysis (chapters 3–5) in which he lays out the techniques by which urban sprawl was promoted across the country, and the implications of this for US oil policy. The initial champions of urban sprawl were landed and urban business elites who, seeking to inflate land values on the peripheries of US cities, successfully lobbied to institute low-density development in planning and housing policies. For Gonzalez, various factors in the interwar period entrenched this shift – the accumulation of surplus capital, the specialisation of US industrial production on the automobile and other durable consumer goods, and federal housing policy in the 1930s (for example, state guarantees for home loans). With urban sprawl serving as the geographical underpinning for post-war American prosperity, it was not surprising, Gonzalez argues, that the US state attached a high strategic priority to securing enduring access to petroleum worldwide (particularly after the peaking of US oil production in 1970). The same economic elites that promoted automobile-centred urban development now lobbied successfully to ensure that the US government recognised this oil vulnerability – weaving the diplomatic and military thread that runs from US support for the Shah of Iran in the 1970s to the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Both books demonstrate a major explanatory gain from applying a critical political economy approach to the social scientific understanding of climate change – a plausible account of the role of power relations in driving carbon-intensive (and socially dislocative) economic development paths. For Schreuder and Gonzalez, the structural lock-in worldwide to a fossil-fuel intensive infrastructure and mode of production is not the outcome of a natural play of market forces or pluralistic decision-making, but the result of the political dominance of capitalist interests in determining the social allocation of resources. When orthodox economists designate anthropogenic climate change as a 'market failure', an unfortunate side-effect of economic growth, they miss the systemic mechanisms by which market relations produce social and ecological harm. Each author takes a different methodological tack to show this: Schreuder surveys global shifts in geopolitical order and industrial production, highlighting the role of transnational corporations, while Gonzalez excavates the material and ideological foundations of modern American capitalism. In their different ways, they both throw new light on the pervasive carbonisation of the global economy.

It is also the virtue of both studies that, while addressed at academic and other informed audiences, they are accessible enough to warrant a place on undergraduate reading lists for environment, development, and international studies courses; indeed, they would serve as a provocative, suggestive counterpoint to mainstream climate change literature. Schreuder's book is perhaps the more student-friendly given the use of illustrative examples; it is more comprehensive on climate change policy and brings out well the North–South dynamics of international regulation. Were it to be well-received and revised, I would recommend additional discussion of the role of state energy corporations in a future edition, as they are key actors in the global development of fossil fuels. She would also need to consider the theoretical challenges to her position posed by Gonzalez's arguments, notably the continuing relevance of state power and the consumption side of the global economy. Less dramatically, a bibliography would also be a useful addition to her book.

Despite its title, the volume by Gonzalez says little about global warming as such until chapter 6, but perhaps this says more about contemporary managerial framings of climate change than any shortfall in coverage, for the author is focused on locating particular political and economic drivers of environmental harm. It will be a welcome mark of success for this book if it stimulates more work in the historical-geographical analysis of climate change: there is much to be done. It is rare that I wish an academic book were longer, but this is one such case; the approach employed by Gonzalez justifies even more of a fine-grained empirical examination, both of the urban growth coalitions and their impacts on the changing landscape, and of the post-war projections of US power in pursuit of energy security. There is also a cultural aspect of automobile

dependence that deserves more attention than given here: this concerns the ubiquitous representations of automobile freedom and mobility that strengthen the ideological grip of carbon-intensive economic development. In this respect, Matthew Paterson's (2007) Automobile politics would serve as an excellent companion to the volume by Gonzalez.

The normative stances of Schreuder and Gonzalez emerge most strongly in their discussions of political agency in response to climate change. As Schreuder observes, political action to tackle climate change is often smothered by powerful vested interests in the business community. Given her blunt assessment that 'Global capitalism as we know it today is inherently incompatible with the pursuit of ecological sustainability or social justice' (p. 79), her final appeal 'for Climate to finally find a partner in Capital' (p. 217) may seem incongruous. Her arguments for more accountable and equitable foreign trade and FDI are certainly justifiable, including the need for international regulatory tools to focus on carbon consumption rather than emissions. However, the politics of the energy transition from 'business-as usual' warrants more discussion: those prepared to support the measures recommended by Schreuder will need to take on deep-rooted coalitions determined to resist far-reaching carbon constraints on capital investment. Where should the pressure for political change be forged and directed? How should capitalism be tamed or transformed?

Gonzalez is more candid on this, though within a US political context. The technical solutions emerging from the environmental policy community ('weak ecological modernisation') are, he claims, a non-starter: 'no technology has come forth that effectively confronts the question of climate change within the current context of global capitalism. In other words, . . . to allow current rates of economic growth and consumption to continue without the externality of climate change' (p. 94). Environmental groups should therefore withdraw from the 'undemocratic' domestic policymaking process and help in the development of a justice-based social movement challenging the imperative of urban sprawl and automobile dependence (pp. 97–100). Nevertheless, there is still the same tension as there is for Schreuder in specifying the scope of the necessary political change. While Gonzalez calls for 'disruptive' political action from civil society, his preferred political outcomes would seem more than reasonable to any European social democrat – ecologically sensitive land management, the concentration of residential and work areas, and the adoption of mass transit as the primary means of transportation in urban areas (p. 106). Again, even if generalised across the developed and developing world, would these measures be enough to steer global economic actors away from those routine practices threatening to cause catastrophic climate change?

There is an admirable integrity to the studies by Schreuder and Gonzalez. If there is a continuous theme in the best work of Leftist intellectuals, it is in speaking the truth to power and consistently siding with the victims of injustice rather those complacent groups benefiting from injustice. Should the critical thought expressed in these studies strike a chord with those campaigning for global climate justice, then the political aspirations of the authors may well find resonance outside the academy. These are fine books demonstrating that, to make sense of the social and ecological irrationalities of capitalism, it is still necessary to look Marx in the face.

References

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Michael Mason
London School of Economics and Political Science