

**Matthew T. Huber**, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet*, London: Verso, 2022. ISBN: 9781788733885 (paper); ISBN: 9781788733892 (ebook)

The politics of climate change is heating up. In *Climate Change as Class War*, Matt Huber makes an antagonistic and pragmatic case for “building socialism on a warming planet”. Huber’s wager is that the climate movement has thus far failed to build a mass, popular support behind its objectives. The book reframes the climate debate by shifting attention from reducing personal consumption to politicising “the hidden abode of production”—spaces of carbon-intensive industrial activity including electricity, steel, cement, and fertiliser production which are usually demarcated as outside of politics. We should “seize the means of production”, according to Huber, not only to assert democratic control over the basic necessities of everyday life, but also to save the planet.

Huber offers an ecological and Marxist theory of class, using class analysis as a “powerful *dot connector*” (p.75) to expertly tie together the threads of the climate crisis. The book deals with three classes—the class primarily responsible for climate change (the capitalist class), the class dominating the climate debate (the professional class), and the class with the structural power to disrupt capitalism and instigate change (the working class). The book is specifically focused on US political culture at the national scale, although it beckons for more research in other contexts and at different scales.

The most rewarding contribution of the book is Huber’s analysis of the professional class. The professional class includes people shaping climate policy debates, negotiating climate treaties, and driving “the climate movement”—a loose network of university-educated knowledge workers including journalists, scientists, legal professionals, government workers, and NGO or non-profit staff. Feelings of “carbon guilt” pervade the professional class for simultaneously *living* carbon-intensive lifestyles while *knowing* the climate crisis. A “politics of less” leads from this where many among the professional class advocate for minimising carbon

footprints and sometimes “degrowing” national industrial economies. Huber argues this negative, and at times moralistic, politics centred on reduction fails to cut through to working-class people who have already endured decades of wage stagnation, austerity, debt, and now inflation (p.38).

As well as outlining what the professional class get wrong in terms of their ideas, Huber also explains the historical conditions in which this class emerged. Deindustrialisation processes over the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were paralleled by a massive expansion of higher education. As working-class power fell from its peak, the professional class surfaced in a newly emergent “knowledge economy” that highly valorises educational credentials and mental labour. At the same time, industrial production became increasingly invisible to society through offshoring, automation, and separate zoning from residential and commercial areas in “post-industrial” society. Huber (p.59) outlines a major challenge here surrounding the question of how to re-politicise an area of society—production—which unlike consumption, is not immediately *visible* in the realms of everyday life.

An important part of the analysis is that despite many of the professional class enjoying material security—through tenured professorships (Huber included), public-sector wages and benefits, or highly exclusive professional degrees—there is a growing, predominantly younger segment of the professional class without assets who are “proletarianizing”—facing increasingly precarious situations in non-unionised, contract work across the professions from journalism to academia. Huber maintains that this common precarious condition should underpin a solidarity between the professional and working classes.

While Huber’s analysis of the professional class is incisive, his portrayal of the working class is less compelling. One gets a slightly uneasy feeling reading a professional-class academic speaking on behalf of a working class he depicts mainly through statistics and socialist theory. Huber offers an ecological definition of the working class including those experiencing “alienation from and lack of control over the ecological conditions of existence” (p.190). The ecological conditions of existence which the working class are alienated from relate both to

*everyday means of survival*—access to land, food, energy, health, etc., which are generally provided via the market in the US—and to *planetary survival*—the future of the planet in a climate changed world. For Huber, then, the fight to save the climate and for better living and working conditions are one and the same. Following Kim Moody, he posits the working class represent 63% of the employed population in the US, and 75% of society if you include those doing unpaid care work (p.37). This is a class *in itself* which Huber wants to turn into a radical, militant class *for itself—and for the climate*.

Some self-reflectivity on the part of the author would have been useful here to position his own class status in relation to the other classes he describes in the book. More positionality would also have been particularly interesting to learn about Huber’s experiences navigating between the worlds of academia and political organising with unions. In the acknowledgements we learn of his relationship with the Democratic Socialists of America, and the Bread and Roses Caucus “who taught me more about political organizing and strategy than anything I’ve learned in universities” (p.297). Deeper reflection over these personal political involvements would have been enlightening about challenges faced by Huber as a professional-class academic foraying into the political field.

In the final chapters, Huber makes the case for a targeted, sectoral strategy for decarbonising and democratising the electric utility sector in the US. This plan is a breath of fresh air in some areas of climate theorising where “the prevailing wisdom [is] that we must change ‘everything’ about society all at once” (p.258). The book beckons for more research in other contexts to map out structures of class power in shaping the climate debate and stalling progress on decarbonisation.

The book marks a departure from Huber’s previous approach to the climate crisis as evidenced in his 2013 book, *Lifeblood*. In this study Huber showed how the “American way of life” is rooted in the social and material geographies of oil: suburbanisation, privatised auto-mobility, and atomised forms of family life and consumption. As the lifeblood of society, oil is

embedded in the cultural fabric of the US to such an extent that threats to its availability and cheapness are reinterpreted as threats to the American way of life itself. This explains why transitioning from oil to alternative energy systems is no easy feat. As Huber (2013: 169, emphasis added) expounded in *Lifeblood*, “the biggest barrier to energy change is not technical but the cultural and political *structures of feeling* that have been produced through regimes of energy consumption”. These structures of feeling, it must be emphasised, do not operate solely in the realms of subjectivities and ideas, but more importantly are rooted in “the basic infrastructures of everyday existence” (Huber 2013: 32). For researchers and climate activists, it is easy to blame corrupt fossil fuel industries and/or governments for climate catastrophe, but “far more disturbing are the more entrenched and everyday forms of living, thinking, and feeling that make cheap energy a ‘commonsense’ necessity of survival” (Huber 2013: 151).

In *Climate Change as Class War*, Huber takes a dramatic turn. He shifts his attention from the everyday embeddedness of fossil fuels in society to “the real cause of the climate crisis”, a small minority of owners “who control vast flows of energy, resources, and, indeed, emissions—all directed toward one goal: profit” (p.55). In Huber’s eyes, industrial capitalists are less responsible for climate change through their luxurious consumption—the gas-guzzling car, the energy-consuming mansion, or their frequent flying—and more through their profiteering from controlling vast networks of carbon-intensive production sites. Huber’s shift from analysing the complex cultural embeddedness of oil in society to a more confrontational style of politics with the capitalist class reflects a broader trend in climate politics over the past decade or so. Prior to the 2010s, climate politics historically lacked an identifiable enemy to mobilise a movement around. However, in the urgency and frustration surrounding lack of action among elites, we now see myriad calls for “ending fossil fuels” (Princen et al. 2015)—from divestment campaigns at the point of investment to calls to destroy fossil fuel private property (Malm 2021).

These all represent what Paterson (2021a) has described as an ascendant conflictual and Manichean style of politics that posits an “us” (the planet) versus “them” (fossil fuels). The

danger in Huber’s newest analysis is that by overemphasising conflict, he might lose sight of complexity—the entanglement of fossil fuels in everyday life and dispersed culpability. The analytical challenge for Huber and for all of us is to oscillate “between conflict and complexity” (Paterson 2021b)—maintaining focus on the embeddedness of society in heterogenous high-carbon systems while challenging structures of class power which block us from decarbonising those systems. Combining Huber’s two approaches from *Lifeblood* and *Climate Change as Class War* makes for a sophisticated, more holistic reading of power in fossil capitalism. What is needed now is more geographically differentiated studies of fossil capitalism beyond the US context.

Overall, Huber demonstrates the merits of reviving class as an analytic—not only for explaining the root of the climate crisis, but also for explaining the historical conditions in which a particular class came to dominate the climate debate. At times, caricatures of the capitalist class are mirrored by a romantic faith in the working class. However, Huber sets the stage for a new round of research on the particularities of class relations in different contexts and at different scales surrounding climate politics. Whether this research can materialise into progressive political action in the 2020s, what former UNFCC head Christiana Figueres calls the “decisive decade” of climate action (in Doyle 2020), will be crucial.



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*Max Cohen*  
*Department of Geography*  
*University of British Columbia*  
*max.cohen.ubc@gmail.com*

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