



Critical engagements with “*Climate Change as Class War*”—proletarian ecology, environmental provision, and the welfare of children as a public good

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ABSTRACT

Matt Huber offers a powerful materialist class-based account of the notion of the interplay of nature and human life as the struggle of “proletarian ecology.” This formulation has led me to think about D.W. Winnicott’s idea of infant development and “environmental provision” in class-based terms. Winnicott’s ideas of environmental provision seem well suited to Huber’s work on environmental policy and governance. Issues of environmental provision for caretakers and children are increasingly eclipsed in a public policy sphere dominated by the Professional-Managerial Class (PMC) as birthrates for high-income women and families continue to fall and birthrates for the poorest women are almost double those of their higher income counterparts. **This paper is part of the SPE Special Theme “Critical Engagements with ‘*Climate Change as Class War*.’”**

KEYWORDS

Matthew Huber; Professional-Managerial Class (PMC); proletarian ecology; psychoanalysis; Winnicott; working class

Matt Huber’s book *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet* offers a powerful critique of the disastrous consequences of the domination by the Professional-Managerial Class (PMC) of environmental politics and activism. Credentialed elites cling to the magical power of “information” and belief in science, advertised on lawn signs in the most expensive real estate markets in the country. Huber offers a materialist class-based account of the notion of the interplay of nature and human life as the struggle of “proletarian ecology.” For Huber, proletarian ecology refers to the politics needed to address the near complete alienation of the working class from the land and the environment that sustains them.¹ This formulation has led me to think about D.W. Winnicott’s idea of infant development and “environmental provision” in class-based terms; the work I am doing on the history of child-saving, and government policy in America has been greatly aided by Huber’s analysis of the environmental movement and the class issues it suppresses.

In focusing on class as a primary condition of social and political change, Huber has attracted the expected criticisms about class reductionism; his criticism of the thinkers of degrowth “lifestyles” was especially welcome. Environmental activists with

PhDs have set up a template for activism and action that is based entirely on privatized individualized action while providing almost nothing to those with very little. Austerity politics with an environmental twist is demobilizing for the masses and very exciting for the elites. The PMC is divorced from the struggle for survival and life that embroils the majority of the world's non-white-collar workers; for the PMC, the struggle for the basic reproduction of life is no longer an issue. For materially comfortable climate activists, raising "awareness" will lead to social and political change if enough "aware" people with enough information act together—to structure carbon offsets and carbon trading. Bill McKibben and his organization, 350.org, have argued that the science of climate change is both irrefutable and apolitical and simply needs to be communicated to the largest number of people possible so that market-based solutions can be pushed through by government action.

In the climate activist's imagination, once a critical mass of people is informed about the science of climate change, something will click in their minds and they will join the environmentalist movement, voting for liberal politicians who will then establish markets in carbon trading while assiduously recycling paper and plastics and buying expensive electric cars. This narrative of political change owes a great deal to the New Left, the crucible of PMC liberalism, with its consciousness-raising groups and belief in an Age of Aquarius turnaround in humanity's orientation. In the hypothesized Age of Aquarius, the stars themselves will guide us to enlightenment and goodness. At least the New Left hippies embraced, along with their magical thinking about transformative politics, an affirmation of sensuous immediacy and pleasure. Instead, the contemporary climate activist is a severe moralist ready to shake her finger at your oversized carbon footprint and celebrate you as you slip your bloated feet into flip flops made of recycled tires. The PMC feels a great deal of guilt about the comforts of its own existence. It produces antisocial theories of degrowth and austerity to allay that guilt: "At the core of... professional contempt for the working (and consuming) masses is a deeper guilt about the professionals' own complicity in the consumer society and the deep contradictions between the equation of professional success with a lifestyle of privatized provisioning."²

The PMC loves to fetishize micro-solutions designed to fit into their lifestyle politics and obsession with virtue hoarding. A sustainable lifestyle has become a stylized, "morally" correct mode of consumption that is supposed to "stop climate change" dead in its tracks. Environmental activists find an actual analysis and reform of modes of production, say of the nitrogen-based agricultural fertilizer industry, too confrontational with corporate capitalism itself. According to Huber, climate activists are unable or unwilling to imagine a mass politics founded on environmental policies that would improve the lives of the working class. As I have argued elsewhere, a PMC activist has no interest in changing the status quo incrementally or radically; in the area of environmental politics, Huber, along with Leigh Philipps, has identified a nongovernmental organization (NGO) activist complex that exists only to fundraise and scold and greenwash people's consciences and corporations' reputations.³

For people who find it difficult to pay rent and put food on the table, this preening condescension might not seem appealing or convincing. Since the 1970s, working-class life in the United States has become more and more difficult; life for

Americans of all races and genders outside of the top 10 percent of earners is a struggle without end. This is where Huber's idea of proletarian ecology comes into play as an analytic tool and materialist concept that has radical explanatory potential for Left politics and its failures. With the growing gap in birthrates between Americans who earn the least money and Americans who earn the most, we can identify childcare and provision for children as a stark, class-based issue.⁴

Marx and Engels' material history begins with the working-class struggle to satisfy basic biological sensations, such as hunger and thirst: "Men must be in a position to live in order to make history. But life must involve before everything else, eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs."⁵ Other types of needs, social and spiritual, will emerge when the primary needs are satisfied, but it is to the realm of the third element of materialism in the making and understanding of human history that I will now turn—human reproduction, when "men who daily remake their own life ... begin to make other men, to propagate their kind"⁶ and the birth and care of children, who when born into the immiserated working class of the nineteenth century, are in the eyes of the capitalist, "nothing more than personified labour-time."⁷ Framed by this abstract and Swiftian formulation for describing the operations of the capitalist, who "werewolf-like" is bent on the extension of the working day, Marx summarizes studies and reports written by Victorian elites and reformers about the working day, during the Industrial Revolution, of working-class children "of nine or ten years dragged from their beds and compelled to work for a bare subsistence until 10 at night." Chapter 10 of *Capital*, Volume One, is haunted by half-starved child workers, bodies covered in dust, poisoned lungs, bent fingers and backs, bleary eyes, and bodies broken before puberty, set to work as soon as possible for as long as possible because a parent's wage could not feed and clothe the family and because the employer wanted to extend the hours of the working day so that the factory would never lie idle.⁸

In the United States, the late nineteenth century presented a scale of working-class misery that shocked serious and civic-minded elites:

Seriously deprived and neglected children had become more visible. Significant numbers of children were caught in horrendous conditions of lower class living. The real despair and ill treatment of children could no longer be ignored ... Reformers emphasized the necessity of countering these conditions by rescuing children from sordid surroundings.⁹

The most extreme of these rescue efforts involved the transport of poor children from the overcrowded slums of the Northeast to foster families in the Midwest as part of the "orphan trains," a system of foster care and indentured labour that lasted from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s, when a shortage of farm labour was no longer an issue. Without changing the structure of surplus value extraction from labour, American progressives hoped to protect children. The tyranny of the abstract nature of exchange, labour for wages for the poor, the old, the infirm, and the very young and their caretakers was rejected by American progressives in the name of a new reformist morality that prioritized government and charity (not-for-profit) agencies that would henceforth work for the "protection" of the vulnerable from the cruelty of the labour market.¹⁰

Writing during the mid-twentieth century at a time of redistribution of wealth from the top down, Winnicott argued that babies cannot be understood outside their “environmental provision.” When the environmental provision is “good enough,” albeit not perfect, the caretaker, most often the mother, must simply survive the baby’s most aggressive impulses: “She has one job when the baby bites and scratches and pulls her hair and kicks and that is to survive. The baby will do the rest. If she survives, then the baby will find a new meaning to the word love, and a new thing turns up in the baby’s life which is fantasy.”¹¹ Fantasy allows the baby to find objects in the world, that is, the transitional objects that take the place of the caretaker and the environment. The foray into the objective and intersubjective world must take place from the safety of being held. If the precarity of the caretaking environment is unable to tolerate a baby’s dependency and aggression, the baby loses confidence in the world.

A failure in care, however, never comes completely from within the caretaker/child dyad; environmental provision is a foundational concept in Winnicott’s theory of infant development. “Holding” and being held are critical forms of environmental provision that allow a baby to attain the necessary psychic structures upon which subjectivity and a recognition of an objective world are built. The children deprived of such steady, loving, resilient care are the ones who ended up in the juvenile courts and the hostel system that Winnicott studied. Winnicott supported social workers and psychologists in providing a steady, normative, dependable environment in which the children could learn to “trust” again.¹² As I argue in “Every Child Needs a Good Enough State,” the provision of care for infants and children include economic and material support for the caretaker or caretakers who, if faced with deprivations and fears for their own wellbeing, will not be able to produce a steadfast presence in the face of normal infantile and childhood impulses of destruction and aggression.¹³ The provisioning environment does not have to include luxuries or technologically advanced gadgets; the caretaker/child dyad is, however, never in a state of social autarky. During and after the Second World War—at a time of Keynesianism and powerful support for social provision for working class families—Winnicott continued to argue that the wellbeing of children was dependent on a nonpunitive, socially supportive environment for their parents and caretakers. We should be asking why, in an advanced industrial society with the capacity to offer care and support to all babies and their caretakers, the role of government in protecting vulnerable people from the cruelty of the market remains so underfunded, mismanaged, and politically controversial.

Childbirth is a facet of human existence that confronts us with the inexorable demands of natural processes. As Huber points out in *Climate Change as Class War*, under agricultural modes of production, the labouring classes depended on the environment for a living, but also lived according to its rhythms and needs. Today, one of the defining features of the global working class is its “profound alienation from the ecological conditions of life itself,”¹⁴ in other words the “lack of control over the basics of life (food, energy, land, housing, etc.).”¹⁵ The working-class politics needed to address this is what Huber calls “a proletarian ecology.”

So, while the most privileged workers can manage childcare through hired help and other commodified forms of support and can even escape the urgency of biology,

as childbirth, childcare, and childhood have become increasingly commodified, the working class is the most vulnerable to market forces, both in terms of the enforced sale of its labour and in terms of the reification of the conditions of care itself.

Just as Huber says that public ownership of electrical utilities can provide real benefits to the working class, so reorganizing our economy around children, dependency, and care would create working class support for Left/environmental projects. The Child Tax Credit, which put money in the accounts of the poorest families with children during the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced the proportion of American children living in poverty to a still eye-watering 46 percent. Many of those COVID-era provisions have expired and the rest will expire in 2025. Conservatives and their liberal helpmates are complicit in embracing austerity policies that add work requirements to social provision and will make lives for the poorest Americans even harder. Joe Manchin and the Republicans worked against the revival of the \$100 billion child tax credit program, although some states, such as California, have put into place their own child tax credit programs.¹⁶

Huber has argued for a radical transformation of environmental politics. By putting proletarian ecology at the centre of the Left agenda for environmental change, he has shown that we can imagine large-scale policy changes to improve environmental provision for working-class life. He focuses on socializing utilities, especially the electrical grid. The Child Tax Credit and provisions for childcare constitute another front on which a battle can be waged for social provision for children, childcare workers, and their parents. The unionization of childcare workers and the treatment of childcare as a public utility could go hand in hand with Huber's conception of proletarian ecology as an environmental politics that puts labour and working-class life at its very core. In laying out a generous blueprint for class-based environmental action, Huber does not shy away from criticizing PMC activism and its blinkered attitudes about public goods.

What I have laid out is a provisional set of suggestions for the synthesis of Huber's ideas about proletarian ecology with Winnicott's ideas about environmental provision. It is not a stretch of the imagination to see that exploited workers, confronting the everyday difficulties of sustaining their lives through the selling of their labour power, will have enormous difficulties being enthusiastic about the environmental movement's constant use of "protect" and "save" with regards to an abstract ideal of the environment. I hope to have made the beginnings of an argument for environmental provision and the wellbeing of caretakers and children as a public good and the provision of care as central to socialist politics. Huber's concept of "proletarian ecology" allows for a stunning return to a Marxist materialist understanding of nature itself. The liberal embrace of degrowth reveals the mainstream ideologically anti-working class attitudes of the professional class, content to prosecute lifestyle transgressions. Huber is asking for us to do so much more than that.

Notes

1. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War*, 188 (see also 21).
2. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War*, 161.

3. Liu, *Virtue Hoarders*; Phillips, *Austerity Ecology*.
4. Antinatalist Leftists are preaching to the choir when it comes to admonishing people to have fewer children. The professional classes are reproducing at a much lower rate than the poor. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/241530/birth-rate-by-family-income-in-the-us/>. Accessed July 27, 2023.
5. Marx. *The German Ideology* (1845). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>. Accessed July 3, 2023.
6. Marx. *The German Ideology* (1845) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>. Accessed July 3, 2023.
7. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 352–3.
8. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 354.
9. Costin, Karger, and Stoesz, *The Politics of Child*, 49.
10. Skopcol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*. See also Fass, *The End of American Childhood*.
11. Winnicott. *Babies and their Mothers*. Also Winnicott, *Babies and their Mothers*, 31.
12. Winnicott, *Oxfordshire County Council*.
13. Liu, “Every Child Needs.”
14. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War*, 229.
15. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War*, 21.
16. Soubramanian. “You’re Not Getting.”

Disclosure statement

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