

The Manichean Mann

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Michael Mann has been in the climate wars for well over a decade now. As he reminds us frequently in this new book, he has been in the crosshairs of his enemies, has fought off the attack dogs, and carries the scars of battle. Even the environmentalist Bill McKibben's promotional puff for the book valorizes Mann in terms of his "scars from the climate wars." The military framing of climate change long predates Mann's involvement, but it certainly is a framing he has done much to promote through his blogs, tweets, and general persona-at-large in public discourse.

And so it is not surprising that Mann's new book continues his characterization of the politics of climate change through a series of complex military tropes and metaphors. Wars, battles, attacks, fights, and enemies litter its 260 pages. Much of what I said about Mann's combative militancy in my review of his 2012 book, *The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars: Dispatches from the Front Lines*, can be equally applied to this new one. Now, his central argument is that there is a *new* war afoot. The *old* war—fought mostly around the claims of climate scientists—has been (largely) won. But a new war has been ignited; Mann and his allies are now having to fight against the forces of inaction.

Mann is half right in his diagnosis. The main axes of public dispute and argumentation about climate change *have* changed. The politics of climate change manifest differently now than they did a decade ago. More centrally in focus—and this is a good thing—are the substantive and pressing questions about the sorts of actions, policies, and interventions that are needed, appropriate, and effective to attenuate the risks of a changing climate. What are their respective costs and benefits? How do different options interact with

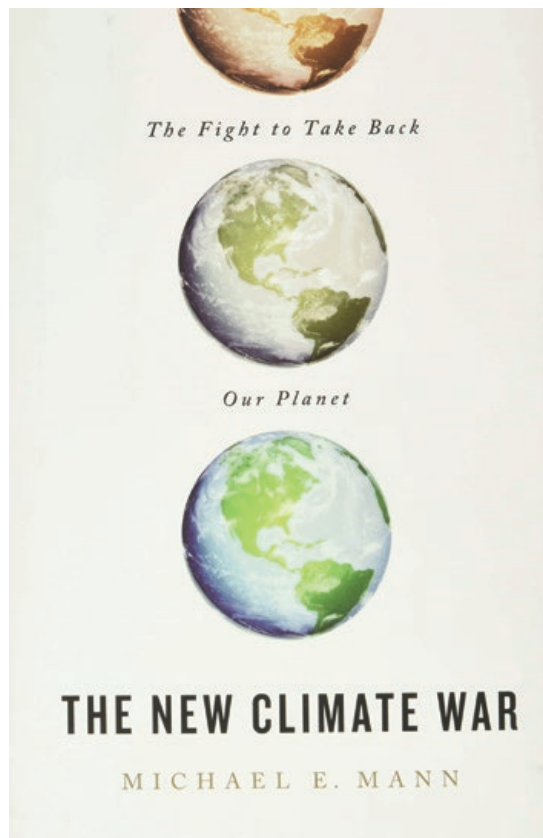
diverse cultural values and collide with vested interests? How do they complicate international geopolitics?

So in this observation Mann is correct. The focus of the issue has moved from “is there a problem?” to “what should be done about it?”

The tragedy, however, of Mann and people who think like him is that they view arguments about these questions through a Manichean lens: the source of all opposition to the “correct” view—Mann’s view—of what should be done about climate change is traced back to an orchestrated evil empire. The basic doctrine of Manicheism is that of a structural conflict between good and evil. For Mann, the source of this evil is the fossil fuel industry representing, as he puts it, “the eye of Sauron,” that omnipotent dark power in *The Lord of the Rings*.

There is no doubting the need for an accelerating transition away from fossil fuels. And there is also no doubt that vested political interests have obstructed its progress. But Mann is so conditioned by his Manichean worldview that wherever he looks in the public, scientific, and political debates around climate change he sees the shadows of the Koch brothers (52 name checks in the book), Exxon Mobil (23), and the Heartland Institute (15). The nefarious hand of the fossil-fuel lobby is everywhere. This worldview leads him to some ludicrous contentions that, taken together, result in *The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back Our Planet* offering an incoherent and distinctly unhelpful narrative on climate change. Let me give some examples of what I mean.

Take Mann’s assessment of an assortment of “solutions” to climate change that he ends up labeling as “non-solutions.” These include nuclear energy; solar climate engineering; various technologies of carbon dioxide removal, including carbon capture and storage (CCS), direct air capture (DAC),



The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back Our Planet

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bioenergy and CCS, afforestation; and enhancing adaptation and societal resilience. In Mann’s bipolar world, all these technologies and policy goals are weapons of inactivism, part of the insidious strategy being waged by the evil empire. Really? Afforestation? Nuclear energy? Are these technologies and policy goals all to be dismissed out of hand because they don’t conform to the preferences of the enlightened? (And this is where the incoherence of Mann’s position becomes evident: he himself recognizes the value of DAC, equivocates about the merits of CCS and nuclear energy, and elsewhere in the book urges societies to adapt.)

Mann unhelpfully identifies eight

alliterative groups of enemies who muster together under the battle flag of *inactivism*: dissemblers, deceivers, downplayers, dividers, deflectors, doomers, delayers, distractors. (Simple deniers now is not enough.) His circle of enemies has grown, mutated, and, perhaps most sinister of all, infiltrated “the climate movement” itself.

Indeed, he finds it necessary to create enemies out of a variety of scientists, scholars, writers, filmmakers, and think tanks that are actually engaged in the serious search for solutions to climate change—just not his solutions. People with whom Michael Mann disagrees—a long list that includes even such progressive stalwarts as Michael Moore and Bill Gates—become enemies: agents of the dark forces of inactivism, or contrarians, or “soft denialists,” or deflectors, or apologists, or defeatists. Mann’s playbook here is reminiscent of 1950s McCarthyism or the ideological purification pursued by the Communist International during the 1930s Spanish Civil War.

If one looks beyond the battle-posturing, the calling out of enemies, and the settling of Twitter disputes, what do we learn from *The New Climate War* about how to frame, enact, and deliver changes in the world that might ameliorate the risks of climate change? The strategy offered—it is of course a “battle plan”—has four elements: resist the doomists; learn from children; educate the uneducated; and focus on systemic change, not individual lifestyle choices. I certainly have a lot of sympathy for the first of these goals, having been arguing for the last 15 years that warnings of imminent global catastrophe are neither scientifically warranted nor politically constructive (although this does not prevent Mann from putting me on “the wrong side,” a contrarian).

But the most intriguing of his four points is the final one: changing the

system requires systemic change. Now, “systemic change” can mean different things for different people, but for Mann it means pricing carbon and promoting 100% renewables for meeting the world’s energy needs (other technological innovations seem to be ruled out by Mann). This is certainly not what some climate activists—such as the anticapitalist Naomi Klein or the young Swedish environmentalist Greta Thunberg—would mean by systemic change, and it is notable that while he is willing to challenge Klein’s position, he works hard in the book to keep Thunberg inside his circle of the virtuous.

I am left wondering who will be impressed by this book? It certainly will help those who are looking for a tidy checklist of the good guys and bad guys in (Mann’s view of) the climate debates. And it may gather some recruits to his battle plan who believe that pricing carbon combined with the technofix of renewable energies will “take back our planet,” presumably from the dark forces of the fossil fuel industry.

The art of politics is not to get everyone to agree with you, but rather to find allies with whom you can find joint ways forward, even if sometimes compromised. Consistently demonizing those who think differently than you makes it harder, if not impossible, to forge alliances. And this is a shame, because in terms of practical climate policies Mann is in fact a centrist. A relentlessly pragmatic approach to tackling climate change would hold to this faith: that political left and right *can* find agreement about carbon pricing and market instruments; that ecomodernists and environmentalists *can* recognize that innovation is essential; that reformists and radicals *can* agree that the path ahead lies somewhere between nudge and revolution; that evangelicals and atheists *can* be equally motivated by an ethics of care; that nationalists and cosmopolitans *can* find common

cause to “level-up” in terms of social welfare. If Mann could only disarm his discursive weapons of war he might actually find that he is surrounded by potential allies.

But Mann seems uninterested in building the alliances necessary for political change. Above all, the book offers little for those seeking a guide to the complex global politics of climate change. This is an America-first book. It perpetuates the fallacy that the global politics of climate change can be read through the peculiar lens of American political partisanship. The other climate superpowers—the European Union (6 mentions), China (8), Brazil (3), and India (0)—seem bit players for Mann. There is no analysis about the political economy of the global energy transition, and he is dismissive of the global challenge of alleviating energy poverty (“a contrived concept”). And Mann uses a trick he accuses his enemies of using—trivialization—when the concerns of those arguing for a just transition for the world’s poor are swept aside with his disdainful comment “there are always winners and losers.”

The German theorist Carl von Clausewitz characterized war as “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will.” This is not a good way to think about climate politics in a democracy. “In wars we have winners and losers. We take sides, and the solution is conquering and defeating your enemy,” observes John Besley, a professor of public relations at Michigan State University. “Do we want people to see scientists as angry, frustrated people or people who are doing [their] best to solve problems to make the world better?” The danger with Mann’s combative militancy is that it ends up being a destructive form of advocacy.

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