

graphy of artistic research since 2000, it both acts as a useful resource and flattens the works listed.

Another case in point is the discussion of Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966) that appears unexpectedly at the end of chapter three. Holert argues that Macherey is 'neo-Productivist', but it is hard to see how, unless two very different definitions of Productivist are in play. Macherey's understanding of literary 'production' is basically a formalist, Althusserian one, where 'production' means any transformation of a 'material' into a 'product' through determinate 'means' (an activity that can take place entirely in thought), whereas in Soviet Productivism it refers to the relations of material production. (A third, more strictly Marxist definition of 'production' as the production of value hovers in the background of the book, but is never quite invited to announce its presence outright.) Meanwhile, Holert seems to understand Macherey's notion of the 'object of knowledge' as evidence that Macherey sees art as an epistemic activity, but Macherey's (Althusserian) object of knowledge belongs to the critic, not the artwork. Macherey's arguments are constructed on a categorical distinction between art and science, in fact, which sets them at a distance from the claims of Soviet Productivism, and inflects any appropriation of them in relation to questions of art-as-knowledge.

In general, despite its caveats, the book is overly gen-

erous to the art institution. Holert's solutions to the problems he raises are often voluntarist and idealist. What is needed is an analysis that is more structural. (Stewart Martin's essay for Documenta 12 (in *RP* 141), and Peter Osborne's recent text on the subsumption of research (in the collection *The Postresearch Condition*) contribute to this.) This is a necessarily bleaker analysis, but this does not mean there is no space for new artistic practices. Indeed, such analysis should also orientate itself by current or recent practices that take up critical and reflexive inquiries into knowledge – Harun Farocki or Ultra-red, for instance. Holert raises the possibility of artworks carrying out a new form of institutional critique – in relation to academia rather than art – but implies, rightly, that this shouldn't be limited to a narrow form of critique that disenchantedly enumerates the ways in which art production is enmeshed in the neoliberal university. Instead, he points to Vishmidt's notion of 'infrastructural critique', an expansion of institutional critique that locates art in an expanded social and material field and can take 'immanent' or 'transversal' forms. This does indeed offer a productive way of conceptualising the intervention that critical art practices may make in the present. But after Holert's book, there is still plenty of space open for theorising art's interfaces with research and knowledge production.

Nicolas Helm-Grovas

Climate struggle

Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet* (London: Verso, 2022). 320pp., £16.99 hb., 978 1 78873 388 5

The US Congress passed its largest ever investment in clean energy in August – the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) – and yet it remains impossible to shake the feeling that, as Matthew T. Huber puts it, 'the climate movement is losing' in both the US and globally. Fossil fuels still provide the vast majority of the world's energy. Pipeline protests and youth climate strikes, irrepressible in 2019, have seen their momentum scotched by the pandemic. The Russian war in Ukraine now provides a national security pretext to 'drill, baby drill' in the US, UK and else-

where, as supply shortages drive record profits. Even the IRA represents a victory not so much for the 'climate movement' as for investors in 'green capital', who stand to benefit most from new clean energy tax credits. Meanwhile, climate disasters multiply, and the people who dragged the world into planetary catastrophe still call the shots.

Given the venality of the global ruling class, content to place scattered 'green' bets while sucking every last dollar out of fossil fuels, the way for the climate move-

ment to start winning is to treat climate change as a class struggle, Huber argues in his new book, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet*. ‘Capitalists who own and control the means of production produce climate change’, Huber writes. Only the working class has the numbers and leverage to challenge these capitalists at ‘the point of production’, he argues, and only a climate politics anchored in traditional labour demands for *more* – money, safety, and control over production – has a chance of winning workers to the cause. For Huber, slashing personal emissions, pricing carbon, or, really, doing anything that does not build up the power of capital’s primary antagonist – labour – is fiddling while the planet burns.

Reviews of *Climate Change as Class War* have mostly focused on Huber’s ideas about how to build a working-class climate movement in the US. I address some of these ideas, but focus on Huber’s theoretical points – both because Huber offers a persuasive rebuke to liberal environmental as well as eco-Marxist thinkers and because a coherent theory of class clarifies why a working-class climate program is necessary not just for workers but for everyone.

Huber is hardly the first to blame climate change on capitalism. He is, however, refreshingly specific about why capitalism is to blame. The problem is not rich people’s SUVs, ‘growth’ in the abstract or market inefficiencies, which might be ‘corrected’ by factoring ecological costs into the price of carbon. The problem is the class structure of the global economy, which concentrates power with ‘a small minority of owners who control ... the production of the energy, food, materials and infrastructure society needs to function’, and who use that control to extract more value from workers than they pay in wages. Labour exploitation is bad for workers on its face. It is bad for the climate because capitalists have come to rely on coal, oil and gas to deepen exploitation – to squeeze more and more value out of the workforce.

Marx observed that capitalists can squeeze workers in two ways. They can extend the working day or use machines to increase how much workers produce per unit of time. Because increasing worker productivity (or, ‘relative surplus value’) has historically meant using fossil-fuelled machines, ‘Capital’s drive for *relative surplus value* – that is to say, their drive to increase *exploitation* – ultimately entails more fossil fuel combustion and intensi-

fication of the climate crisis’. Here Huber follows Marx’s *Grundrisse*, as well as Andreas Malm’s argument in *Fossil Capital*: the capitalists who built up the English factory system in the early nineteenth century traded water mills for steam engines not because coal was cheaper than water, but because the portability and energy density of coal allowed them to submit workers to the rigid discipline of urban factories running day and night. Mechanisation also cheapens commodities churned out by the industrial system, including food, driving down the socially necessary wage any given capitalist must pay workers. This too increases relative surplus value while baking carbon burn into the reproduction of everyday life.

This is not the standard eco-Marxist account. Represented by figures like James O’Connor and Jason W. Moore, the usual eco-Marxist critique holds that capitalism produces ecological crises because capital plunders its ‘outsides’: ‘cheap’ labour, land and resource frontiers, including the carbon capacity of the atmosphere, which capital both needs and tends to destroy. It is hard to dispute this account; from petrochemical ‘sacrifice zones’ in Louisiana to clearcutting in the Amazon, examples of capital’s ecological parasitism are everywhere. For Huber, though, traditional eco-Marxists stray too far from ‘the hidden abode of production’ – a tendency he, like Ellen Meiskins Wood, blames on neoliberalism’s scrubbing of class struggle from the political imagination. In foregrounding the destructive *effects* of capitalism away from the shop floor, eco-Marxists presumptively deprioritise the class best positioned to address destruction’s *causes* at the point of production: the working class.

Crucially, class is neither an identity nor an income bracket but a social position, defined by one’s relationship to the ‘means of production’, as Huber stresses. If you own land, factories, mines, apartment blocks, software patents or money for investment, you belong to the capitalist class. If you do not – and so get what you need to live by trading your labour for money which you then trade for food, shelter, energy and the like – you belong to the working class. If you work to live but your work mostly involves ideas, symbols and images, you might belong to a segment of the working class Huber, following Barbara Ehrenreich, calls the ‘professional class’. Each class has firmly objective interests. Capitalists want to extract surplus value from workers. Workers want more resources, power and control over their lives. Capital and

labour are thus at war. The socialist view is that trying to win this war – by organising to claw back power from the capitalists, ultimately to make the economy serve the common good rather than private gain – is the best way to satisfy workers’ immediate interest in material security and *everyone’s* long-term interest in a livable planet.



Pulled mostly from the ranks of the professional class, mainstream climate activists have largely avoided class warfare in favour of various forms of sacrifice – from limiting personal consumption to campaigning for carbon pricing. Even the climate movement’s more radical currents – fossil infrastructure saboteurs, for instance – tend to position themselves against abstractions like growth, slipping into a ‘politics of less’ that denies the necessity of securing more material wealth for the majority of people. In worst case scenarios, such a politics fuels populist anger more readily captured by the Right than the Left, as France’s 2018 Yellow Vest protests, sparked by a fuel tax hike, suggest. In best case scenarios, it aims to redistribute resources from the rich to people who directly experience worsening weather – the so-called frontline communities routinely spotlighted by the professional-

class climate movement.

These frontline communities are owed a tremendous climate debt, but, for Huber, the climate movement’s alliance with frontline groups (more often rhetorical than real) is a strategic mistake. People who depend on ‘resource-based livelihoods’, especially, may be most deserving of resources for adaptation and repair, but this does not make them the best equipped to wrest those resources from a powerful global ruling class. ‘While socialist politics must always assert the right to self-determination of land-based peoples, a majoritarian popular climate politics will not emerge from those directly experiencing its worst effects’, Huber writes. A majoritarian climate politics can only emerge from the majority – a broadly conceived working class, whose relationship to capitalism is defined not by a direct connection to the environment, but by ‘profound *alienation* from the ecological conditions of life itself.’

Workers’ separation from the conditions of life is the basis of what Huber calls ‘proletarian ecology’. Echoing Italian communist Laura Conti’s ‘ecology of class’, ‘proletarian ecology’ defines the working class broadly: the mass of people who lack direct control over land, housing, energy, mobility, and so on, and so must work for money to buy commodities to live. Because workers’ access to resources is mediated by the commodity system, the working class has an interest in ‘decommodification’ – not just free or affordable housing, electricity and food, but social ownership of the means of producing what one needs to live well. Social ownership is also a solution to climate change; the tendency to deepen exploitation for profit is, after all, what drives accelerating combustion. For this reason, Huber argues, appealing to working people’s interest in decommodification – even if, at first, this simply looks like public power or free mass transit – is key to building a climate movement sufficiently large, committed and powerful to demand a just transition to a non-fossil economy.

Huber’s defence of the working class as an agent of decarbonisation and climate justice is a necessary rebuke to the view that labour is too committed to jobs – and thus industrial growth – to lead a movement for ecological repair. At the same time, Huber understates the compatibility of a working-class climate politics and one emerging from the frontlines. Labour exploitation and plundering the land are two moments of the same pro-

cess – one that involves violently transferring ownership of the means of life from the mass of people to a handful of capital owners, making reproduction contingent on selling one’s labour on the market. Any movement that opposes capital’s exclusive control of the means of life – whether made up of waged workers, unwaged workers, land-based populations, anti-colonial fighters, or something else – is struggling against the same enemy. In focusing principally on how climate activists claim an alliance with frontline communities to promote a politics of less, Huber downplays the many examples of land-based struggles, from Standing Rock to southwestern Bangladesh, fighting for precisely the thing Huber suggests the labour movement also wants: popular control over production.

Though Huber undersells it, the compatibility of working-class and land-based struggles lends weight to one of the book’s most important and controversial claims: the particular interests of the working class – social ownership of the means of life – are the interests of the human species as a whole.

Species is a loaded word. Dipesh Chakrabarty put the concept back on the critical map in his 2009 essay ‘Climates of History’, which argued that climate change reveals the species to be an agent of ‘geological’ change. The essay, which also popularised the Anthropocene concept, invited a rush of critiques and awkward neologisms: capitolocene, plantationocene, and others, all of which observe that the species is internally stratified, with some bearing outsized responsibility for climate change and others bearing outsized burden. Huber inherits a version of this critique, stressing that most planet-warming emissions trace back to a handful of capital owners who ‘have names and addresses’.

But Huber also wants to claim a universalist politics. Unlike the bourgeois universalism of the Anthropocene, however, whose insistence that ‘we are all in this together’ papers over actually existing hierarchies, Huber’s socialist universalism holds that social equality is possible only on the condition of material equality – when no single class, by virtue of its monopoly over land and other assets, can exert control over any other class. In this fairly orthodox Marxist view, the working class is the ‘class to end classes’, first, because it has a material interest in doing so and, second, because its position in modern economies, i.e., the source of all capitalist profits, gives

workers the leverage needed to actually pull it off.

Beyond this, the labour struggle is a struggle for universal liberation because capital is a universalising force. Capital subsumes difference into itself by turning human effort into a commodity (labour power) that becomes the measure of value in general – a means of ‘universal convertibility’ allowing qualitatively unlike things to be exchanged. This unleashes capital’s expansionary potential, driving capitalists to scour the Earth for anything they can seize and sell. The universalising thrust of capitalism begins, in other words, with the labour contract. For this reason, workers’ fight against exploitation is also a fight against capitalism’s imperialising tendencies, including its tendency to exhaust the capacities of ‘women, nature, and the colonies’, as Maria Mies put it. This is what makes working class interests the species’ interests: the source of workers’ oppression – the commodification of labour, which entails the commodification of life – is the source of capitalism’s full gallery of horrors, including those, like planetary heating, that appear to unfold far from the shop floor.

At the same time, labour power is the source of modernity’s triumphs: ‘Capitalism has ushered in real historical possibilities for human emancipation’. Yet such possibilities remain only that, possibilities, so long as wealth produced by workers’ collective efforts remains in private hands. Replacing capitalism with more democratic forms of political economy is key not only to curbing ecological destruction, but also to making the possibilities for abundance contained in modern machinery and infrastructure serve common rather than private ends. This is not to say that today’s global network of factories, mines, fields, ports, wires, algorithms, and so on should be preserved *tout court*, with workers replacing capital’s representatives at the helm. The architecture of modern capitalism has a tendency to degrade workers and the environment regardless of who holds the deeds. A socialist economy has to change not just *why* we produce but also what and how if it is to serve human needs into the future. The socialist wager is that a consciously and democratically planned economy, accountable to ordinary people, is infinitely better suited to achieving long-term human well-being than an economy ruled by and for the few.

Bringing this vision into being requires an organised and militant working class. As Raymond Williams put it in a 1984 lecture to the Socialist Environment and

Resources Association, building a sustainable and democratic system of production can only be achieved by ‘the force which is rooted in the majority interest and in the indispensable livelihood of all the people in the society, and that, ideally ... is the labour movement.’

Looking to the US, Huber suggests first organising electricity workers – a strategy he calls ‘socialism in one sector’. Ditching fossil fuels will require widespread electrification under any scenario; organisers should work with electric utilities workers, already heavily unionised in the US, to use strikes, slowdowns and work-to-rule campaigns to fight to nationalise electricity production, with an eye towards improving working conditions, providing electricity as a human right and transitioning the grid to non-fossil sources. Building this sort of programme will require sustained workplace organising focused on connecting workers’ interest in workplace safety (consistently a top priority) with their positional interest in control over the environments in which they live. If such organising succeeds, a nationalised electricity sector might form ‘the core of a public sector-led decarbonization program’. Longer term, the ‘disruptive capacity’ of electricity workers might supply the muscle for working-class voting majorities persuaded to support Green New Deal-type programs. FDR struck the New Deal under pressure from a broad working class backed

by industrial workers on strike. Who says it can’t happen again?

There are many reasons to doubt the odds. Despite excitement around the 2021 ‘strike wave’ and successful union drives at Starbucks and Amazon, union density and strike activity remain at historic lows in the US. Even if workers have a material interest in ‘decommodification and decarbonization’, the two core planks of capitalist ideology – the free market is good; there is no alternative – remain sturdy enough to block any quick conversion of the US workforce into a class *for itself*. More insidiously, the materials, machines and infrastructures that make capitalists powerful (and heat the planet) are also the materials, machines and infrastructures ordinary people rely on to survive. To live in a fossil capitalist society is to live under a threat: no fossil fuels, no work.

The hope is that labour militancy can answer this threat with its own: no workers, no profits. More than anything else, then, building a working-class movement for post-carbon democracy means supporting militant labour actions, however small, that demonstrate working people’s power to disrupt the economic and political order and remake it in some other image. As Huber suggests, there is no better way to get a feel for labour’s power than unionising your workplace.

Casey Williams

Frames of modernity

Susan Buck-Morss, *Year One: A Philosophical Recounting* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021). 416pp., £28.00 hb., 978 0 26204 487 5

Philosophers of the enlightenment such as Rousseau, Kant and Hegel imagined their projects as universal in reach and scale. Whether these philosophers were writing about the social contract, the foundations of moral law or the progression of spirit, the idea that the whole world could be understood from a universal perspective was taken for granted. In the twentieth century, postcolonial theorists have argued that this ‘universal perspective’ was inspired by specific, local or provincial European imaginaries. Reading postcolonial theory, one has learned to be cautious of the way universal modes of thought

risk imposing one culture’s values and norms onto all other cultures. Yet in an increasingly divided yet ‘globalised’ world we might ask: Are there ways of recuperating universal forms of inquiry from this dubious history? If so, how would we navigate the risk of imposition and reduction? What kind of philosophical project could be both global in its reach and sensitive to particularity, contingency and difference? What kinds of projects could create *new* visions of universal thought and history? For the last two decades, the philosopher and historian Susan Buck-Morss has been tackling precisely these questions.