

**Mann, M.E. (2021) *The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back Our Planet*. New York: Public Affairs.**

*For Issues in Science & Technology*

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 cross-hairs of his enemies, has fought-off the attack-dogs and carries the scars of battle. Even Bill McKibben’s promotional puff for the book valorises Mann in terms of his “scars from the climate wars”. The military framing of climate change long pre-dates 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. Contributing not least to this was his earlier book *The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars: Dispatches from the Front Lines* (Columbia, 2012).

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 the 260 pages. Much of what I said about Mann’s combative militancy in [my review of his 2012 book](#) 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. How the politics of climate change manifest now is different to how 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? What are their associated upsides and downsides? 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 of what should be done about climate change is traced back to an orchestrated evil empire. The basic doctrine of Manicheanism 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” (p254).

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 (84 name checks in the book), Exxon Mobil (39) and the Heartland Institute (44). The nefarious hand of the fossil fuel lobby is everywhere. This worldview leads him to some ludicrous contentions which, 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 which he ends up labelling as "non-solutions" (Chapter 7). These include nuclear energy, solar climate engineering, various technologies of carbon dioxide removal - carbon capture and storage (CCS), direct air capture (DAC), bioenergy and CCS, afforestation – and enhancing adaptation and societal resilience. In Mann's bi-polar world, all of 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 spends a considerable part of the book (notably Chapter 8, but elsewhere too) taking on what he calls "the doomists", one of his 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. He calls out numerous individuals here whom, he claims, engage in "crypto-denialism" and "climate nihilism" (p183): Guy McPherson, Kevin Anderson, Will Steffen, Jem Bendell, Rupert Read, Roger Hallam, David Wallace-Wells and Peter Wadhams, to name but a few. I very much agree with Mann's challenge to the disingenuous and misleading nature of some of the extreme claims about the future emanating from these individuals (see below). But Mann uses his Manichean cookie-cutter to place all of them – and indeed the broader movement of "doomism" – as either victims or subversive agents of the fossil fuel industry. Really? Kevin Anderson? David Wallace-Wells?

In similar vein, Mann finds it necessary to create enemies out of a variety of scientists, scholars, writers, filmmakers and think-tanks. People with whom Michael Mann disagrees become enemies, agents of the dark forces of inactivism. Here is just a short-list from the book: the Breakthrough Institute, Matthew Nisbet, David Keith and Ken Caldeira are all dismissed as ecomodernists, on the wrong side of the front-line; Michael Moore (through his film *Planet of the Humans*), Bill Gates and the website *FiveThirtyEight* have all been 'turned' and now betray the cause; while Naomi Klein and her followers are accused of aiding and abetting the enemy. Roger Pielke snr, is dismissed as a contrarian, Michael Shellenberger as "a soft denialist", David Victor as a deflector, Nathaniel Rich as an apologist

for the enemy and Jonathan Franzen as a defeatist. All are conniving with the enemy, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Mann's playbook here is reminiscent of 1950s McCarthyism or the ideological purification by the NKVD of the Comintern during the 1930s Spanish Civil War.

If one looks beyond the battle-posturing, the calling-out of his 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 making [this exact same argument for the last 15 years](#) (although this does not prevent Mann 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 the technofix of 100% renewables for meeting the world's energy needs (even though other technological innovations seem to be ruled out by Mann). This is certainly not what some climate activists – such as Naomi Klein or 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 “battleplan” 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).

But 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 EU (13 mentions), China (12), Brazil (3) and India (2) – 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”; p132). And Mann uses a trick he accuses his enemies of using – trivialisation - 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” (p135).

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, 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.

*Mike Hulme, University of Cambridge, 8 February 2021*