

Autonomy: A Return to Earth

by Luca Paltrinieri

Accumulation in a world of finite resources: Such is the vortex into which the moderns are thrown. Current ecological concerns, however, should also be viewed as a metamorphosis of the social question.

Review of: Pierre Charbonnier, *Abondance et liberté, une histoire environnementale des idées politiques*, La Découverte, 2020. 464 p., 24 €.

Though a history of political thought that begins in early modernity, Pierre Charbonnier describes the slow constitution of the founding axioms that blinded the “moderns” to their collective relationship to “nature” while throwing them into the vortex of infinite accumulation in a world of finite resources. The claim that the dominant conception of freedom was built on the illusion of inexhaustible resources is a fairly banal one, but Charbonnier also defends the less obvious thesis that it would be in our interest to view current ecological concerns as a metamorphosis of the social question. He is certainly not the first to tackle the task of combining social and ecological critiques in an effort to (re)politicize ecology.¹ Yet, his approach is of interest both because of the materials it uses (the philosophical tradition, but also the history of the social sciences and in particular of economics) and because of the double attempt it makes to renew political ecology *and* political philosophy.

Does the book rise to the challenge? Nothing is less certain. On the one hand, some “militant” environmentalists have criticized Charbonnier for abandoning the

¹ See in particular Murray Bookchin, *L'écologie sociale. Penser la liberté au-delà de l'humain*, Marseille, Wildproject, 2020.

radical critique of the capitalist mode of production and techno-scientific objectification to take refuge in a “greened socialism,” a vague call for “re-embedding” the ecological into the social.² On the other hand, the overall ambition of the project of politicization brings the intellectual to “discern a new political and critical form of knowledge adjusted to the new climate regime,” that is to say, “an assemblage between political theory and ecological knowledge which would guarantee the re-founding of a critical political subject on the basis of a response to the new *affordances* of the land” (p. 351). This purely programmatic perspective overlooks the awareness that is emerging in society.

Three legacies

The book builds on three legacies. First, it reminds us that modern political thought has always grappled with the material features (land, energy, machines) of a world that must be inhabited, known, and rendered productive, and that yet these features “have never imbued our political categories enough to make us sufficiently sensitive to the political problems they pose” (p. 40). For Charbonnier, it is precisely these “*political affordances of the land*” that have been repressed by the pact between affluence and freedom, which *conceives* of the latter as an emancipation from all material dependence yet *constructs* it on the basis of the promise of infinitely improved material conditions in a world of finite resources. In this sense, the investigation is an intellectual contribution to the great Latourian project of “landing on Earth”: The awareness of the limits of modernity compels us to take on the task of a (re)anchoring in the soil, the territory, and more generally the networks of geo-ecological interdependencies from which we have detached ourselves over the course of the last two centuries (especially in the domain of value production, as is made clear by the contemporary triumph of finance).³ The point is to put an end to the “ubiquity of the moderns”—their tendency to live “above the Earth”—while also refusing the conservative return to a sort of anti-democratic primitivism that celebrates soil, race, and blood (pp. 280-284).

² Aurélien Berlan, “Récrire l’histoire, neutraliser l’écologie politique,” *Terrestre*, 2 November 2020 : <https://www.terrestres.org/2020/11/02/recrire-lhistoire-neutraliser-lecologie-politique/> ; Daniel Tanuro, “L’abondance, la liberté et leur forme historique,” *Contretemps*, 27 July 2020, <http://www.contretemps.eu/liberte-abondance-forme-historique/>

³ Bruno Latour, *Où atterrir?*, Paris, La Découverte, 2017.

Second, the “materialist” legacy of modern thought only becomes visible in the Anthropocene, where *we can no longer* close our eyes to the irreversible impact of human action on the Earth and where climate change takes on the triple meaning of a political condition, a legacy to be embraced, and a trial to be overcome (p. 396). One must then seize the present by escaping the alternative between “collapse and resilience,” which according to Charbonnier dominates our historical moment. On the one hand, “green finance” construes the environmental limits of the pact between affluence and freedom as *risks* that can be leveraged for profit on the disaster market. On the other hand, “collapsology,” the “new cult of the end of the world,” falls into the scientific trap of mechanically describing the conflict between the inevitably growing needs of an expanding population and the *already* exceeded *limits* of the environment. For Charbonnier, both sides of the alternative lead to political inaction, not only because neither allows for conceiving of a political subject capable of “going in search of its autonomy” (p. 411), but above all because they are both “out of kilter” with the present moment: Green capitalists indefinitely postpone the abolition of our economic-political model, while collapsologists think that it is always already too late and that all that remains is to prepare for survival or redemption. Yet, this new “critical” subject can only be the product of an operation of “symmetrization,” which is to say, an epistemological volte-face that builds on multiple sources (postcolonial theory, the history and sociology of science, ecofeminism, the anthropology of nature) able to reverse the historical narrative whereby the West is the norm of development for all other civilizations (p. 357).

Third, it remains to understand what the (re)politicization of collective relations to the physical and living world would consist of in a “post-growth democracy.” Surely, “it is probably not philosophy’s task to affirm by speculative means what will be the name and the exact form of this collective capable of establishing itself as the subject of the ecological counter-movement” (p. 417). But the book should contribute to the scholarly invention of another freedom—the freedom, as must be clear by now, not to be “modern” any more, that is to say, not to be enslaved to the ineluctability of a growth whose material basis has been repressed. It is here that lies the disagreement with a political ecology that is incapable of designating a new path of freedom because it seeks to tear itself away from our “Western” tradition of thought in order to criticize it as a whole, in a movement that is both symmetrical and consistent with the illusory extraction of the moderns from their natural environment. This claim to autonomy, which takes the form of an autarkic ideal opposed to the global commercial circuits of industrial modernity, maintains a disturbing proximity to the modern conception of “extraction-autonomy”—namely the modern fantasy that society has unbounded

power over itself—whereby political emancipation is a wrenching from the land and affluence is the “elimination of the pressure of needs—the obsolescence of the survival motive in human action” (p. 43). Ultimately for Charbonnier, political ecology has merely maintained the border that the other science of the *oikos*, economy, established long ago between material self-subsistence and political autonomy (which the citizens of the *polis* could achieve only once the problem of their relationship to the “outside” or “nonhuman” world was solved).

By contrast, the historical investigation of the material unconscious of political thought must disclose *both* the presuppositions that have led us to this impasse and the possibilities for another modernity-freedom (p. 417). Charbonnier traces the intellectual antecedents of this project of self-protection to the socialist tradition: The emergence of society as a category capable of “transcending the laws of the market” and as a political subject capable of self-protection against the pathologies of industrial capitalism could inspire the formation of a new “collective subject” (p. 277). This is why Charbonnier does not hesitate to suggest that his book sounds the death knell of environmentalism: It is of course necessary to overcome the divide between the “ecological question” and the “social question,” but with the more profound aim of re-embedding the social into the natural.

A philosophical history of the environmental repressed

Let us stress the ambition and difficulty of a project that aims to hold together the description of the historical vicissitudes of the pact between affluence and freedom, the re-foundation of autonomy for the post-growth era, and the ecological revival of the social question. Charbonnier seems in fact to have written two books in one. The first book is concerned with how to write the history of political philosophy from its relationship to the social sciences and from the point of view of the environment. The second, more programmatic book proposes to rework (or abandon?) the notion of autonomy to move towards a post-growth conception of freedom.

Charbonnier’s work is neither a genealogy of the ecological question nor a history of ideas about the environment. It is rather an “environmental history of ideas” (p. 29), wherein the question of collective relationships with the land and the physical environment allows for a rereading of political and social philosophy against the grain.

The point is not to write an umpteenth “externalist” or “sociological” history of philosophy, but to reconstitute the traces that material coordinates (ecological, productive, energetic, demographic factors) have left in the theoretical and normative debates on freedom, autonomy, and democracy. Thus, the “outside” is a material world made of energy and pollution, logistics and food, private property and battles for the right of navigation: Through these conflicts, the Earth has burst onto the scene of political thought—an irruption that Charbonnier proposes to grasp from within the scene itself, that is to say, from the perspective of philosophical reflexivity.

Through a comparative reading of Grotius and Locke, the historical investigation begins by showing that occupation of the land and dependence on the land constitute a common unthought of modern political philosophy. Grotius conceived of exclusive property as the setting of boundaries that distribute men and things and thus allow for limiting conflict. Locke, on the other hand, justified the appropriation of the land in the name of improving it (through labor) and no longer considered it from a strictly defensive perspective: Entrusted with doing God’s will on Earth, man was given a literally infinite task. The modern project of human self-determination was thus linked to the occupation of physical space, of the land, in particular through the notion of exclusive property, which was but a form of delegated sovereignty.

Charbonnier then shows that from the pact between affluence and freedom, the ideal of autonomy was progressively co-opted by the market economy with the support of the state. On the one hand, the state created and guaranteed the legal conditions for the functioning of the market, and, on the other, it ensured the market’s progressive expansion, notably through colonial conquest and international relations. As guarantor of the pact between affluence and freedom, this liberal alliance between state and market took different forms, all of them based on a structure characterized by the polarity between inside-territory-limitedness and outside-space-unlimitedness: the enlightened despotism of the Physiocrats, a minimal liberal state limited to regalian functions, a closed commercial state. This structure specific to a colonial Europe living on resources from outside its territory is for Charbonnier at the origin of the “ubiquity of the moderns,” which defines freedom as the capacity to live in two different spaces at once: the space of the law, delimited by the borders of the state, and the virtually inexhaustible global space of trade and exploitation in which new energies and resources are constantly being made available. This disjunction, obscured by the infinite adaptations of liberal thought to the different phases of Europe’s economic trajectory, is precisely what prevented the assignation of a political meaning

to the interdependencies between modern society and its limited global resources and what “left the field open to ecological predation” (p. 162).

Although the fathers of socialism, Proudhon and Durkheim, were already acutely aware of the conflict between affluence and freedom, they were unable to conceive of autonomy in any other form than as a power that society exercises over itself by freeing itself from all forms of dependence on its environment, the latter appearing only in the form of a *nature* that can be mastered and is *external* to society (p. 140). While Proudhon did emphasize “the genesis of poverty amid affluence” (p. 177), he remained caught up in the fantasy of human emancipation from geoclimatic cycles. Durkheim, for whom the energy of coal, the machine, and the division of labor would henceforth provide the framework for the freedom of the moderns, insisted on the contrary on the physical and material burdens of the democratic project. We find a similar opposition between Saint-Simon and Veblen. Both sought to wrest all the material and human means of a technical power elaborated in the course of the industrial revolution from the financial finality of the economic system, with the aim of putting them at the service of a social regulation that would ultimately be in agreement with the ideal of emancipation. Yet, while the utopian Saint-Simonian “government of things” effectively led to a social organicism in which the quasi-religious faith in industry obscured the externalities (pollution, diseases, hazards), Veblen and the “technocratic movement” remained connected to a still elitist figure of technical intelligence: the engineer.

It has been said that Marx integrated the ecological debt in his critique of Capital by stressing the perpetual imbalance between society and its own conditions of existence.⁴ For Charbonnier, however, the post-capitalist promise of communism was yet another “ecological fiction,” a great conciliatory and abstract utopia that abolished space, cultural differences, and ecological constraints. In his view, Marx remained caught up not only in the humanist Prometheanism of a certain Western philosophical tradition (for which he was criticized time and time again), but also in the fascination with the deterritorializing globalization at the heart of the capitalist dynamic.

According to Charbonnier, it is with Karl Polanyi that the ecological unthought was finally dissipated. Polanyi brought to light the contradiction that underpins the liberal “commodification of nature.” Above all, he showed that the conception of nature as an infinite reservoir of exploitable resources and the definition of scarcity as the only true source of value are the two drivers of the movement by which the

⁴ John Bellamy Foster, *Marx écologiste*, Paris, Amsterdam, 2011.

economy “disembeds” itself from the social. While the naturalization of the social and the repression of the interdependencies between humans and their environment are two symmetrical and complementary tendencies, the emergence of society as a subject that protects itself against the centrifugal thrust of the market opens up the possibility of another relationship to the land. *Contra* the liberal pact between affluence and freedom *and* the conservative reaction that dismisses the democratic project in the name of the archaic link between local identity, customary law, and native soil, this new relationship conceives of the land as an “element of nature which is inextricably intertwined with the institutions of man” (p. 279).

The reorganization of political structures as a function of *social* freedom and, in parallel, the rearrangement of *collective* relationships with the land is precisely the project that Charbonnier wishes to revive. Thus, the project of “re-embedding” the ecological into the social draws its inspiration from that of “re-embedding the economy into society” that runs from Durkheim to Polanyi. But this is also the project that has paid the highest price for progressive amnesia: The fully automated luxury communism of Marcuse, who advocated delegating productive functions to the machine and left humans with the task of realizing their post-historical and post-instrumental “essence” through playful and aesthetic activities, could well be defined as the “critical” revival of the paradigm of extraction-autonomy. On the other hand, the notion of the limits of growth, which was first put forward by Meadows and the Club of Rome and was later taken up in bioeconomics and the risk/prevention paradigm underpinning Beck’s and Giddens’ work on “reflexive modernity,” sounded the death knell of the illusion of infinite growth only to pose a no less illusory alternative between collapse and resilience.

What post-growth autonomy?

This long trajectory has clearly brought to light the “ecological” paradox of emancipation. On the one hand, the project of political self-determination requires the subordination of the environment. On the other hand, it institutes a separation between political human concerns and a nonhuman “nature” made of bats, rivers, microbes, and pollinating insects that systematically underestimates the ecological interdependencies between worlds. The full significance of the “political affordances of the land” then becomes evident: The shifts and ruptures that characterize the history of the material supports of human existence and the geo-ecology of commercial exchanges have shaped economic policies, social thought, and philosophy alike. This observation amounts precisely to short-circuiting the liberal fable of the endogenous

character of an emancipation grounded in property rights, the division of labor, and the spirit of sacrifice (p. 155).

One could of course reproach Charbonnier for making arbitrary choices in building his pantheon of precursors and gravediggers of the ecological question, or even regret that he attributed from the outset the reflexive position to the socialist critique of the liberal model. The fact remains that he brilliantly reveals the modern and liberal contingency of the pact between affluence and freedom, the persistence of this pact in time, and some of the early challenges to it. Can we then still believe in the durability of the pair democracy/freedom, now that the impossibility of improving the material conditions of life through the expansion of needs has become evident? At a time when the horizon appears to be shrinking, how can one conceive of the autonomy of a society that thought itself free only in and through unlimitedness?

This is precisely what is at stake in Charbonnier's "second" book (p. 390):

"The political autonomy of peoples is being played out, will be played out, in a response to the affordances of the land that can circumvent the productive mode of relation that has dominated naturalism since at least the industrial revolution, in the abandonment of the regime of sovereignty founded on ubiquity, and in the liberation of a critical collective subject that does not meet the traditional definition of society which implies its opposition to nature."

It is clear, however, that the normative indications for the construction of this autonomy are slow to emerge. The last two chapters do set a few milestones for a renewed conception of autonomy in the era of the landing on Earth that draw on different sources (symmetrization, decolonization, the critique of productivism, the construction of new political cartographies based on geo-ecological interdependencies). But these milestones are tasks for a new political philosophy more than they are instruments for enabling the "subject of the ecological counter-movement" to take on the immense task of thinking freedom while gaining awareness of the "geological" and timeless dimension of its own action.⁵

It is undeniable that "the transformation of our political ideas must be of a magnitude at least equal to that of the geo-ecological transformation that climate change constitutes" (p. 403). But, above all, it is the place of philosophy within the new configuration of knowledge that ought to be revisited, at least if one endorses the observation with which the book opens, namely that the geo-ecological reality of our

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History. Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), 2009.

common world is changing faster than our founding epistemo-political beliefs. The philosopher who draws on several legacies to revive the project of socialist autonomy could also be asked to pay close attention to the tensions, the movements, and the awareness that are emerging in society. From this perspective, the refutation of “collapsology” through its reduction to millenarianism is problematic,⁶ first because it is not so certain that millenarianism and “politicization” have nothing to do with each other (let us think of Müntzer), and second because the fears of “civilizational collapse” – with all the confusions and approximations that they clearly entail – testify at least to a certain social awareness that the pact between affluence and freedom is historically relative. In any case, we cannot put in the same reactionary bag the neo-liberal resilience that profits from “climate risks” and the aspirations of civil society actors who get informed, get depressed, get talking, and get involved.

But perhaps the problem is deeper and concerns the nature of this “we the moderns,” the use of which is not always questioned by Charbonnier (nor by Latour, whose legacy he claims). The expression refers to a certain “Western” (European and in fact partly American) trajectory that went from enthusiasm for a certain model of extraction-autonomy to the acknowledgement of its potentially catastrophic limits. Given his concern for symmetrization, Charbonnier is careful to “provincialize” the critique by integrating into his approach the contributions of post-colonialism. This gesture does not, however, explain why the “Western” model of democracy and growth is still so attractive to those outside Europe, who seek to access freedom through identifying it with a lifestyle that necessarily follows from the pact between affluence and freedom.

A final remark concerns the difficulty of envisioning the actor who will politicize the ecological question. Charbonnier outlines the contours of the new collective (“neither class, nor people, nor nation, nor society,” p. 416) that might respond to the challenge of identifying the good affordances of the Earth in the age of the Anthropocene: In the wake of Latour, this collective will be situated at the crossroads of the human and the nonhuman. But the real difficulty is that climate risk calls more than ever for a global solution, whereas the various projects of economic territorialization are essentially local ones. Even if we consider, as some do, that reviving the socialist project also implies reviving modes of management of the common good different from the dominant model of exclusive property that has prevailed since Grotius and Locke, the problem remains of knowing how to establish

⁶ Catherine and Raphaël Larrère, *Le pire n'est pas certain. Essai sur l'aveuglement catastrophiste*, Paris, Parallèle, 2020.

the governance of the natural commons at the global level. In *Abondance et liberté*, the question is approached at a still abstract level: “The geo-ecological dimension of dependencies between the regions of the world and their political projects must become the cardinal reference point of political philosophy, and it is on this new base map that inter-state strategies are projected afterwards” (p. 381). Such a beautiful program, so urgent, yet still so far away.

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