
Pierre CHARBONNIER, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas* (Cambridge, Polity, 2021, 327 p.)

Facing the climate emergency, many scholars in the human sciences wonder if our inherited frameworks are not obsolete. Should we turn the page on our traditions' prior work and start fresh? Or should we dig deep and recover the marginalized history of explicit environmental thought, with pit stops in traditions like conservation biology, social ecology, environmental justice and political ecology? In *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, Pierre Charbonnier makes a more ambitious move: the reconstruction of a broad cannon of classic political theory, done by recovering major texts' implicit environmental thought. In this “*environmental history of ideas* (his emphasis),” he shows how “the centrality of the relations between nature and society functions as a way of analysing all ideas, theoretical controversies and their history” [22]. By emphasizing “the affordances of the land,” scientific and technological developments, shifting energy regimes, and struggles for territorial control, Charbonnier refreshes stale conversations. And he uncovers a rich tradition of semi-conscious environmental thought populated by the thinkers who already dominate syllabi on political theory and European intellectual history. Charbonnier's environmental history of ideas in fact ignores most of the typical protagonists of self-conscious environmental and ecological thought. Even so, he develops a backstory that sheds light on one of our biggest questions today: how can people be free in an age of potentially catastrophic ecological breakdown?

I am a social scientist of the climate emergency, but I am not a political theorist or intellectual historian. Like many of the book's likely readers, I am less interested in the finer points of Charbonnier's incisive reinterpretations—which will provoke new discussions among the relevant specialists—than in the overall arrangement of his meta-narrative, and its implications for clarifying climate politics. In the book's broad contours, it delivers. Charbonnier demonstrates over and over that the major preoccupations of European thinkers are incoherent unless we take account of their (largely implicit) engagements with the natural world. For instance, in writing about Locke and his interlocutors, Charbonnier shows that property is best understood as “the properly political form

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whereby individuals gain access to the soil, the good use of the land that guarantees them entry into the space of *sovereignty*” [49]. And as Charbonnier moves from the 17th to the 20th century, he continues to show how intellectuals ranging from liberals like Adam Smith and the Physiocrats through Alexis de Tocqueville and Pierre Proudhon, to socialists like Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen and Karl Polanyi, are all entangled in semi-conscious environmental theorizing. *Affluence and Freedom* can be read alongside books like the historical sociologist Jason W. Moore’s *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*,¹ which argues that capitalism is fundamentally a system of “organizing nature”: all economic history, and all intellectual history, must be environmental history.

Throughout *Affluence and Freedom*, the guiding thread is the tense relationship between two Enlightenment concepts: affluence and autonomy (both individual and collective), and their shifting relationship to land use, science and technology, and economic development. It is here that everything comes together. For Charbonnier, “the apparent discontinuity between the social problem and the ecological problem actually hides a more essential continuity, that of a tension which pervades societies that want to be free and prosperous, a tension between the desire for autonomy and the desire for emancipation from geoclimatic cycles and their constraints” [116]. In other words, liberal and socialist ideas of autonomy have for centuries presupposed affluence and, more precisely, a project of infinite economic production and growth; but this fantasy is now coming undone, because the underlying political economy of expanding affluence is causing a planetary ecological crisis. Must limits to affluence entail limits to autonomy? Only in some paradigms.

One key, for Charbonnier, is how autonomy is defined. In broad strokes, “the project of autonomy consists... in forming a political community transparent to itself, which determines its laws and its orientations according to this knowledge, this representation” [89-90]. In other words, some kind of enlightened self-government. But in liberal colonialism, not everyone is included. Liberalism’s fatal flaw is that it has always been happy to externalize the costs of its affluence onto other peoples and places. Tocqueville, for instance, took brief note of American democracy’s apparent dependence on the country’s “land and riches”—which of course were not natural, but seized through genocide and

¹ Jason MOORE, 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York, Verso).

conquest. But the genteel liberal preferred to dwell analytically on other dimensions of American civil society. For Charbonnier, this exemplifies liberalism's underlying "extraction-autonomy": autonomy for *some*, based on the mobilization of "inexpensive and abundant energy sources, combined with violent appropriation of land and labour placed under colonial authority" [90].

In contrast to liberalism's endless elisions, the socialist tradition at least recognizes the problematic coupling of autonomy and affluence. Socialist thinkers consistently question "collective relationships with nature" [158], in what Charbonnier calls a vision of "integration-autonomy" [95]. But recognizing is not solving. The problem is that none of the varieties of socialism—whether industrial, populist, or technocratic—can wholly let go of the idea that autonomy entails a more equitable distribution of an affluence obtained through extraction and production powered by fossil fuels. What is more, Charbonnier argues that in the decades after World War II, the pre-eminent socialist critics of Europe and the United States barely noticed the enormous ecological damage wrought by those decades' explosive economic development, now sweeping the whole world. Leading socialist thinkers knew how troubled the affluence-autonomy couplet was, but they kept failing to fully cash out their analysis.

There are one and a half exceptions. Charbonnier notes that Marx recognizes the "ecological rift" caused by capitalist productivism. But even Marx's ecological insights, in this view, are perpetually marginalized from the core of the thinker's productivist framework. For Charbonnier, among the great socialist thinkers, only Polanyi fully grasps the ecological contradictions of economic development, in particular through his analysis of land as a fictitious commodity; and thus only Polanyi argues that a public authority—the state—must regulate extraction from non-human nature in a democratic, equitable fashion.

Forgive me a brief tangent. Some of the critiques of Marx land. But they cannot account for the fact that—as Charbonnier recognizes—Marx wrote often about ecological issues. And while, on one reading, Marx was indeed just another egalitarian industrialist, the other dimensions of his thought have inspired some of the principal currents of critical environmental social science, from eco-Marxist social theory to political ecology (research often focused on peasant politics), and quite a bit of environmentally minded human geography. It is no accident that Marxist intellectuals like André Gorz were on the vanguard of leftist environmental politics in Europe.

In any case, I am intrigued by Charbonnier's call to redeem the socialist project by "updating the conceptual and historical base on which the concept of autonomy can be reconstituted, rather than at all costs reviving ideals linked to the industrial age" [235]. To that end, I note Charbonnier's effort—albeit late in the book—to bring in critical intellectual traditions from outside the European mainstream. He renders these as late-20th century critiques of modernity, in the form of post-colonial thought, the sociology of science, and the research program of unequal ecological exchange.

No book can cover everything. And this book covers a lot. Countless students read the classics of the European tradition. Many more readers are already familiar with those celebrated authors. Why should these readers throw out intellectual tools they have already worked so hard to develop, when they could reuse them in new ways to think more deeply about the present crisis? These people now have a volume that brings the dilemmas of climate politics to life in classic texts. And Charbonnier's core question could not be more relevant to the rise of green capitalism—how can we avoid yet another wave of (green liberal) extraction-autonomy?

We should also take the opportunity of Charbonnier's meta-narrative to debate some core concepts that bridge intellectual history and contemporary politics. One theme where I would like to apply some pressure to *Affluence and Freedom* is its accounts of inequality.

Charbonnier argues throughout the book that the question of the earth is also the labour question. I agree. And yet labour—and class domination—are hardly present in the text. We read little about the texture of workers'—and countless other groups'—struggles for autonomy, which we might define more narrowly as struggles for freedom from domination: class domination, but also ethno-racial and caste domination, gender domination, and domination based on any number of other differences. As a sociologist, I found the discussion of autonomy often abstract, decontextualized from the material struggles that drive changes in political thought. Where the book does tackle social domination, it often comes in the form of denouncing colonialism, which is the primary axis of inequality in the book. For instance, in the text's final pages, Charbonnier evokes the urgency of "questioning of the epistemic and political order that separated the social from the natural, the West from the rest of the world" [260]. Charbonnier is correct, here. But the point is incomplete. For the projects of working-class autonomy involve both struggles within and between countries. The labor questions in the West and the rest have always been linked, and those links have been

consistently highlighted by a wide range of anti-colonial thinkers, ranging from the Black radical tradition to any number of Communist and socialist internationalist traditions across the Third World. All this matters to climate politics. Inequality in responsibility for carbon pollution and vulnerability to climate damage are not just a matter of difference between countries; within countries, different groups consume and suffer to vastly different degrees. Both affluent capitalists, and insurgent social movements, are cooperating with allies across borders. Old patterns are taking new forms. There are long intellectual traditions of research into such nested and intersecting inequalities. B. R. Ambedkar, Aimé Césaire, Antonio Gramsci, C. L. R. James, José Carlos Mariátegui, and Vladimir Lenin could appear in companion volumes asking similar questions from different vantage points. Many of the critiques of mainstream European thought that Charbonnier highlights have older roots than he explores. As we continue to develop a fuller environmental history of political thought, we might also engage with the transnational social histories of internationalism from below, like Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.²

Affluence and Freedom's animating tension, of course, is its rescue mission of the European cannon. The very move that allows Charbonnier to revisit the classics to great effect also impedes a more holistic reconstruction of the environmental history of political thought along global lines. And the move to situate European thought's reliance on colonialism takes narrative precedence over investigating the multiple axes of the labour question (including the dispossession of peasants) whose centrality Charbonnier emphasizes.

This book has convinced me that European political thought has a surprising amount to say about contemporary ecological politics. I also note that it is that tradition's political economy currents that seem most relevant to Charbonnier's analysis: the physiocrats' agricultural economics, the industrial technocratic visions of Saint-Simon and Veblen, Marx and Polanyi deconstructing commodity fetishes, and the research program on unequal ecological exchange.

The reason is that, as Charbonnier notes implicitly on the book's final page, the 21st century tension between affluence and freedom is not philosophical—it is material. In closing his book, he argues (correctly) that the only way to change social life in accordance with the affordances of the land is by “reinventing the protective institutions and urban

² Lisa LOWE, 2015. *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, Duke University Press).

infrastructures, and the mechanisms that finance them, as well as the social attachments which find their place in them... The self-protection of the Earth, therefore, is not an ideological curiosity symptomatic of the erasure of politics, but the only arrangement of concrete struggles and aspirations that can meet the challenge of the present" [264]. In short, it comes down to green political economy and environmental class struggle.

Moreover, the ostensible imperative to slow or stop economic growth, which Charbonnier takes as given, is not a philosophical necessity. It is an empirical claim. Even if that imperative is correct, it is not very meaningful when shorn of specifics. The most ardent advocates of degrowth still want to build more solar panels, more public transit, more hospitals, and so on. Naomi Klein has called this vision *selective* degrowth. The concrete details of prioritization are crucial here. If we really are headed to a zero-sum, steady-state economy, then the animating battles will be over investment and distribution—struggles over how limited resources are spent, over which transformations of the land are prioritized, and over the power to make the big decisions: ecological economics plus green realpolitik. The socialists and political ecologists that Charbonnier admires have much to say about this—precisely because they situate the developments of political thought in a broader political economic context riven by struggles over power. Ultimately, the environmental turn is an empirical and material turn. We might have to think of autonomy and freedom in less esoteric, and less abstract ways. We might find that environmental, social, and economic histories of political ideas are also merging.

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