

## **Imagining a Virtuous Break with the Modern Age**

**Article by Edouard Gaudot**

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Modern political thought has often overlooked society's relationship with its environment. But a certain understanding of this relationship has always been embedded in its major currents, from liberalism to socialism. *Abondance et liberté* (Abundance and Freedom) by Pierre Charbonnier is an environmental history of ideas that links changing patterns in resource and land use to political thought as it developed in the modern era.<sup>[1]</sup> Edouard Gaudot reviews this sweeping analysis, highlighting its relevance to thinking through the dual social and ecological crisis of the 21st century.

Since the spring of 2020, around half of humanity has seen its freedom to come and go drastically curtailed, while collective interactions have been temporarily confined to the virtual public space of social media. At the same time, with shops closed, global value chains disrupted, public transport halted, employees furloughed, and businesses going bust, the effects of a sudden slowdown in economic activity around the world are already palpable, and extremely worrying.

The COVID-19 pandemic, the accompanying health crisis, and its social, economic, and political consequences provide a fitting backdrop for a reading of Pierre Charbonnier's fascinating *Abondance et liberté* (Abundance and Freedom). With abundance threatened and freedom suspended, the entire imaginary of modernity – initially Western, and subsequently global – is being called into question. This resonates strongly with the book's central theme.

Benefiting from the temporary drop in human activity and the multiple forms of pollution it causes, skies and waters are clearing, allowing flora and fauna to flourish. As humanity withdraws, creatures hitherto relegated to the periphery of humanity's consciousness – among them dolphins, deer, birds, and insects – are reappearing in its sensory field: the environment. Having previously been pushed out by our excessive expansion, nature is returning at a gallop.

A change expected to emerge from the catastrophic manifestations of global warming is instead occurring as a result of the current health crisis: a greater awareness that the land, just like public space, should be shared between all of the life forms that inhabit it. Far beyond the intellectual and activist world of ecology, hopes are growing that this change to our routines and outlooks will help overcome a major dichotomy of modernity: the separation between humans and nature.

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Written in an era marked by both the degradation of life on our planet and a questioning of the established liberal order, *Abondance et liberté* is, in a way, two books. It can be read both as a history of political ideas written

through a chronological reading of key thinkers, and as an essay reinterpreting how the production of these ideas – and their political importance – was linked to developments in “forms of spatial occupation and land use” (p. 7).

In other words, ecology is older than the ecologists. “Ecological reason” developed with the rise of the ideas of abundance and autonomy (i.e. freedom). Charbonnier’s work highlights and traces the historical and philosophical links between this modern trilemma: wealth, liberty, and ecology. This effort represents one of the work’s three major merits.

The author’s approach is threefold, as is the history that he describes. In the first phase, the promise of political autonomy and emancipation from arbitrary power doubled as a collective and individual promise of enrichment. Subsequently, the formation of autonomous, free social groups determined to pursue their interests translated into a movement for both economic growth and democracy, thereby anchoring the historical equation between the two in our imaginaries. But at the same time, as the costs of access to abundance became clear, particularly on the margins (the working class and colonialism, closely followed by environmental degradation), the initial relationship between freedom and prosperity began to be critically overturned. This trajectory continues right up to the current historic moment, in which autonomy is threatened by the rationales of growth and abundance that once fuelled it.

Growth, democracy – and ecology: by adding this third pillar, Charbonnier invites us to revisit the modern political project for individual and collective emancipation, a project underpinned by rapid industrial expansion viewed as the unstoppable march of progress. China’s authoritarian capitalism has already proved that this modern tandem does not necessarily follow a linear path. Abundance can be enjoyed without freedom. But with 40 years of warnings from scientists and environmental movements about climate change, the destruction of nature, and systemic threats to the planet’s ecological balance, political ecology has so far provided the most enduring critique of the combination of capitalism and democracy.

*Abondance et liberté* is therefore “an environmental history of ideas” informed by the critical anthropology of modernity – particularly Bruno Latour, cited frequently throughout the book, and Philippe Descola, a pioneer in moving beyond the separation between nature and culture: “Rather than a short and continuous history of environmental awareness, we will instead write a long history littered with breaks in the relationship between political thought and forms of subsistence, between territoriality and ecological knowledge.” (p. 30) From the land itself to machines and energy in its various forms, the book grapples with the way in which we inhabit, subsist on, and “know” territory, and how this conditions our political categories and the ideological systems they create.

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Thomas Piketty’s powerful recent work *Capital and Ideology* shows how the unequal spread of wealth derives its legitimacy from the dominant ideological discourse. Charbonnier broadens this reading by reminding us how dominators and the dominated participate in the same relationship with the world, with nature, and with resources. By showing that modernity, whether in its enthusiastic liberal or critical socialist form, resides on land, subsists on it, and describes it in the same way, the book invites a rethink of foundational categories. The modern, 17th-century definition of property is synthesised as that “form of individual access to the soil, in which good use of land guarantees sovereignty” (p. 87). Private or public, land belongs to those who can improve it. From this we can easily see the rationale for colonialism, or the ordering of productive space by the state.

Regional inequalities, the distribution of social groups, the allocation of scarcity and abundance: more than a mode

of production, capitalism presents itself as a “mode of residence” (p. 405), a collective way of being in the world. More than simply curbing its excesses, its beginnings need to be completely rethought. This is the second major merit of the work: it moves beyond the standard anti-capitalist imaginary that still appears all too frequently in the environmentalist critique of society (in particular in the fashionable notion of the “commons”, which often simply burnishes the image of communist thinking discredited by historical experience). The relationship with ownership of the means of production, or sharing out the fruits of the earth, cannot be understood without a profound redefinition of what it means to own and exploit natural resources.

By demonstrating the neglect of the environment in modern ideas, *Abondance et liberté* reads as an alternative history of Western triumph “over nature, scarcity and heteronomy” (in other words, outside constraint) (p. 25). The shift from “environment as object” to “environment as viewpoint” opens up opportunities for historical interpretation that are both pertinent and fundamental. A re-reading of the history of social struggle in the Global North and South, at times with the help of Timothy Mitchell’s classic *Carbon Democracy*, while keeping in mind the question of a community’s sovereignty over its land, allows a connection to be made between miners’ strikes in the Ruhr, the struggle of the Mapuche people in Chile, and the fight of the defenders in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, both in space and time. This “politicisation of lands” (p. 405), which frees them from the uses prescribed by the modern state, illustrates one facet of this political and intellectual project.

In order to resolve the wealth/liberty/ecology trilemma, this project must “break with the modern exception” (ch. 11). In this sense, the call on Greens to incorporate elements of socialist critical thinking has the immense merit of widening environmentalist thought beyond a discourse too often trapped in an approach exclusively centred on nature, at risk of misanthropy, and with a certain moral perspective on progress. This may well explain the surprising absence of certain political ecologist thinkers, whether pioneers or pillars, particularly when it comes to a critique of technical reason. Is this why an anti-technological imaginary is missing?

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By partially skipping historical resistance to mechanisation – and the artisan ideas of self-limitation and craftsmanship – in favour of the “technocratic hypothesis” of Henri de Saint-Simon or Thorstein Veblen, the book leaves the question of technology to languish in the blind spot where the majority of environmentalist thinking, whether degrowth or post-growth, has abandoned it. Yet the speed and nature of the social and cultural change necessary for resolving the trilemma also depend on the speed and nature of technological change. Whether environmentalists lament, ignore or fight it will not make any difference: societies with the technology for nuclear weapons and genetic sequencing will not simply forget about it. What place will they have in a society that has broken with the “modern exception”?

Nevertheless, the programme of “breaking with naturalism”, “rethinking the planetary scale of trade”, and “thinking about curbing the economy” (pp. 374-382) has a familiar ring to it. In this sense, Charbonnier clearly identifies himself as belonging to the ranks of political ecology’s thinkers. And, like them, he stops at the foot of the mountain, without indicating a path to the top.

The reason for this may well be that addressing the problem of technology would require a profound reprogramming of the Western imaginary. It should also be said that it exceeds the book’s scope, both in

complexity and subject matter. Indeed, therein lies its first major flaw, of a philosophical nature: the framing of the picture is a little narrow. Certainly, the undertaking was highly ambitious, and by that measure quite successful. But it must be said that the book is more an “environmental history of political economy” than an “environmental history of political thought”.

The adventure of modernity, and the link between abundance and freedom, is also that of the application of critical reasoning in history. In this case, it is about overcoming the many disabling separations that imprison us: human/nature, spirit/flesh, and even male/female or familiar/foreign. This major endeavour also requires an environmental history of humanism, starting with Pascal and Descartes as the pillars of human rationality’s superiority over the real, nature, the environment.

Furthermore, the emergence of individual sensibility and interiority also translated into politics. Rousseau, Goethe, Hugo, and Byron – the romantics whose revolutionary fervour marked the 19th century right up to the horrific industrial and nationalist butchery of 1914-18 – deserve an environmental re-reading. The usual suspects are certainly there, through Marx, and Marcuse for the Freudian dimension. But there is a surprising absence of Nietzschean references to the genealogy of morality and its dialectics, or even to Heideggerian thinking about technology and the enframing of nature.

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Work has already begun, for example by Serge Audier in *La société écologique et ses ennemis* (2017). And by Peter Sloterdijk, whose “The Domestication of Human Beings and the Expansion of Solidarities”,<sup>[2]</sup> *In the World Interior of Capital* (2013), and even *Spheres* (2011) take a philosophical approach to overcoming our separation from the world. There is sufficient material here for all manner of historical investigations to guide us in making essential changes to our outlook. Absent from the impressive list of references are the more traditional green intellectuals, such as Jonas, Gorz or Graeber, who have all in their own way attempted to provide contemporary political ecology with the tools to “decolonise the imaginary”: in other words, to liberate us from a “certain idea of man”, and from the philosophical and political representations inherited from industrial modernity, without calling into question its dual legacy of abundance and freedom.

Bequeathed to us by humanism, this “certain idea of man” is inseparable from the way we think about nature, the world, social relations, and the female half of humanity. The choice not to explore this aspect of “symmetrisation” (p. 355), that is to say the critical reversal of modern centrality, while concentrating on two others (decolonisation and the environment), might seem like common sense: the slope is steep, the summit far, and the terrain can very quickly turn into a conceptual minefield. But it is a telling and ultimately detrimental choice. The asymmetric otherness that nature represents is more abstract, faceless, and devoid of an expression of autonomous will. Feminism, eco-feminism in particular, offers a powerful lever for shifting imaginaries. This endeavour to bring about a readjustment, away from a masculine, linear, and technical vision of progress and towards its feminine, circular, and creative counterpart, deserves to move from the radical and activist fringes of ecological thinking to its centre.

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, *Abondance et liberté* provides a stimulating journey for those wishing to understand the historical emergence of political economy and its establishment as an area distinct from

politics. Economics has gradually left behind its *raison d'être* to become an autonomous and voracious matrix, fuelled by our vital energies, into which our consumerist brains are now wired.

The work's core, its claim to originality, and its third major merit, lies in its pursuit of the trails laid by Proudhon, the first socialist critic and "environmentalist" thinker, on the limits of growth and the use of resources, and Durkheim, the "inventor" of the social question.

"The social question is the first expression of the environmental question... Political ecology is underpinned by the question of society's resistance to its subordination to an economic order." (pp. 198-199) It is here that the book's central argument is made, in an audacious interpretation of the historical continuity between the social question identified by Durkheim and Proudhon at the birth of socialism and the contemporary environmental question. Charbonnier makes the same category error as today's environmentalists: the temptation to reduce one to the other in a hierarchy – chronological for him, moral for them.

The book's second major flaw is political in nature. An ambiguity haunts the reader throughout this journey: socialism is at times described as a historical moment, at others presented as a political preference. This persistent ambivalence makes for confusing reading. The reader is frequently left wondering whether this is a history of ideas or an ideological attempt to move forward the socialist critique of the link between abundance and freedom to address the environmental question. It carries a particularly pertinent message for industrial socialism's conservatives: "the greatest tribute that we can pay to socialism is to update its conceptual and historical foundations so as to build a project for autonomy upon them, rather than to revive ideas associated with the industrial age at any cost." (p. 390)

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This ambivalence, however, disappears at the end of the book, where we understand the aim stated in the introduction, "to contribute to the politicisation of ecology" (p. 11). This may have sounded like arrogance (leaving aside the electoral trajectory of the European Greens, ecology has clearly been a feature of the political landscape for several decades) but, in fact, it simply signals the book's implicit ambition to bring a certain intellectual and theoretical order to ecology.

Like a large building with many open doors, the environmentalist cathedral has the ephemeral atmosphere of a great participative forum, a festival of ideas. Unlike socialism or liberalism, ecology is notable for its lack of a sacred book or canon. Reading *Abondance et liberté*, you sense the dream of remedying this – at the risk of crystallising both an orthodoxy and its accompanying heresies, and of destroying the political biodiversity that characterises ecology.

While this is somewhat presumptuous and not a particularly desirable aspect of the book, the idea of making it clear to all that the social and the environmental now overlap is useful for achieving the political convergence that is needed today. Redefining the social question to "give solidarity between humans and non-humans the centrality that it deserves in the current context" (p. 404) is a good approach, which could bring together the different churches of ecology and socialism in their own Council of Nicaea.

More than a simple ecumenical reformulation of the issues, there is a need for a compass, a "new conceptual

mapping” (p. 388). Picking up the theme of Bruno Latour’s 2017 essay *Down to Earth* on politics in the era of the climate imperative, in the closing pages Charbonnier argues for the emergence of a “new critical subject” (p. 411), meaning in a way the “people of ecology” that French Green politicians try very hard to invoke, as if conjuring spirits.

But how can this collective subject emerge? Like others before it, the book stumbles when it comes to the conditions required for disalienation, for our voluntary detoxification. We can of course proclaim the need for self-limitation, or an ethical revolution based on Ancient Greece, as advocated by Giorgos Kallis in his excellent short essay *Limits*. “Refusing subordination to an economic order”, echoing Durkheim, is not enough. We must return to the ideological dimension: a sort of rehabilitation of the meaning of life. By providing a narrative about the world and the human, centred on the representation of an ideal society as in Ernest Callenbach’s science-fiction classic *Ecotopia*, ecology links individual fates to collective paths. As an ideology, it reintroduces the dual dimension of transcendence and immanence that holds society together – without illusions of a re-enchantment of politics.

The key to the link between the traditional socialist and environmentalist critiques of modernity lies in this ability to tie together the individual and the collective: the emancipation of people and society as a whole. The book leaves us at the edge of the forest with this question unanswered: how do you bring about an ecological society? And at what level? National, European (a missing dimension, unfortunately, whereas Latour placed all his hopes on Europe), global?

Despite its limitations, *Abondance et liberté* is an important book in a series of recent works, from short essays to hefty tomes, which attempt to think about the world in the context of the climate imperative and to reconcile economic and environmental questions. A valuable contribution, it is a plea not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We must acknowledge the accomplishments of modernity without losing sight of its ecocidal consequences. In this sense, the book’s critique of progress is in keeping with the progressive tradition, making it fundamentally part of political ecology.

Therein lies the challenge, and its urgency. Rethinking humanity’s place in the reality of the living world – and our political categories accordingly. Pierre Charbonnier’s book does not address this question. But it does provide a valuable stepping stone towards an answer.

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## Footnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> Pierre Charbonnier. *Abondance et liberté – Une histoire environnementale des idées politiques*. La Découverte, 2020.

<sup>[2]</sup> This is a chapter from *Solidarity and the Crisis of Trust* (European Solidarity Centre, 2016). Jacek Koltan (ed.)

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