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Ecology to an Anarchist Beat

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From Élisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin to Rachel Carson, Murray Bookchin, and André Gorz: the anarchist tradition understands ecology not as top-down conservation, but as a practice of cohabitation. Simon Guyomard and Édouard Jourdain trace this overlooked lineage through to today's ZADs and Rojava, and ask what it means to inhabit the world without dominating it.

Although a consensus is forming as to the necessity of an ecological approach, ecology has been politically neutered and, in many cases, appropriated by state and commercial worldviews. As a result, there is an urgent need to reexamine the critical traditions that have theorised the relationship between nature and society, not as a matter of management or expertise, but as a fundamentally political question.

Among these traditions, anarchism's unique contribution is often overlooked. Yet it was one of the first approaches to think about human emancipation and the preservation of the environment as two inextricable dimensions of the same societal project. This link can be traced back to the very first formulations of anarchist thought in the nineteenth century.

Anarchism thus enables us to think about ecology in a different way: not as top-down conservation policy, but as a founding practice of cohabitation, in which questions of power, ways of inhabiting the world, and the legitimacy of authority play out.

Ecology without masters

From the very early stages of Europe's industrial revolution, radical criticisms were made of the effects of industrial civilisation on the environment and on human beings. Utopian socialists like Charles Fourier were quick to critique the ravages of capitalism on nature. Dominant socialist lines of thought, particularly Marxism, did not dwell on ecological issues.

It was the anarchists who developed the first real arguments connecting the conditions of emancipation to the preservation of the environment. While this crucial conception can be read into the works of the early anarchist thinkers such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin, the true theoretical foundations of the convergence of anarchy and ecology were laid by two anarchist geographers towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Élisée Reclus (1830–1905) was a French geographer exiled as a Communard. He was the author of the monumental *Nouvelle géographie universelle* (1875–1894) (published in English as *The Universal Geography*) and *L'Homme et la Terre* (1905–1908). Reclus's geography and anarchism were intrinsically linked: understanding human societies, he believed, required an understanding of how they fit into their natural environment. This led him to develop the concept of *mesology,* which took account of the settings in which various organisms interact.

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His magnum opus *L'Homme et la Terre* is considered one of the first formulations of political ecology *avant la lettre*. Reclus could already see the ravages of industrial agriculture and of capitalism on environmental balances. The quality of human life, he wrote, depends on our societal choices regarding the earth: "The truly civilised man, understanding that his own interests are bound up in the common interest and with that of nature itself, acts in a completely different fashion. He repairs the damage committed by his predecessors, helps the earth rather than brutally attacking it, and works to beautify as well as improve his land … Having become both 'the conscience and consciousness of the earth', the man who is worthy of this mission thus takes on a share of responsibility for the harmony and beauty of the nature that surrounds him."[1]

Reclus's concept of the relation between humans and the environment was thus inseparable from an ideal of social justice. Being aware of the interconnected nature of different forms of domination, he was also a vegetarian and a feminist. His influence was later rediscovered by the libertarian ecologists of the 1970s, who saw him as their forerunner.

At the same time, the Russian prince-turned-anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) was developing a naturalistic approach to social theory. Like Reclus, Kropotkin was a geographer by training and had explored Siberia. He was struck by the cooperation he observed in nature. In 1902, he published *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution,* a work of popular science in which he opposed the Social Darwinism of his time. Kropotkin highlighted the importance of cooperation and mutual aid in the animal and human worlds, seeing it as a natural law just as fundamental as laws of competition.

For Kropotkin, the spontaneous cooperation in nature acted as the empirical foundation of anarchism: if mutual assistance was a factor in evolution, he reasoned, then libertarian social structures founded on voluntary association and mutual aid were not only moral, but in accordance with human nature.

Kropotkin not only transposed natural laws onto society but also developed a critique of nineteenth-century industrial centralisation. In *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899), he suggested decentralising production by combining agriculture and industry at the local level, in order to reduce the waste and alienation resulting from large-scale capitalist industry. Foreshadowing modern ecological ideas, Kropotkin advocated for a society made up of a collection of autonomous communities that satisfied their own needs in a sustainable manner, by integrating agricultural and manufacturing work, and returning to local short supply chains.

These two writers are among the figureheads of a tradition which was remarkable among other socialist schools of thought from the middle of the nineteenth century for the way it integrated ecology into a revolutionary perspective.[2] These anarchists focused primarily on practical interdependencies, which led them to see nature not as a trove of resources to be exploited but as a collection of human habitats integral to how societies worked. Rather than an anthropocentric vision of dominating nature through reason, the anarchists espoused an ethics of cohabitation, with politics rooted in ecosystems themselves.

Their radical rejection of the state, understood as a hierarchical structure of seizure, standardisation and separation, went hand-in-hand with an early critique of modern land management, authoritarian planning, and government. They saw the state as a rapacious power that destroyed the organic forms of human societies and their relationships to their surroundings. This political approach to land led them to imagine forms of ecological federalism, where each community would adapt to its own ecological conditions, as opposed to an administrative universalism that ignored the diversity of environments.

Another link between anarchists and political ecology is in their relationship to technology. Rather than a promethean fascination with mechanisation, the anarchists had a warier attitude influenced by direct experience of the alienation of workers and the dispossession of artisans. By railing against all-out productivism, they differentiated themselves from the mainstream forms of socialism that, to varying degrees, conflated human liberation with an indefinite increase in the ability to transform the material world.

Anarchism valued a frugal lifestyle, technological autonomy and self-sustainability uncoupled from the quantitative obsession with growth. The relationship between early anarchism and science was also different to the technocratic instrumentalism that prevailed in a certain strain of Marxism: rather than relying on a single foundational body of knowledge, they favoured a vernacular epistemology, including practical know-how and sensory understanding, rejecting academic science's claims to a cognitive monopoly.

The anarchist conception of history thus differed fundamentally from linear historical materialism, in which the progress of productive forces was the key to historical development. Anarchists rejected the idea of an arrow of time leading inevitably from ancient to modern: for them, history was full of forks in the road, about-turns and situations in which the old and the new coexist. This refusal of teleological temporality opened up the possibility of an ecological conception of time, sensitive to cycles, rhythms, and regenerations.

From the 1890s to the 1910s, activists advocated for changing our way of life away from industrial capitalism: return to the land, nudity, healthy eating, etc. This movement, referred to as anarcho-naturism, gained some popularity among individualist anarchists during the Belle Epoque. In France, a grouping of libertarians known as "les naturiens" coalesced around publications such as *Le Naturien*, in which theorists such as Henri Zisly and Georges Butaud advocated for "deserting industrialism" and a radical return to the natural wild. Rejecting bourgeois conventions, they enthused about life in small rural communities, vegetarianism, and nudity, and denounced the modern city as artificial and corrupting.

In Spain, anarcho-naturalism was at the heart of the libertarian movement in the 1920s and 1930s. At the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo ("the National Confederation of Labour", CNT) in Zaragoza in 1936, just before the Spanish Revolution, the delegates even discussed the status of naturist communities in future society. Aware of the presence of many vegetarians and nudists among the Andalusian anarchist peasants, the CNT planned to allow these groups to live outside of industrialisation and to negotiate specific economic agreements with them. Many Spanish anarchist peasants had in-depth knowledge of their local environment, which they sought to preserve while also improving communal productivity, rejecting the brutal methods of capitalist agroindustry.[3]

In Mexico, libertarians such as Ricardo Flores Magón linked the fight for *Tierra y Libertad* ("Land and Liberty", a popular slogan and the title of his 1916 play) to the protection of communal indigenous land from capitalist exploitation. In Argentina and Brazil, anarchists also took part in peasant demonstrations against excessive deforestation and land-grabbing by foreign companies.

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Peasant, vernacular, and insurrectionary ecology was not a knee-jerk conservative defence of the old ways, but rather a form of political innovation where the self-management of land, the pooling of resources, and the reclaiming of agricultural know-how were part of a broader conceptualisation of the ecological reshaping of the social world. As the anarchists got to grips with the ravages of capitalism and the exodus from the countryside, the ecological question was transplanted into the very structures of the towns and cities. As town planning began to emerge, the rejection of domination was connected with a reflection on spatial forms of liberty.

From municipalism to the ZADs

From the 1950s onwards, early warning signs of the ecological crisis began to appear: chemical pollution, runaway urbanisation, nuclear threat, and more. Then, in 1962, the American writer Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a bestseller that denounced the destruction that pesticides wrought on nature. That same year, Murray Bookchin, an American militant anarchist, pseudonymously published *Our Synthetic Environment*, which attracted less attention, but offered a radical critique of industrial pollution and capitalist productivism. A worker-turned-teacher, Bookchin was one of the very first people to formulate a comprehensive ecological critique from a revolutionary perspective.

In a 1964 article, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought”, Bookchin stated that ecological critique must form an integral part of social critique: the survival of humanity required a revolution to abolish not only capitalism, but also humanity’s domination of nature. His key idea, which he developed in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971) and other works, was that the ecological crisis was rooted in society’s hierarchical and authoritarian structures. Thus, “what literally defines social ecology as ‘social’ is its recognition of the often overlooked fact that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems.”[4] In other words, humanity’s domination of nature follows from the domination of humans over other humans.

In order to reach a balance between humans and their surroundings, Bookchin envisaged a society structured by cooperation between natural communities (i.e. communities not delineated by the state or a coercive political authority). This would be achieved through libertarian municipalism, in which the citizens of a community would control economic production in order to meet their basic needs and preserve the environment.

This idea led other anarchist thinkers to focus on the concept of regions. The American anarchist Peter Berg, for example, coined the term “bioregionalism”. This perspective was shared by all the libertarian thinkers engaging in political ecology (Jacques Ellul, Bernard Charbonneau, Ivan Illich, etc.), who “wanted to build, here and now, decentralised, self-administering, and self-governing societies on a human scale. Rather than a sudden, dramatic revolution, they wanted to establish a parallel structure of small, self-managing groups, brought together on an affinity model.”[5]

The degrowth movement that followed the publication of *The Limits of Growth* in 1972 also had strong libertarian underpinnings, theorised in the French context by André Gorz, who put forward a radical critique of the society of work and consumption. Gorz advocated for individual autonomy, which he saw

in terms of self-determination of a sufficient standard of living, and warned against the appropriation of the ecological emergency by the state or companies in order to increase technocratic and capitalist domination. Today, figures such as Serge Latouche and Paul Ariès advocate for re-localisation, direct municipal democracy and the abolition of consumer society, positions that are very close to Bookchin's libertarian municipalism or Kropotkin's communalism.

In the 1960s and 1970s, an assortment of social experiments brought together libertarian ideals and ecological issues, via rural intentional communities such as Longo Maï in France and self-managing urban projects. These collectives rejected private property, settled on land where they practised organic agriculture, developed sustainable artisanal technologies, and lived outside of capitalist systems. At the same time, local environmental battles, especially over the Larzac, forged alliances between farmers, ecologists, and libertarians, and involved radically democratic forms of civil disobedience. This transnational dynamic sketched out the rudiments of a practical eco-anarchism, anchored in the land, defying state control, and inventing eco-technological, non-hierarchical forms of collective living.

The 2010s saw the emergence of the phenomenon of *zones à défendre* ("zones to defend", ZADs), the most famous of which was in Notre-Dame-des-Landes near Nantes from 2009 to 2018, in which wooded wetlands were occupied to prevent the construction of an airport. Within an alternative microsociety of around fifty dwellings spread over 1,600 hectares, the inhabitants of the ZAD organised themselves into horizontal communities of about a dozen people. Each established comprehensive self-management of the territory they occupied: decision-making general assemblies, temporary dwellings, collective farms, bakeries, and freely accessible workshops.

Many saw the ZAD as an enduring experiment in self-sufficient anti-capitalist society, emphasising collectivity, voluntary simplicity, and care for the earth. ZADs also took root in Sivens (against a planned dam), Bure (against a nuclear waste storage depot), and elsewhere. Each of these occupations was a concrete instantiation of the intersection of the ecological struggle (preserving wetlands, forests, etc.) and the anarchist project (inventing ways of living without the state or private property).[6]

Nevertheless, the ZADs were controversial even within the anarchist movement, as had sometimes been the case with the free communities in the nineteenth century: Is it realistic to seek to create spaces within territory that remains under state control? Would it not be better to concentrate on more comprehensive strategies to subvert capitalism? Such debates are also found throughout the ecologist movement, as demonstrated by the foundation of Extinction Rebellion in 2018, with anarchist tracts advocating for a break away from the state and the economic system in favour of local, self-managed solutions.

The collective Les Soulèvements de la Terre (The Earth Uprisings Collective, SLT) has struck out in a different direction, with a horizontal and protean organisation inspired by libertarianism. It was created in 2021 and became a household name in France after the widely reported demonstration in Sainte-Soline in March 2023. The SLT campaigns bring together anarchist militants and ecologists, forming common cause with local social struggles while seeking to disarm those responsible for the ecological catastrophe. The collective, which practices direct action and civil disobedience (occupation, sabotage, etc.), has hundreds of local committees, all of which are active in society with the support of trade unions, political parties, and environmental associations.[7]

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The twenty-first century has other large-scale testing grounds for the eco-anarchist ideal, although we must be careful to understand the nuances of specific situations. One of the most notable is what has been attempted in Syrian Kurdistan. In 2012, the Kurdish population began to put in place a democratic confederalist system explicitly inspired by the ideas of Murray Bookchin. The autonomous cantons of Rojava have local assemblies, agricultural cooperatives, and egalitarian people's militias. Their goal is to establish a feminist, ecological, and democratic society, without a nation-state, in extreme conditions. Despite war and blockades, Rojava has begun reforestation, permaculture and environmental education programmes, as well as measures to reduce dependence on oil; it has also created agricultural cooperatives, communal nature reserves, and renewable energy projects, all managed by grassroots communes.

Living without dominating

Where classical Marxism(s) subordinate ecological questions to the development of productive forces, and liberalisms naturalise the exploitation of resources in the name of progress, some libertarian thinkers have constructed an integrated critique of social domination and our domination over nature. In opposition to anthropocentric and productivist ways of seeing the world, they have developed an ecopolitical vision of autonomy, combining social justice, rootedness, an ecosystem-wide focus and horizontal institutions.

But anarchism and ecology cannot be resolved into a stable synthesis, or one treated as a simple thematic addition to the other. Instead, the place where they meet is an essential locus of tension, in which the fundamental questions of political thought play out in ever-changing forms: What is a habitable world? How legitimate is authority? What structures are fair and just for whole ecosystems and enable living beings to live alongside one another?

The major theoretical advantage of anarchism is found in its close links with ecology, precisely because it prevents these questions being answered based on the standard categorisations of modern politics. As Baptiste Morizot indicates, "It is quite another matter: it is the call of the interdependences which indicate the limits to the range of possibilities that the human democratic collective can explore."[8]

Neither the abstract individual of liberalism, nor the organic community of nationalism, nor even the teleological dialectic of Marxism, offers a sufficient foundation from which to operate. The standard tools of sovereignty, law and contracts cannot encompass the entire natural world. It is thus necessary to re-politicise materiality, treating it not merely as a simple natural constraint, but as an ontological framework of which human institutions are one modulation among others.

From this point of view, anarchism, which thinks about power as a contingent relationship, is particularly well-suited to thinking about ecological normativity. It is not a question of basing norms on nature (which would descend into authoritarian naturalism), nor of constructing yet another green doctrine, but rather of making ecology a pragmatics of the communal, of sufficiency. It is a radical critique of established forms of power, capable of opening up a fresh direction in which freedom is not something that is taken from the world, but is instead part of it, allowing unique forms of life to coexist in the long term without dominating one another.

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